

An accomplished soldier, fired for no reason

Sergeant First Class Kate Cole isn't an activist. She isn't a radical. She's a trans woman, a rock climber, and my friend—and after 17 years of military service, Trump kicked her out.

by [Anna Keating](#) in the [August 2025](#) issue

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On his first day in office, President Trump signed a flurry of executive orders, many of them targeting trans people. Executive Order 14183, "Prioritizing Military

Excellence and Readiness,” directs the secretary of defense to ban trans people from serving in the military in any capacity. This order would fire over 15,000 American soldiers, including my friend, Sergeant First Class Kate Cole—despite the fact that the Army is facing its largest recruiting shortfall since the draft was abolished 50 years ago.

Kate and I met online. I was in a bunch of Southern Colorado rock climbing groups, and when I posted a message looking for a partner, she replied. In her picture, I could see a blonde girl on a wall, but I couldn’t see her face, so she told me what her car looked like before we planned to meet up in Cheyenne Canon. I thought Kate had messaged me from a group called “Climbers for Christ,” so I was expecting an evangelical stay-at-home mom.

I walked over to the silver Subaru with the topper and found a six-foot drill sergeant, busty, with long blond hair, copper brown eyes, pearl stud earrings, and tattoos. The bumper sticker on her car said, “Nature doesn’t judge.”

We shook hands and made small talk while we waited for her friend Cheyenne to join us. “Where are you from?” I asked. “I grew up in rural Mississippi,” she said, “but I’m never going back there. I love it here. When I get out of the Army I’m coming back to Colorado Springs to stay.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty great,” I said. Something we could all agree on, loving Colorado. “Also rocks. Rocks are pretty cool.” We laughed nervously.

As we scrambled to the base of the crag through a steep gully of boulders and loose rock, Kate told me her hobbies: snowboarding, shooting, caving, rafting. When she asked me about mine, I felt like the biggest square. I’d gotten into climbing at 36 after a life spent mostly avoiding sports. I own a handmade furniture business. I’m a writer. “Um, I like to read,” I said. “I can only have one dangerous hobby. That’s about all I can handle.”

Kate and Cheyenne talked about their careers in the Army. Guns, deployments, basic training, field work, lots of acronyms that went over my head. “I’ve never held a gun in my life,” I confessed. In college, I worked for an organization that helped conscientious objectors get out of the Army.

“That’s OK,” Kate said. To my relief, these tough women with life experiences so different from mine welcomed me. They were safe climbers. They were fun. We had

a good first day and planned to climb together again soon.

Before climbing, I didn't know any enlisted people, despite growing up in a town with three military bases. I also didn't know any trans women, at least not well. It turns out meeting climbers online and having adventures with them is a great way to get to know America outside of my own echo chambers.

Kate and I started climbing together a lot. She was positive and attentive. When I did well on a climb, she'd say, "That's my partner right there." If I fell, she'd say, "Now you got that out of the way." Once, when I was struggling with nerves on a hard overhung route, she said, "Don't mentally defeat yourself." I needed to hear that; it's something I often do.

I trusted her, and I could see why she was so good at her job and why her troops respected her. She was capable, methodical, and calm in sketchy situations. When we met, she was a non-commissioned officer in charge of 36 enlisted people. She told them when to eat, when to run, when to sleep, how to shoot, and how to keep each other safe when being shot at.

On those long days climbing together in the middle of nowhere, Kate and I talked about our families, work, religion, food, and the weather. Her gender identity never came up. It wasn't until the rumors about trans soldiers being kicked out by the incoming administration began that she and I started talking about being trans.

On January 23, I flew into Las Vegas to meet Kate for a climbing trip in the Red Rocks Conservation Area. We planned to do trad multipitch (climbing big walls and placing your own protection in cracks as you ascend—very risky).

When Kate picked me up at the airport, it was clear she was not in a good place. I'd never seen her like this. Wildfires had broken out in Los Angeles and were still burning close to her apartment. Her dad had recently almost died from cancer. And the press was reporting that the president was about to revoke the previous administration's order that allowed trans people to serve openly in the military. Kate had tears in her eyes. "I'm not a crier," she said, "but my life is about to get really hard."

At 34 years old, after 17 years in the Army and a tour of combat in Afghanistan, Kate had the best job she'd had since she'd enlisted as a teenager. She'd been relocated to Los Angeles by the Army and was now a senior military science instructor at

UCLA. She was about to be promoted to master sergeant. Recently a blind review panel had ranked her in the top 10 percent of people with her job nationwide. These folks didn't know her name, gender marker, or that she was trans. She had been looking forward to retiring with benefits in 2027, after 20 years of service. She talked about becoming a climbing guide.

