

REFLECTIONS ON THE CURSE OF RACISM IN THE U.S. MILITARY

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The new cadets at West Point had only been at the academy for a few short weeks when they were shuffled into the boxing section of the gym one evening for a lesson that had nothing to do with academics, physical fitness, marching, or inspections. Over the next hour and a half, an officer instructor patiently explained the realities of institutional racism, the inevitability of individual prejudice and

bias, and the dangers of racial discrimination. He stressed that every aspect of military behavior ought to conform to absolute norms of fairness and equal treatment of everyone in uniform, regardless of race or color.

If you're picturing a bunch of social media-savvy, Generation Z cadets attending this lesson, your timeline is way off. This lesson didn't take place in 2020 — or 2010, 2000, or even 1990. It took place in 1972, when one of us was a plebe at the academy. U.S. Army leaders then understood that as the Vietnam War was ending, they faced a massive crisis with racism and race relations within the force. And the topic was so urgent and so important that those leaders had made sure that talking about it openly and honestly was one of the key priorities carved into the jam-packed schedule of West Point's newest class.

BECOME A MEMBER

Over the painful decades that followed, leaders of all the military services worked hard to improve race relations and solve many other endemic and corrosive problems across the force. Almost two decades later, the U.S. military looked far different. Discipline and rigorous training had been restored, drug abuse largely stamped out, and its improved race relations and commitment to equal opportunity were often heralded as a model for American society more broadly. Gen. Colin Powell, an African-American, served as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the decisively triumphant 1991 Gulf War, and was recognized and revered by millions of Americans of all backgrounds. His position at the pinnacle of the U.S. military was seen by many as a vindication of the military's resounding success in overcoming the last vestiges of racism in its ranks.

But racism was neither gone from the military, nor gone from U.S. society. Yet, buttressed by these evident successes and its new-found acclaim from the American people, military leaders essentially concluded that racism within the force was a problem that had been “solved.” That urgent lesson for new cadets disappeared from the academy at some point. Many senior leaders, officers, and non-commissioned officers believed that the military was genuinely colorblind — sometimes explicitly bragging that everyone in uniform was simply “green.” Many also believed that achieving success in the U.S. military was based on objective merit to the greatest extent possible in a human institution. As recently as last summer, Gen. John Hyten, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Congress that the military had tackled the problem of overt racism and “eliminated it from the formation.” He added, “when I am in uniform, I feel colorblind, which is amazing.”

Of course, that picture looked extraordinarily different if you happened to be black. The scourge of racism continued to plague the military, as it plagues U.S. society, even if its ugliest and most direct forms occurred less frequently. The enduring nature of racism in the ranks has been made painfully clear in recent public statements by a surprising number of high-ranking African-American senior leaders, speaking out about their own painful, personal experiences with racism inside the force. For example, Gen. C.Q. Brown posted a powerful video about his experiences as a black officer shortly before he was confirmed as the new chief of staff of the Air Force (and thus became the first black chief of any military service). He spoke about the “supervisors I perceived had expected less from me,” and then “working twice as hard to prove that their expectations and perceptions of African-Americans were invalid.” In a particularly striking anecdote, he described “wearing the same flight suit with the same wings on my chest as my peers, and then being questioned by another military member, ‘Are you a pilot?’” Gen. (ret.) Vincent Brooks similarly recalled that he had been “personally impacted by explicit and implicit bias” starting “as a military child, in my time at West Point, and in my military career, even during my time as an Army general.” And Lt. Gen.

(ret.) Vincent Stewart of the Marine Corps described his deep pain of “being described as the best black officer in a unit — never described as the best officer in the unit — or never being the first choice for visible prominent assignments, despite a superior record of performance than my peers.”

These stories, and countless others that remain untold, show that racism and discrimination remain extensive problems in the U.S. military, even as tolerance for their most blatant expressions has declined. Many white members of the military, perhaps like Hyten, have seen so little personal evidence of racism that they became convinced that the military was indeed color blind. Yet African-American servicemembers continue to face discrimination simply because of the color of their skin. In one stark example, statistics from the military justice system show that black personnel are more likely to be court martialed and face more severe judicial punishments than their white counterparts – including in cases that involve the death penalty.

