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Thank you, Chairman Gallego, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the subcommittee, for inviting me to testify on the mission critical topic of diversity challenges and opportunities in the special operations forces. I am honored to be with you.

In his message to the force of March 4, 2021, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III laid out three priorities for the military: defend the nation, take care of our people, and succeed through teamwork.<sup>2</sup> Several of the Secretary's goals are centered around reexamining old ways of doing business to remove barriers to talent, build resilience, strengthen relationships, and increase leader accountability. But as General C.Q. Brown, the first African American to lead the Air Force, recently told CBS News about the stagnant growth of pilots of color in the service since the 1990s, when it comes to advancement in the military, including selection for service in special operations, "...ducks pick ducks."<sup>3</sup> Humans are indeed hard-wired to pay special attention to similarity, so senior military leaders must learn to deliberately override this natural tendency to "pick ducks" in pursuit of a more diverse, more united, and inclusive force. In a world where volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity reign supreme, we can no longer afford to think the old ways of leading and doing business are sufficient.

The conscious and unconscious preference of leaders to select those who most resemble themselves for membership in their tribe is reflected in a lack of diversity throughout the military, most glaringly in the special operations community and my former branch of service, the United States Marine Corps. The fact is that most positions of power and authority are held by white men. In addition to preserving the power status quo, "ducks picking other ducks" also reinforces covert and overt rules about who is *most respected and valued* in the organization. As sociologist Cecelia Ridgeway wrote, preserving the status quo and limiting the advancement of members of nondominant groups results in "cultural beliefs about who is 'better' or *presumed to be more competent or suitable for positions of authority*."<sup>4</sup> Thus the decision on who gets to serve and in what capacity is often predicated less on demonstrated ability and facts and more on

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<sup>1</sup> The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing any outside organization or entity, public or private. Per Rule 11, clause 2(g)(5) of the Rules of the House of Representatives for the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, in the past 36 months, I have not been the recipient of any federal contracts, grants, or payments originating with a foreign government, nor have I received any contracts, grants, or payments from any organization or entity, public or private, with a material interest in the subject matter of the hearing.

<sup>2</sup> Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III, "A Message to the Force," Defense.gov, March 4, 2021 (<https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2525149/secretary-lloyd-j-austin-iii-message-to-the-force>).

<sup>3</sup> David Martin, "Race in the Ranks: Investigating racial bias in the U.S. Military," *CBS News*, March 21, 2021 (<https://www.cbsnews.com/amp/news/us-military-racism-60-minutes-2021-03-21>).

<sup>4</sup> Cecelia Ridgeway, "Why Status Matters for Inequality," *American Sociological Review*, Vol 79(1), 2014 (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0003122413515997>).

stereotypes and perceptions about who is more mentally and physically competent, and therefore more suitable, for positions of leadership.

On top of that, as diversity, equity, and inclusion experts note, “Barriers to inclusion tend to be invisible to those already succeeding in an organization.”<sup>5</sup> Based on their own unimpeded experiences as members of the dominant group, a majority of white male military members tend to believe barriers to advancement do not exist for minorities. As a result, many former and current majority group servicemembers are of the belief that the military is a fully actualized meritocracy and opportunities for advancement and selection for special programs exist for all who desire and are qualified for them. Despite the highest egalitarian ideals of our military, we have a lot of work to do to make this a reality.

Furthermore, the military community is becoming ever more insular and less representative of the demography of American society, with a disproportionate percentage of the force recruited from the conservative Bible belt in the South and from families with a direct tie to the military.<sup>6</sup> In essence, the military has become a “family” business, which translates into a predominantly white, male, and conservative Christian force. When it comes to diversity efforts, this presents significant danger of group think and a glaring “say/do” gap for members of nondominant/minority groups.

Minority servicemen and women regularly hear military leaders say diversity is important and see them develop strategic plans to direct diversity and inclusion efforts, but do not see corresponding increases in minority population numbers or experience positive changes in how they are perceived or treated. Thus, the targeted growth of minority populations (by gender, ethnicity, and race) and the elimination of racism, sexual harassment, assault, and retaliation in the military can only be achieved by eliminating say-do gaps between espoused values and contradicting behaviors and increasing accountability measures when members violate expectations for conduct.

