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PROCUREMENT OF BLACK ARMY OFFICERS IS IN TROUBLE

by

NATHANIEL P. MOORE

Since 1922, when Howard University in Washington, D.C., graduated 23 black individuals who were commissioned from their Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) program, predominantly black institutions have been the principal source of black commissioned officers for the US Army, and they continue to be so even today.¹ Within the next 10 to 20 years, that trend may change because of the possible dissolution of a substantial number of traditionally black public colleges and universities, primarily because of desegregation.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964—particularly Title IV, dealing with higher education—was originally designed to insure that blacks and other minorities were afforded an opportunity to attend, teach, and administer at institutions of their own choice, without regard to racial or other artificially designed restrictions.² The purpose was to desegregate, or integrate, educational institutions whose past policies, overtly or covertly, were to exclude minorities. To a large extent, this is well underway at institutions throughout this country. However, other events (including lawsuits; court decisions; budget limitations; court-ordered affirmative action plans; and Department of Health, Education, and Welfare guidelines for desegregation) have created a dilemma which bodes ill for the continued existence of historically black public institutions as desegregation is accomplished at their expense.

The scenario has been established, and the tone is grim. Because of the plan for their

gradual assimilation (or elimination), survival of these institutions is likely to be the exception rather than the rule. When this assimilation occurs, it will have an adverse effect on the number of blacks being commissioned as officers in the Army and on the Army's Affirmative Actions Program. These institutions have provided 50 to 60 percent of black college graduates in recent years and previously provided the vanguard of about 80 percent of those graduates throughout the nation.³ A major and continuing downward thrust in these percentages, without a compensating gain from other sources, such as predominantly white colleges, will have serious long-term negative effects likely to lead to periods of unrest.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To fully understand the significance and the importance of traditionally black colleges in America, their current plight, and the probable long-range implications for blacks, it will be necessary to focus on the origin and the general treatment of black public colleges by state and federal agencies during the past 150 years.

Since the middle of the 19th century (primarily after the Civil War), when traditionally black colleges began to appear on the American scene, they have served as the primary vehicle for blacks seeking a higher education and preparation for employment in one of the professions.⁴ However, funding, programs, and

curriculum offerings at these institutions have generally been inferior to those available at state-supported, predominantly white institutions. This duality of treatment thrived with little opposition in traditional southern and borderline states, but it also thrived to a lesser extent (or in a more subtle way) in northern, midwestern, and western states. In fact, it was even accepted, if not encouraged, in educational institutions organized and administered by the federal government, most notably in the service academies. The US Military Academy (USMA) graduated only 55 blacks during the 90-year period ending in 1967. The first black graduated from USMA in 1877, the second in 1887, the third in 1889, and the fourth was an almost unbelievable 47 years later, 1936, in the person of Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., who rose to the rank of Lieutenant General in the Air Force before retiring.⁵

Black institutions of higher education have meant a great deal to those who attended them, because these colleges were the only ones which accepted blacks in great numbers and with open arms. These schools generally recognized that because of their deprived cultural backgrounds and the social and economic conditions associated with those backgrounds, some of their students would be deficient in mathematical and verbal skills. However, since these institutions were more oriented toward teaching and educating youth than toward research, the enrollment of numerous young people with these shortcomings was regarded as both a challenge with an acceptable risk and a duty to the community-at-large.

Have black colleges been successful in their goal of educating minorities? One measure of this—or of the quality of education at *any* of our colleges—is the achievement of their graduates in various professions. From a purely military perspective, 8 of the 14 black general officers on active duty with the Army in December 1977 received their undergraduate degrees from traditionally black colleges.⁶ Of the five black Army officers enrolled in class number 62 (1978) at

the Armed Forces Staff College, three received their undergraduate degrees from black colleges. Black colleges have served many generations of reasonably successful black Americans and these people feel a tremendous sense of uneasiness over the prospect that their alma maters may become extinct because of desegregation.

TRENDS TOWARD DISSOLUTION OF BLACK PUBLIC COLLEGES

The basic premise in this paper is that black colleges, particularly those which are public, face either dissolution or merger. The dilemma of extinction was addressed in a June 1971 pamphlet by John Egerton for the Race Relations Information Center, a Nashville-based, private, nonprofit organization. He quoted an unnamed high-ranking black educator as follows: "I can't point to a single example of hope in the record. There is a blueprint to get rid of the black institutions."⁷ Here is a brief glimpse at what has happened to some black colleges and the prospects for some of the others:

- At least five of these institutions (West Virginia State College, Bluefield State College in West Virginia, Lincoln University in Missouri, Kentucky State University, and Delaware State College) are now predominantly white institutions, and others are approaching that threshold.⁸

- Two of these institutions have been merged with larger, predominantly white institutions—Arkansas A.M. & N. College merged with the University of Arkansas, and Maryland State College became the University of Maryland, Eastern Shore.⁹

- At least one of these institutions, Florida A. & M. University, has lost its Law School to a predominantly white institution, Florida State University. In fact, of the 13 law schools previously existing on black campuses, only 4 remain.¹⁰ Additionally, the hospital at Florida A. & M. University, which supported its nursing program, has been closed.