Racism in the military also manifests itself in some subtler ways, with effects that can be difficult to parse out but are nevertheless tremendously consequential. Take, for example, the dismal number of African-Americans who currently serve as the military’s most senior leaders. Today, only two of the nation’s 41 four-star generals and admirals are black (down from six in 2014). In the Army, the largest service, African-Americans constitute 12.1 percent of the officer corps, but only one of its 14 four-star generals is black. The Navy has no black four-star admirals, and the Marine Corps, alone among the services, has never had an African-American officer promoted to four-star rank. An Oval Office photo from last fall captured the nation’s service chiefs and combatant commanders surrounding the commander-in-chief and his senior national security leadership. Not a single person was an African-American (or a woman).

Why are these numbers so low? Discrimination against African-American officers certainly still exists, but the answer is more complicated than that alone. In the Army, for example, a vicious circle keeps sizable numbers of African-American

officers from reaching the highest ranks of the service. The number of black officers serving in the combat arms branches has shrunk in the past several decades while their numbers in the supporting branches such as logistics and personnel have swelled. Yet most of the officers promoted to the most senior general officer ranks come from the combat arms. This dynamic creates an ever-smaller bench of black officers who can even compete to reach these highest ranks of the service, which contributes to the extremely low numbers of those who do make it. And this problem will persist for decades to come, since the military is a closed system that promotes only from within. Even if the military suddenly commissioned large numbers of black combat arms officers today, those who stay for a career will not reach the general officer ranks until the mid-2040s.

On the face of it, this self-selection of most blacks into the supporting branches doesn't seem to have much to do with race. After all, in an all-volunteer force, people can generally choose to serve in whichever branches they want. Data shows that many African-Americans prefer the Army's supporting branches so they can gain marketable skills that prove valuable after military service, and that key influencers in the African-American community often steer young people away from the combat arms. We've both heard Army officers say that this self-selection dynamic is the root of the problem — and if black recruits and cadets don't want to serve in the combat arms, there's not a whole lot that the Army can do about that.

But this argument fails to acknowledge the deeper ways that race shapes these preferences, whose origins date back many decades. After the Army was desegregated in 1948, many black soldiers volunteered to serve in the combat arms — partly because racism during World War II had largely relegated them to support roles. Black servicemembers rose in both numbers and seniority, in both the enlisted and officer ranks, especially during and after the Vietnam era. As a young infantry officer, one of us served under African-American division, brigade, and battalion commanders at a time when it would have been highly unusual for a middle-class white man to work for a black boss anywhere else in America.

Disproportionately high numbers of African-Americans also served in the enlisted combat arms ranks at the time. In 1980, one of us commanded an infantry company that was approximately 45 percent black. One of his West Point classmates served in an infantry company where one platoon was entirely black, save the lieutenant.

But the number of black personnel joining the Army started to decline in the early 1980s and those joining the combat arms declined further still. The reasons why are not entirely clear, though the fact that black unemployment rates spiked during the 1981-82 recession may have encouraged many African-Americans to join support branches in order to gain skills that could more easily transfer into civilian jobs. Today's four-star generals entered the Army around this time, which is one of the reasons why there are so few African-Americans among their ranks. By the year 2000, the number of black soldiers in the company that was once 45 percent African-American had shrunk by half. And today, only five of the 119 infantry soldiers in that company are black.

Once this trend started, numerous dynamics made it self-sustaining. Fewer black officers in the combat arms meant fewer mentors and role models for those coming up behind them. It vastly reduced the opportunities for rising officers of any race, especially white officers, to work for African-American commanders. And it slashed the interaction of vast swaths of the fighting formations of the Army with black soldiers and leaders, except in supporting roles to combat units. Since the military confers the greatest prestige and rewards on those who directly fight the enemy, this fostered the perception in the combat arms that most African-Americans were best placed in support, and not really qualified for front-line combat jobs. It also fostered both explicit and unconscious bias within the force, which thus led even more blacks to conclude that they would have better opportunities for success in the support branches.

The prestigious combat formations of the Army thus became more and more white. Army Rangers and Special Forces developed reputations as having particularly racist attitudes, which drove even more African-Americans away. The ever-increasing whiteness of these special operations units and the combat arms branches inevitably made them more attractive to those with racist and even white supremacist views. And some of those views have turned into behavior, even as all of the services emphasized that such behavior will not be tolerated. For example, surveys conducted by the *Military Times* show that the percentage of respondents who had seen examples of racism or white nationalism in the force grew from 23.1 percent in 2017 to 36.3 percent by 2019, and that the percentage of minority servicemembers who had personally witnessed such examples grew from almost 42 percent to 46.7 percent during the same period. The Department of Defense has prosecuted 21 criminal cases of white supremacist behavior during the past five years, though critics charge that far more needs to be done to eliminate white supremacist behavior from the force.

