

Identity Politics and Critical Race Theory Have No Place in U.S. Military

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COMMENTARY Defense

Mar 29, 2021 4 min read

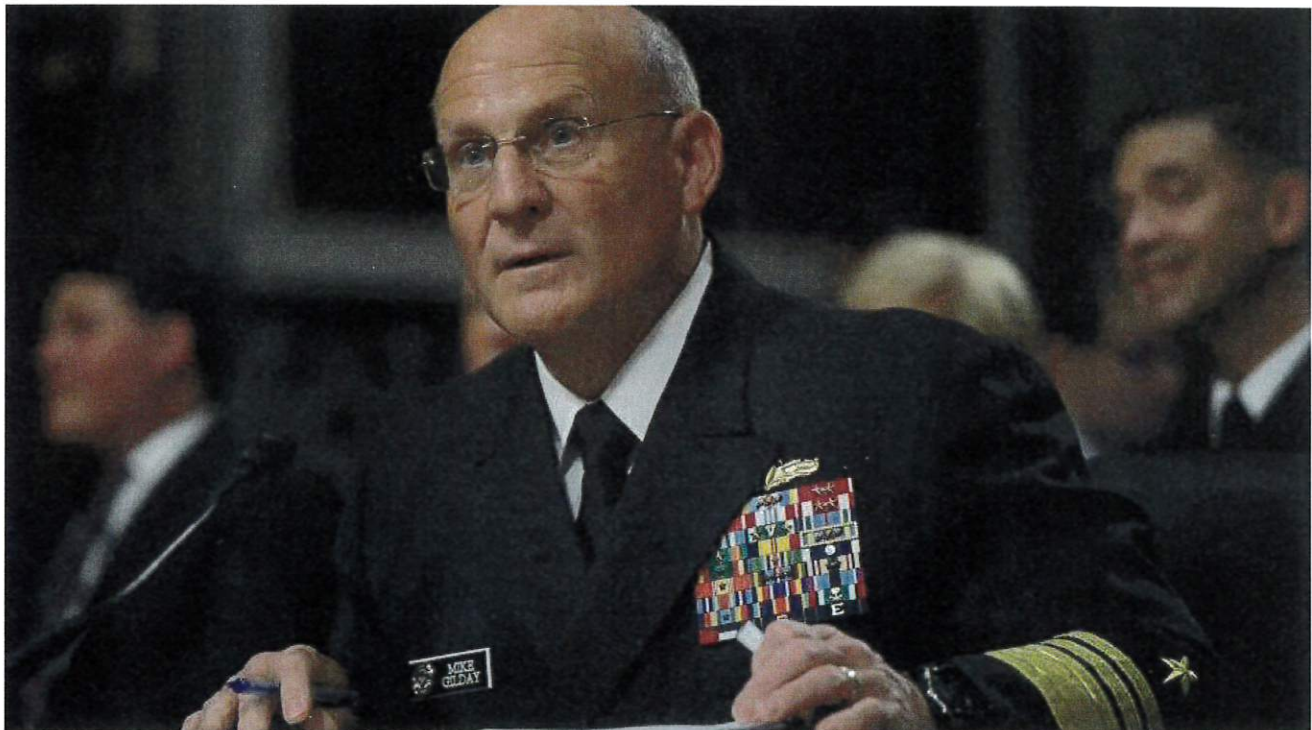
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COMMENTARY BY



Navy then-Vice Adm. Michael M. Gilday testifies before the Senate Armed Services Committee July 31, 2019 in Washington, D.C. Win McNamee / Getty Images

Key Takeaways

The beauty of military service is that the uniform and common objective supplants grouping by individual identities of color, class, gender, or religion.

Critical race theory would move the military in the wrong direction by undoing decades, even centuries, of work to foster a team-centered culture.

When we view people through the lens of race, gender, or religion, we embrace the polar opposite of everything the U.S. military strives for.

Sen. Tom Cotton, rightly angered that the Department of Defense is moving to indoctrinate U.S. military personnel in divisive critical race theory, has introduced a bill that would forbid it.

Like colleagues in the House who sent letters to Adm. Mike Gilday, the chief of naval operations, expressing severe disapproval of the Navy's decision to include books on critical race theory and other aspects of identity politics on professional reading lists, Cotton, R-Ark., and a former soldier, demonstrated he understands the corrosive effect that such teachings would have on the U.S. military.