• One institution, Prairie View A. & M. College in Texas, is now a part of the administrative structure of Texas A. & M. University.

• Other tactics being employed which clearly threaten the continued existence of some of the remaining minority institutions include the establishment or expansion by the state of predominantly white, competitive institutions in the same area, or within easy commuting distance, of the following existing black colleges: Alabama A. & M. University at Normal, Alabama State University at Montgomery, Virginia State College at Petersburg, and Tennessee State University at Nashville.¹¹

From these actions, a reasonable person would assume that the objective is the dissolution or merger of these traditionally black colleges. This position is strongly supported by the fact that the most reasonable alternative of expanding the programs of the existing black colleges was not selected, and probably not even seriously considered.

ROTC PROGRAMS AT BLACK COLLEGES

Having established what appears to be the objective of eliminating traditionally black public colleges in the name of desegregation, it is very important to know that 14 of the 19 black colleges which have senior ROTC programs are public colleges.¹² Focusing further on ROTC enrollment at traditionally black institutions, Department of the Army information for the school years 1971-72 through 1976-77 shows that black ROTC enrollment at black colleges decreased steadily (from 73.7 percent of all blacks enrolled in ROTC nationwide to 58.2 percent) while steadily increasing at white colleges (from 26.3 percent to 41.7 percent).¹³

The decrease in the total percentage of black students enrolled in ROTC at black colleges coincides with a trend toward a greater number and percentage of black students attending predominantly white

colleges.¹⁴ A study provided by the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges in October 1977 revealed that 68.6 percent of the black student population was enrolled in predominantly white colleges, in sharp contrast to survey figures for mid and late 1960's, reflecting that less than 40 percent of all black students were enrolled in white colleges.¹⁵ This dramatic 70-percent shift in less than 10 years reflects increased efforts on the part of white institutions to recruit black students due to desegregation requirements imposed on them, the increasing level of comfort that blacks feel when attending white institutions, stepped up efforts to obtain black scholars, and special efforts to recruit talented black athletes.¹⁶

In spite of this tremendous increase in the number of black students in white colleges, their participation in ROTC has not kept pace with these enrollment trends. Consequently, black colleges continue to have a greater number of blacks participating in their ROTC programs, even though there are only 19 black colleges that have senior ROTC programs out of a total of more than 250 such programs nationwide. A review of data on black officers commissioned via ROTC for the years 1969 through 1974 reflects that consistently more than two-thirds came from black colleges, one year as high as 82 percent.¹⁷ The loss of these black colleges would require wholesale crash

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programs designed not only to restore the existing officer levels, but also to fulfill general affirmative action goals.

Another gauge of the importance of ROTC programs at minority colleges may be seen from statistics on the sources of commissioned officers: the US Military Academy, Officer Candidate School (OCS), and ROTC. During the years 1972 through 1976, ROTC provided between 72.75 and 88.63 percent of all black commissioned Army officers; USMA provided between 3.32 and 7.42 percent; and OCS provided between 3.95 and 21.23 percent. The percentages from ROTC remained high, even though black officers commissioned from USMA increased from a mere 0.7 percent of the graduating class in 1972, to a still unrepresentative 4.7 percent in 1976, because during this same period, ROTC figures for blacks also increased from 75.35 percent to 85.12 percent.¹⁸

Overall ROTC enrollment figures are increasing again, after having fallen from 177,000 in 1963 to 33,000 in 1973, probably due to the termination of our involvement in Vietnam. Enrollment was 49,997 in 1976 and 56,443 in 1977, including 11,898 women. About 6500 are on full-tuition ROTC scholarships, and according to the *Equal Opportunity News*, a Department of Defense publication, the Army must increase the number of Army officers commissioned from ROTC substantially within the next five years to meet expected demand.¹⁹

Information on ROTC scholarships awarded for the five school years ending in 1977 reflects a disproportionately lower percentage being awarded to blacks. The number of blacks enrolled in ROTC nationwide varied from a low of 13.7 percent in school year 1972-73, to a high of 22.1 percent in school year 1976-77. ROTC scholarships awarded to blacks for the same years ranged from 6.1 percent to 7.2 percent.²⁰