Although this starkly demonstrates that even the most heinous forms of overt racism still infect the military, there are also far more hidden and insidious forms of racism that are too often invisible to those who are white. A military that prides itself on being colorblind has become blind instead to the different experiences endured by its African-American members. The wave of protests that have swept the nation after the senseless killing of George Floyd are illuminating the extent to which race and racism is still built into the fabric of the American experience. It was exceedingly naïve for white servicemembers to believe that the military could be genuinely colorblind while the nation continues to struggle with what has often been called America's original sin. At the very least, recent events have swept away the last remaining excuses for such ignorance.

Addressing racism in the military, and the nation as a whole, is a monumental challenge that will require sustained and focused efforts over many years. A problem more than 400 years in the making cannot be solved overnight, and

challenges those of us who have never faced discrimination based on the color of our skin to listen to and learn from those who have. The military needs to start by make a concerted and comprehensive effort to analyze the extent of racial issues inside the force, and to begin to identify possible solutions. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper recently announced some initiatives to address these issues, and the Army has launched Project Inclusion. These are good starts, but there are some specific and long-overdue actions that the military should also take now to accelerate reforms.

Most immediately, the Army and the Air Force should follow the lead of the Marine Corps and, more recently, the Navy, and ban all public displays of the Confederate flag and other symbols celebrating the Confederacy and its leaders. Organizations ranging from NASCAR to the state of Mississippi have now gotten rid of these deeply offensive symbols; it's shameful that parts of the Department of Defense have not yet done so. The Army should follow the example of one of its most senior commanders, Gen. Robert Abrams, who enacted such a ban at U.S. Forces Korea. The Army should also do what it can to quietly support renaming its IO bases that commemorate Confederate generals. Army leaders unfortunately cannot do so publicly right now, since the White House essentially blocked the Pentagon from continuing its discussions on this issue. But they can start quietly planning for how the renaming process would move forward if bipartisan legislation to force the issue passes as part of this year's defense authorization bill, or if a more supportive president takes office next year.

On a broader level, U.S. military leaders ought to rededicate themselves to rooting out racist leaders and outlooks. This should be a priority across every element of the military, but combat units and special operations forces deserve special scrutiny. Social media provides an important window into this dark world, and military leaders, while respecting privacy, should be vigilant for members who

encourage racist behavior on these platforms. Every leader in every military unit ought to be clear and uncompromising in stamping out this behavior and condemning these beliefs.

Such an effort is not likely to succeed unless military leaders at all levels invest much more time listening to African-Americans within the force, as well as African-American teachers, coaches, parents, ministers, counselors, and even fraternities and sororities. This will help those leaders better understand the concerns that they have about military service, gather their recommendations for change, and reaffirm the importance of diversity in the nation's military leadership.

Finally, military leaders should do far more to encourage African-American officers to serve in combat positions, especially in the Army and in special operations forces. This should start in ROTC and at the service academies, and should also include a stronger investment in cadets at historically black colleges and universities. Today, ROTC programs exist at only 25 of the more than 100 of these schools. That number needs to grow and should be increasingly emphasized as part of the White House's initiative on these educational institutions. More top-performing combat officers, and especially black combat officers, should be assigned to ROTC detachments at these schools.

There is no silver bullet to fixing the U.S. military's long-running problems with racism. It remains a reflection of the society it serves, and racism continues to run deeper in American society than many of us who do not face its sting every day often realize. But the recent senseless deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and other African-Americans have forced the United States into a long-overdue reckoning. In this tense national environment, the U.S. military now has both an opportunity and an even greater obligation to help show the way forward by setting a positive example for the rest of society. It should aggressively assess the size and scope of its own problem with racism, and its leadership ought to set a clear and unequivocal course to put its own house in order. It needs to

recapture the energy, commitment, and sense of urgency to attack this pernicious problem that was conveyed to those very young West Point cadets almost 50 years ago, and recommit itself to its ideals as an institution where every person is judged based on merit alone.

BECOME A MEMBER

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