Today, the military is experiencing a critical shortage of young men qualified to join the all-volunteer force at the very same time that public trust in the military is eroding for the first time in decades (“56 percent of Americans surveyed said they have ‘a great deal of trust and confidence’ in the military, down from 70 percent in 2018”).<sup>7</sup> Negative stories about racism and discrimination, sexual harassment, assault, and retaliation are prominent in news coverage of the military and have no doubt negatively impacted public perception. Competition amongst the services is high for the limited number of qualified males already, and a further loss of the public’s trust will no doubt have a negative impact on the propensity of young men and women to serve, further limiting the potential for new, more diverse accessions. Senior leaders could

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick Miller and Judith H. Katz, “The Path from Exclusive to Inclusive Organization: A Developmental Process,” *The Pfeiffer Annual*, Volume 2, 1995, ([https://www.mcids.org/uploaded/Campus\\_and\\_Community/CC365/The\\_Path\\_from\\_Exclusive\\_Club\\_to\\_Inclusive\\_Organization.pdf](https://www.mcids.org/uploaded/Campus_and_Community/CC365/The_Path_from_Exclusive_Club_to_Inclusive_Organization.pdf)).

<sup>6</sup> Dave Phillips and Tim Arango, “Who Signs Up to Fight? Makeup of U.S. Recruits Shows Glaring Disparity,” *The New York Times*, January 14, 2020 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/10/us/military-enlistment.html>).

<sup>7</sup> Leo Shane III, “Trust in the Military is dropping significantly: new survey suggests,” *Military Times*, March 10, 2021 (<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2021/03/10/trust-in-the-military-is-dropping-significantly-new-survey-suggests/>).

very well jeopardize the ability of Special Operations Command-- and the military more broadly-- to fulfill our national defense requirements if they fail to widen their apertures and challenge their existing views regarding the talent pool and who is “worthy” of entrance and inclusion in the organizational culture. As one expert notes about organizations that fail, “active inertia is an organization’s tendency to follow established patterns of behavior—even in response to dramatic environmental shifts.”<sup>8</sup> The transition of our military from two decades of counterinsurgency operations to preparing for conflict between great powers *while also* responding to nation-state threats represents just such a dramatic environmental shift. Meeting these complex global challenges will require not only cognitive diversity, but the unique talents, experiences, and abilities of young men and women from different backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures.

There are **three diversity and health of the force issues** senior Special Operations Command leaders must face head on to change course, increase the public trust, and meet the imperatives the Secretary of Defense established in his message to the Force:

**1. Acknowledge that expanding the minority membership in the organization is an inherently emotional issue for dominant group members and tailor strategy, education, and training efforts accordingly.** Military leaders must understand that facts don’t drive human behaviors—emotions do. The high emotional sensitivity regarding diversity in special operations forces (SOF) was fully demonstrated by a 2016 RAND study on the subject, which states “Based on our survey of SOF personnel, opposition to opening SOF specialties to women is both deep and wide, with high levels of opposition across all SOF elements. This opposition is also deep-seated and intensely felt.”<sup>9</sup> Additionally, neuroscience research demonstrates that making diversity a compliance issue triggers autonomy and status threat states in the brain and actually *activates* bias, jeopardizing the success of the diversity strategy and potentially *increasing* levels of discrimination, harassment, and retaliation against members of nondominant groups.

Diversity strategies and education must therefore be grounded in an understanding of the brain science of change and the feelings of grief, loss, skepticism, and anger in dominant group members as a result of the focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Part of making the force stronger should also involve educating service men and women on how to become more emotionally intelligent so that they are able to name their emotions, challenge the related assumptions and beliefs which cause them, and deal with them in more productive ways. Additionally, diversity, equity, and inclusion should be tied not only to organizational values, which are inherently emotional, but embedded in every aspect of training and evaluation as

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<sup>8</sup> Donald Sull, “Why Good Companies Go Bad,” *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 1999 (<https://hbr.org/1999/07/why-good-companies-go-bad>).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas S. Szayna, Eric V. Larson, Angela O’Mahony, Sean Robson, Agnes Gereben Schaefer, Miriam Matthews, J. Michael Polich, Lynsay Ayer, Derek Eaton, William Marcellino, Lisa Miyashiro, Marek Posard, James Syme, Zev Winkelman, Cameron Wright, Megan Zander Cotugno, and William Welser IV, “Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in U.S. Special Operations Forces”, RAND 2016 (<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/wisr-studies/SOCOM%20-%20Considerations%20for%20Integrating%20Women%20into%20Closed%20Occupations%20in%20the%20US%20Special%20Operations%20Forces.pdf>).

leadership imperatives. Without actually evaluating leaders on how inclusive and equitable they are, there is no measurement by which to hold them accountable.