In 1968, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. expressed his dream that one day people "will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." It is a powerful message consistently referenced by everyone who seeks true equality in diverse populations.

King, like so many before and since who have championed a unified people within our great American experiment, worked to replace identity by race, ethnic group, economic status, gender, or religion with a shared humanity that prizes mutual recognition and respect, regardless of the various characteristics that tend to segregate people by type

In many ways, America's military strives to manifest King's dream of a world that values people by their character, shared identity, and commitment to a common, noble purpose.

The beauty of military service is that the uniform and common objective supplants grouping by individual identities of color, class, gender, or religion.

I best know the U.S. Marine Corps, because I served in it for 20 years, but all of the services have a similar approach to forming a team—rather than sowing division by focusing on those things that separate individuals from each other.

What united everyone with whom I served was the singular identity of being a U.S. Marine committed to defending our country, a country comprising every sort of person from countless different backgrounds.

It didn't matter where you came from. All that really mattered among Marines was whether you were competent in your job, committed to the mission, and were someone your fellow Marines could depend on.

Military service truly is the best example of America as the proverbial great melting pot.

This isn't to say that the military is perfect. Like any other human endeavor, it is composed of people who bring their biases and prejudices with them. But the military knows this; hence, its constant emphasis on small-unit leadership, reinforcement of values, teamwork, and personal accountability.

The Uniform Code of Military Justice, which governs the legal aspects of military discipline, amply addresses unacceptable conduct, including abuse and disrespect of others.

Every service chief, commanding officer, senior enlisted leader, professional military school, and unit training curriculum reemphasizes core values that characterize military service. It is always a work in progress, just as much as is our country and each of us individually.

Critical race theory would, however, move the military in the wrong direction by undoing decades, even centuries, of work to foster a team-centered culture.

By relentlessly harping on and reinforcing specific identities—advocating for some, while disparaging others, and requiring certain levels of representation in jobs, ranks, and occupational fields as defined by those identities—what advocates of identity politics actually do is undermine the very thing they supposedly want to advance; namely, equality across peoples.

Racial and gender-based criteria for promotion or assignment to a position, as examples, cause people to wonder whether the person was selected on merit or merely got the job because he or she had a particular identity.

If the latter, then their credibility and the level of respect they should legitimately enjoy are undermined and damaged. They aren't seen as having earned the position because of performance, competence, or leadership qualities.

People will still salute and carry out orders—but because they are obliged to, not because the person is perceived as rating such on their own merit. By emphasizing and sustaining stereotypes, advocates of racial and gender identity more deeply root prejudices, accelerating and amplifying them, rather than neutralizing and eliminating them.

Military discipline, expected conduct, and respect between and within ranks undergird a system in which military forces get the job done because those in uniform are reminded from the first day they put on their uniform that a soldier, Marine, sailor, airman, or Space Force guardian is just that—a fellow service member who has gone through the same training, had to meet the same standards, serves the same Constitution and country, and respects the same flag and national identity.

In short, military service already is the great equalizer.

Programs that emphasize differences among service members, that impose a demand for people to feel guilty about their identity and background, that elevate one group over another, or that seek to subordinate a group relative to another generate resentment, or a sense of aggrieved victimization, or entitlement to special handling.

Such initiatives destroy the fabric of military service that otherwise unites an extraordinarily diverse population in common purpose and identity. Identity politics is a cancer that corrodes good order and discipline and the necessary authorities inherent in a chain of command.

When we view people through the lens of race, gender, or religion, we embrace the polar opposite of everything the U.S. military strives for, being a colorblind, race-blind, gender-blind team that takes the contributions of everyone willing to serve their country and folds them into success.

Thinking less about teams and more about individuals is a recipe for failure for any military, yet this is exactly what critical race theory and other forms of identity politics attempt to do.

Cotton and Republican Reps. Jim Banks of Indiana, Doug Lamborn of Colorado, and Vicky Hartzler of Missouri are all on the mark in questioning why the most senior leaders in our military would act to damage the very foundation upon which our military forges an incredible team of like-minded people dedicated to a common cause, regardless of personal backgrounds and characteristics.

Our military leadership must focus on the core purpose of our military—organizing, equipping, and training a force willing and able to defend the nation from external threats—rather than mire itself in the self-defeating claptrap of identity politics.

This piece originally appeared in The Daily Signal.