Similarly in the same years, black enrollment figures for the Military Academy, where the government finances the total education, ranged from a low of 3.5 percent to a high of 5.6 percent.²¹ These figures

reflect that in both the ROTC scholarship program and the US Military Academy, participation by blacks is considerably below the general population statistics for this racial group. The Army is aware of these figures and has set goals in its Affirmative Actions Plan to improve minority participation.²² These statistics, particularly in ROTC, together with the increased prospect of the merger or dissolution of black colleges, mean that an even smaller number of blacks will be participating in ROTC at these schools as white enrollment and participation in ROTC increases. In those instances where the college is dissolved and minority students seek alternative institutions, they will either attend minority or other colleges which do not have ROTC programs, or attend predominantly white colleges where minority enrollment and participation in ROTC is low. This latter may be due to the lack of encouragement or to other campus activities that are more attractive, because overall enrollment in ROTC on predominantly white college campuses is generally far below the number of positions available.

PERSPECTIVE FOR THE FUTURE

The Army's posture today in terms of the number of black officers on active duty is in need of improvement. Although blacks comprise about 23 percent of the total number of active duty personnel in the Army, only 6.1 percent of its officers are black.²³ In its Affirmative Actions Plan dated 20 August 1975, the Department of the Army includes a representation model index which suggests that the percentage of black, female, and other minority officers in the Army should be a mirror image of the total Army population.²⁴ This means that the number of black officers on active duty needs to be multiplied by a factor of four to reach the proper representation index, a task which will be made more difficult by the merger or dissolution of black colleges and the accompanying reduction in the number of blacks participating in ROTC. This is a dilemma that should be resolved, but how?

That question, as raised in this paper, is not

intended to be a rhetorical one. Rather, it is designed to raise the issue in a manner which should generate an immediate but positive response from the top echelons of the Department of the Army, both civilian and military. The failure to act will be a failure to use a vital segment of America's personnel resources at a time when quality resources are at a premium. The Department of Defense, including the Army, is well-known for its ability to respond to crises when its own or the nation's best interests are at stake. It cannot afford to ignore this situation, and this voice of moderation urges immediate action, unless the Army is willing to sacrifice its hard-earned credibility, particularly in the areas of equal rights and affirmative action.

Perhaps it is a sign of our times that when we are at peace, we tend to rationalize certain programs as being unnecessary; and if they are somewhat sensitive, we relegate them to the proverbial "back burner." Then 10 or 15 years later, when the problem surfaces again amidst a crisis atmosphere, we frantically search for ways to resolve it. Frequently, our response is to apply band aid treatment to a massive wound, trying to give the appearance of progress or responsiveness when, in fact, it is too little and too late. This takes place in an atmosphere in which the actions are characterized by their detractors as being both unnecessary and unfair.

The problem is both a short-term and a long-term one, and to postpone action for even a single year is to add another year of uncertainty to what already appears to be a rather dismal prospect for either increasing or maintaining the number of black commissioned officers in the Army.

ADDRESSING FUTURE NEEDS

What actions should an organization contemplate when its most prolific source of an important resource appears to be diminishing rapidly, especially when that resource cannot be recovered after it is lost? The following are immediate steps which

should be taken to assist in addressing the dilemma I have outlined earlier:

- More four-year ROTC scholarships should be made available to students at predominantly black colleges, because of the comparatively greater number of blacks in ROTC programs on these campuses. This may require a modification in the selection criteria, since a significant portion of the total score to determine eligibility is derived from national aptitude test scores and high school academic records, the two areas in which whites tend to do better.²⁵ This would provide more financial aid to a segment of the population which needs it, and possibly generate an interest in a military career. There should also be an intensified effort to encourage blacks at predominantly white colleges to enroll in the senior ROTC program and to apply for scholarships.

- The Army needs to explore the possibility for the next school year of establishing senior ROTC programs on the campuses of black private colleges in an effort to offset the ROTC program losses resulting from the closure or merger of black public colleges.

- The Army should start sending military representatives to predominantly black colleges at a time when incoming freshmen may be persuaded to seriously consider the Army as a career. It is no longer sufficient for the Army or other services to send recruiters to black college campuses in April and May, just before graduation, in an effort to get graduating seniors interested in the Army as a career alternative. A special session should be tailored for incoming first-year students as a part of freshman orientation; it would possibly yield more positive results than those obtained from graduating seniors. A corollary to this item is the selection of people who are in a position to show a record of success to sell the program. It would require individuals in the grade of O-3 or above who have had a variety of meaningful assignments and who can do an exceptional job of selling the Army. Lower-ranking officers may be

able to establish rapport more easily, but their credentials are usually not sufficiently impressive to persuade the genuine skeptic. These officers must be willing to discuss all facets of a military career, including hardship tours and extended separations from the family, as well as those aspects which make service life particularly appealing.