Finally, servicemembers should also be taught from day one of their military experience that the less diverse an organization is at all levels, the less it can aspire to being a true meritocracy. This reasoning can also be extended to a national level in that societies that more equitably share resources, power, and responsibility for citizenship and governance are more stable than those that do not. America is truly stronger when resources, power, and responsibility are more equitably distributed, and the same is true for our military.

**2. Conduct comprehensive military/special operations specific research to clearly identify how diversity contributes to a more lethal and capable force relative to current future threats and global operations.** Up to this point, military leaders have relied primarily on case studies from private industry like the tech and finance sectors of the economy to provide rationale on how diversity makes the force stronger. Little if any independent research has been conducted to quantify how a more diverse, equitable, and military makes for a more lethal force or enhances the ability of the force to achieve success in global operations. Despite decades of female engagement teams being employed alongside special operations forces counterinsurgency operations, little to no quantifiable research exists to demonstrate the extent to which service women expand access to indigenous populations, enable the collection of actionable intelligence on the battlefield, or tangibly impact tactical mission success.

Additionally, 20 years into the global war on terror, the number of women employed in security forces remains negligible, further reducing their potential impact and reinforcing the notion that women on the battlefield are just “nice to haves.” As noted in a 2014 paper by The Joint Special Operations University’s Center for Special Operations Studies and Research, “There is very little research directly addressing the effect of gender on team performance.”<sup>10</sup> Little has changed since the study was conducted, and the lack of available data combined with the limited number of women serving with special operations forces continue to sow seeds of skepticism, doubt, and resentment about diversity, equity, and inclusion *and* the combat abilities of servicewomen. Without military case studies specific to the benefits women and other minorities bring to the fight, it will be difficult to reduce skepticism and instill faith in the hearts and minds of dominant group members that a drive towards a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive special operations force is not only fair and just, but of necessity to our national defense.

**3. Resolve existing gaps in the Headquarters Special Operations Strategic Diversity and Inclusion Plan to overcome diversity, equity, and inclusion inertia.**

Diversity programs fail or reach a state of inertia when leaders choose not to establish metrics and define who is accountable for achieving them. Without these two critical elements, “ducks will continue to pick ducks” for advancement and opportunity and it will remain abundantly

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<sup>10</sup> Dr. Jessica Glicken Turnley, Dr. Dona J. Stewart, Dr. Rich Rubright, and Dr. Jason Quirin, “Special Operations Forces Mixed-Gender Elite Teams: Examining socio-cultural dynamics of SOFMET, The Joint Special Operations University’s Center for Special Operations Studies and Research, June 2014 (<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/wisr-studies/SOCOM%20-%20JSOU%20Study%20on%20Special%20Operations%20Forces%20Mixed-Gender%20Elite%20Team3.pdf>)

clear to members of nondominant groups that the strategic diversity and inclusion plan is nothing more than a mandatory check in the block. Establishing annual special operations specific diversity recruiting metrics and tying them to mission requirements and capabilities (like language or gender specific security requirements) and then creating a mechanism for accountability amongst the services for meeting the goals will be absolutely necessary to both quell resistance from dominant group members and increase feelings of belonging and inclusion for nondominant group members.

Most importantly, the current Headquarters Special Operations Strategic Diversity and Inclusion plan omits any mention of the word equity, which is foundational to the success of any diversity and inclusion initiative. According to one expert, “Equity kind of changes the dynamic where you create the opportunity for people from different backgrounds to be able to contribute at the same level, have power at the same level and be able to extract beneficial outcomes at the same level.”<sup>11</sup> Since equity is about leveling the playing field for everyone through the identification and removal of systemic barriers to service and advancement, whether policies, equipment, practices, or behaviors, a strategy without a clear path to achieving equity for nondominant group members will likely doom the organization’s diversity and inclusion efforts to fail.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to provide my thoughts on this mission critical topic and am happy to answer any questions you have. Thank you.

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<sup>11</sup> John Joyce, “Diversity and Inclusion must be about equity, not buzzwords or an image,” *Triad Business Journal*, January 24, 2020 (<https://www.bizjournals.com/triad/news/2020/01/24/diversity-and-inclusion-must-be-about-equity-not.html>)