It's important for civilians like me to remember that being in the Army isn't a normal job; it's your life. You lose your freedom to decide where you live or what you do. You must follow orders, even orders to kill people or risk your own life. Kate had close friends who died in combat. Some of her tattoos honor them. She has endured trauma, but on the flip side, she experienced camaraderie seldom experienced in a civilian job. The Army was her tribe, and now, people who usually said, "thank you for your service" wanted her fired without a pension for reasons unrelated to her job performance. She didn't even transition until the Army said it was permissible to do so.

To be shunned, excluded, and deemed unworthy—after giving her life to military service—felt like the ultimate betrayal. A president who had never fought in a war was excommunicating her. Politicians spent \$215 million in the last campaign cycle to turn trans people into an all-purpose scapegoat.

"People just hate you," she said. "It's hard to take."

The uncertainty was proving difficult as well. Nobody knew what the executive order might mean in practice. Enlisted people can't just quit; the Army doesn't work like that. They need permission from their commanding officers. So the trans people in the military were in a kind of limbo. Would Kate be honorably discharged and still receive a retirement paycheck, or would she just be kicked out, with no benefits whatsoever, like she was never in at all?

"This is the only job I've ever had," she said, wondering aloud if she'd be able to find another one. Would she be able to keep her house in Colorado without her Army paycheck? And if she had to identify as male on her passport and driver's license, after going through so much agony to pass as female, would it make it harder for her to live a normal life under the radar? What would happen at work if she was forced to use a male restroom? Most of her colleagues didn't even know that she was trans.

Kate isn't an activist. She isn't a radical. She has some conservative views and some liberal views. She grew up as a Southern Baptist kid in the Deep South. She first told her mom and sister she wanted to be a girl when she was 15. This was before the proliferation of smartphones and social media. She didn't know any transgender people. Being trans wasn't trending in rural Mississippi in 2006. "I would go to bed every night praying to wake up as a girl," she said. She tried to bury her feelings. At 17, she enlisted in the Army, thinking, *the military will make me super masculine, or else I'll go to war and die and then I won't have to worry about it anymore*. She went to war and lived. The feelings persisted.

Nine years after that first conversation with her mom and sister, at age 24, Kate saw a doctor and started taking estrogen. "I just want to exist as me," she told me. "I don't want anyone else to be transgender if they're not supposed to be. I wouldn't want anyone else to have to go through what I went through. I just want to exist. I just want to do my job."

Kate doesn't keep her story a secret, but she also doesn't bring it up unless it's necessary. "In the climbing community," she told me, "It's literally never come up. That's part of what I love about climbing: I'm just another climber. Being trans is not all of who I am."

Our mutual climbing friend Luke didn't know Kate was transgender until she told him about the president's plans to kick her out of the Army. He called her on speaker while I was there and asked, "This might sound crazy, but can you just go back to being a dude and stay in?" Kate told him no, she didn't want to do that, but also, she's not really able to at this point, even if she did want to. Following the advice of medical professionals, she'd made decisions with permanent consequences.

I slept poorly our first night in Vegas, Kate's words rattling around in my head. There were no easy answers.

The next morning, we met at 5:30 to climb Cat in the Hat. It was cold and dark as we drove into the canyon, 17 miles west of the Vegas strip. We saw only one other pair of climbers that day, two guys with colorful patches sewn onto the knees of their climbing pants. Kate sorted all the gear so she would know exactly where each piece of protection was on her harness—trad climbers insert protection into cracks in the rock and then clip the rope attached to their harness into these as they ascend.

When we started hiking, there was a crescent moon in the sky, and the sun was just beginning to come up. We stepped into a Western landscape painting. The bands of color on the rock formations—white, purple, burnt orange—looked as if someone had taken a level and painted each sandstone formation with a band of color at the same height. We passed giant Mojave yucca and jumping cholla cactuses that glowed as the sun rose. The ground beneath our feet was silty. My sneakers sank into the sand until we started scrambling over psychedelic-looking rocks. I kept stopping to stare at the colors beneath our feet, red boulders with purple-gray stripes or white with brown stripes and pinkish white stones with big purple polka dots like Easter eggs.