- The immediate goal for the US Military Academy should be a first-year enrollment of blacks equivalent to 15 to 20 percent of each first-year class. This would take into consideration the normal attrition rate for all USMA students, but still permit each graduating class to include at least a reasonable representation of blacks.

- Additional ROTC programs should be established in high schools which serve heavy concentrations of black students. The interest generated by this type of approach could easily become the source of future enlisted and officer personnel for the Army.

- The Army ought to provide more opportunities for full-time graduate studies for black officers. This is one of the tests of the credibility that minority officers focus upon when they consider various options in their career development.

- Finally, a conscious effort needs to be made to increase the visibility of black generals as models for black youth. Speaking engagements at high schools, colleges, and community events should be encouraged to the maximum extent possible. Their mere presence at certain events would establish the credibility of a military career as a viable option beyond any doubt.

While no one of the above steps—or even all of them collectively—could be regarded as a panacea, their implementation will certainly increase the possibilities of obtaining more blacks as commissioned officers for the Army. Failing that, they would at least insure that a maximum effort has been directed toward that goal and enhance the image of

the Army in the eyes of one of the vital segments of American society, the black community.

NOTES

1. John Holley, "Officer Production From Predominantly Black Institutions," p. 1, and "Black Officer Procurement Statistics from ROTC, OCS, and US Military Academy for the School Years 1972-73 Through 1976-77," p. 1 (unpublished reports for the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Department of the Army, 1977).

2. *Civil Rights Act of 1964, Statutes at Large*, 78, Title IV, 246 (1964).

3. Mabel M. Smythe, *The Black American Reference Book* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 436.

4. Harry A. Ploski and Ernest Kaiser, *The Negro Almanac* (New York: Bellweather Publishing Co., 1971), p. 528.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 603; John Holley, "US Military Academy Graduation Statistics By Race," p. 1, and "Opening Enrollment Statistics for the US Military Academy, 1972-73 Through 1976-77," p. 1 (unpublished reports for the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Department of the Army, 1977).

6. "Resumes of Service Careers of Black General Officers on Active Duty" (unpublished report for the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Department of the Army, 1977), pp. 1-14.

7. John Egerton, *Black Public Colleges: Integration and Disintegration* (Nashville, Tennessee: Race Relations Information Center, 1971), p. 5.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 30; Jack Slater, "Is the Black Public College Dying?" *Ebony* (October 1972), 92.

9. Egerton, p. 30; Slater, p. 92.

10. Smythe, p. 436.

11. Egerton, p. 11; Slater, p. 92.

12. John Holley, "Listing of Black Colleges with Senior ROTC Programs" (unpublished paper for the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Department of the Army, 1977), p. 1.

13. US Department of the Army, Office of the Director of Equal Opportunity Programs, *Race Relations and Equal Opportunity Annual Assessment of Programs* (Washington, 1976), p. 53. Hereafter cited as *Equal Opportunity Assessment*.

14. Harry A. Ploski and Warren Marr, *The Negro Almanac, A Reference Work on the Afro American* (New York: Bellweather Publishing Co., 1975), p. 566; Smythe, p. 436.

15. "Minority Group Students Up 16.8% at US Colleges," *The New York Times*, 12 October 1977, p. A20.

16. "Black College Football Fights for Survival," *Ebony* (December 1972), 143-44.

17. John Holley, "Statistics on the Number of Black Officers Commissioned via ROTC from Black and Other Colleges for the Period 1969 Through 1974" (unpublished report for the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Department of the Army, 1977), p. 1.

18. *Equal Opportunity Assessment*, p. 10; Holley, "Black Officer Procurement Statistics from ROTC, OCS, and US Military Academy for the School Years 1972-73 Through 1976-77," p. 1.

19. "Rebuilding the ROTC With Women's Help," *Equal Opportunity Current News*, 126 (August 1977), 9.

20. *Equal Opportunity Assessment*, p. 53.

21. Holley, "Opening Enrollment Statistics for the US Military Academy, 1972-73 Through 1976-77," p. 1.

22. Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, *Affirmative Actions Plan* (Washington, 1975), p. 10. Hereafter cited as *Affirmative Actions Plan*.

23. John Holley, "Statistics on Active Army Personnel By Race and Grade" (unpublished report for the Office of the

Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Department of the Army, 1977), p. 1.

24. *Affirmative Actions Plan*, p. 34.

25. *Equal Opportunity Assessment*, p. 54.