When we got to the base of the climb, we made a plan for the day and tied in. Kate led, and I followed. The rock was cold. My fingers burned as I hauled myself up, removing the protection Kate had placed in the cracks overhead. I don't know how to lead trad yet, so Kate was on the sharp end of the rope that first day. She was assuming the risk; I was just in it for the views.

Like a lot of people, I got into climbing after a crisis in my life. Mountaineering, which started out as a sport for aristocratic men, eventually branched out into rock climbing, and by the 1960s it was the provenance of dirty hippies and broke eccentrics. Climbing is like an island of misfit toys. We're all weird in our own special ways. I've been known to talk to the rocks on a climb. There are the woo-woo climbers like me, for whom climbing borders on a spiritual experience of going into fear and coming out again and again, but there are also math-and-science types who geek out about gear and applied physics. There are climbers with disabilities, queer climbers, climbers in recovery, old timers who still get after it, nursing moms who lead climb with holds so tiny they boggle the mind.

Mostly we all get along, united in our common obsession. If you roll up to a bouldering area and ask other people if you can climb with them, they will probably say yes. Not only will they tolerate your presence, they'll spot you so you don't hit your head on a rock and hype you up, saying, "You got this, you're going to make it."

I've never been near a war zone, but I am a committed outdoor climber. At the end of the day, in climbing, as in battle, you have to trust your partner with your life. Even on easy terrain. They can't build an anchor wrong, or tie a knot wrong, or load a belay device incorrectly. If they do, someone could die. Tragically, a climber died the week before us in this same place. I trusted Kate to keep us safe, and she

trusted me. I've climbed with people I didn't like or trust, and I quickly rotated them out of my circle. Kate isn't one of them. She works hard, has a good attitude, is mentally and physically strong, and is always researching how to make things safer. She reads and studies climbing books like someone else might read murder mysteries. They line the shelf by her bed.

Kate and I had a good two days of climbing in Vegas. On that first day, at a belay station about 300 feet off the ground, she took a work call. "Yes sir," she said, before rattling off her students' last names and grades. "This is your office," I laughed as we were tethered into an anchor on the side of a cliff. "Nice view."

Rappelling down from a 600-foot climb, we met up with the guys we'd seen with the colorful patches on their climbing pants. The one with a scraggly beard stopped rappelling long enough to give us some beta (climbing slang for advice) on the route. "It's a hard right," he said. "You traverse across that ledge and then place gear in the crack above." He asked us our names and then offered his, told us to look him up if we were ever in the Gunks, a climbing area in upstate New York. No outsiders, just fellow trad climbers.

By the second day, Kate and I had gotten into a groove. While she was scrambling to set up a top rope, a silvery bird with a pointed beak landed right next to my hand and held my gaze for a while. "It was magical!" I said. "We shared a moment." But Kate just shook her head. I'm the weirdo who's in this for the birds. Kate and I are very different people. I believe in God; she's a materialist. I've always wanted to be a mom; she never wanted kids. She's an adrenaline junkie; I'm more cautious in my approach (though I have come to love adrenaline, the euphoric feeling of pushing just beyond what seems safe or possible). And yet she's my friend.

If you want to make a friendship work, or a neighborhood, or a community, you cannot constantly encourage people to despise one another. You encourage them to know one another. If you want to make America great, you don't exploit differences to fuel mistrust and hatred. You teach people that our differences don't undermine our shared humanity or common values. A country at war with itself is not only easier to destroy, it's also much less pleasant to live in.

There are important conversations to be had about gender, but when trans people are being fired as a group, it is not the time to have those conversations. The conversation we need to be having right now is about why the president is

promoting hatred and fear of an already vulnerable minority. Who is benefiting from this? The president's executive order was notable for its meanness: "A man's assertion that he is a woman, and his requirement that others honor this falsehood, is not consistent with the humility and selflessness required of a servicemember."

And yet Kate has given half her life to her country. If you take the culture war temperature down for a moment, it would seem obvious that the Department of Defense—which is the world's largest employer of trans people—should treat Kate and other trans soldiers with respect, not deny them their retirement benefits.

On February 26, the Pentagon issued a memo stating that Kate and all the other soldiers with a previous or current diagnosis of gender dysphoria must be fired within 30 days. On May 6, the Supreme Court upheld the ban. If Kate had 18 years of service she'd be eligible for retirement, but with only 17 she was fired without benefits.

Kate and others like her exist, and they deserve to roll up to the crag and climb, or roll up to work and do their job, just like everybody else.