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Remo Butler

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Why Black Officers Fail

REMO BUTLER

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Black officers are falling behind their white counterparts in promotions at and above the rank of lieutenant colonel at a disconcerting rate. The purpose of this essay is first to describe that phenomenon and then try to identify the reasons for it. The cause may not be overt racism, but rather a debilitating inertia in the way young black officers are mentored and a lack of common cultural understanding among both black and white officers.

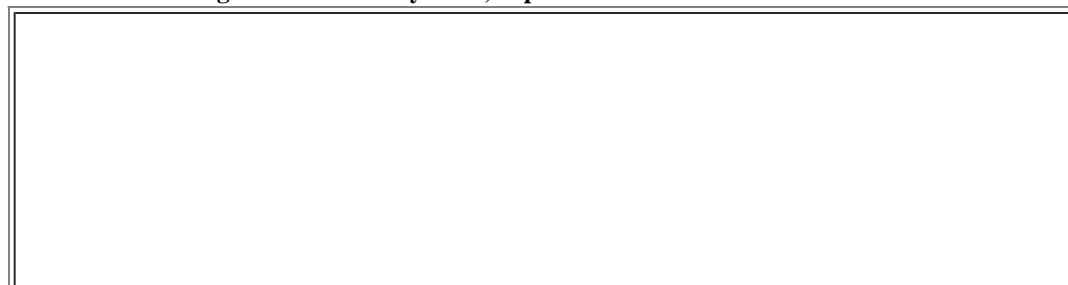
To clarify the problem, this essay will look first at comparative promotion rates. These statistics indicate that black officers are not succeeding at rates comparable to those for white officers. Then we will explore some possible explanations. We will look at how young black officers are acquired and nurtured by our Army. We will then look at some of the cultural biases inherent in the military, and at how they might affect advancement, assignments, and attitudes. Last, I will suggest some ways we might work to overcome the problem.

Where the Numbers Diverge

In 1990, blacks composed 29.1 percent of the Army, but only 11 percent of the officer corps.[1] In 1998, the most recent year for which I have data, those statistics had not changed significantly: blacks accounted for 26.6 percent of the Army, and 11.1 percent of the officer strength. In this article, however, the focus is on a different disparity, one within the officer ranks themselves. Up to the rank of major, black officers constitute about 12 percent of the officer corps, but in the higher ranks the percentage decreases by nearly half. Conversely, as rank increases, the percentage of white officers increases by about 10 percent. Figure 1 shows officer percentages by race in the quarter ending September 1998.[2] Figure 2 portrays the divergence at the higher ranks.

Rank	White non-Hispanic		Black non-Hispanic	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
General Officer	278	90.3	25	8.1
Colonel	3,194	88.2	233	6.4
Lieutenant Colonel	7,518	83.0	920	10.2
Major	11,048	80.0	1,715	12.4
Captain	17,267	77.9	2,663	12.0
1st Lieutenant	7,571	78.5	1,027	10.7
2d Lieutenant	6,452	77.8	865	10.4

Figure 1. Officers by Race, September 1998.



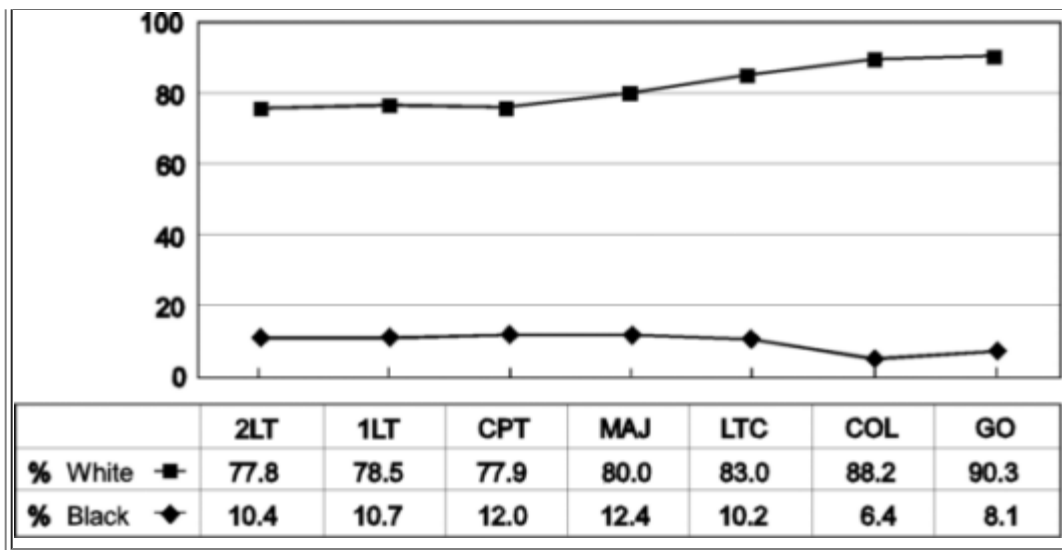


Figure 2. The Racial Divergence in Ranks, September 1998.

The most difficult hurdle for black officers actually seems to be from captain to major. Figure 3, below, presents data from year groups 1973 and 1974.[3] These year groups were selected because they were the accession years for many of the officers in my 1996 Army War College resident class, which seems to be fairly representative.

	Year Group 1973		Year Group 1974	
	Overall select %	Black select %	Overall select %	Black select %
CPT	95.5	92.8	91.1	88.4
MAJ	79.0	72.9	78.0	66.9
LTC	61.4	65.6	60.5	61.7
COL	42.8	41.0	Unavailable	

Figure 3. Selection Rates for Promotion, 1973 and 1974 Year Groups.

Year group 1973 provides a good example since only 1.8 percentage points separate the selection rates of blacks and whites for promotion to colonel. The number of white officers eligible was 1082, while the number of blacks was 117.[4] With 42.8 percent and 41.0 percent select rates, respectively, 455 whites and 48 blacks were promoted. These rates seem comparable. In reality, however, the result is very poor for black officers. By this career stage, the numerical pool of white lieutenant colonels has become so much greater that comparable promotion rates thereafter still present a losing proposition for minorities. It would have been more meaningful to compare black and white promotion rates using the total number of entering officers, but these numbers were unavailable. The significant hurdle for the 1973 and 1974 year groups was from captain to major. That's where black officers fell behind, and subsequent comparable promotion rates did little to compensate for it.

Is this an anomaly or a continuing trend? Figure 4 shows promotion rates for officers in year groups 1984 and 1985, a cohort entering the Army 11 years later.[5] For these groups, both the percentage and numbers of selected officers are available. To show the divergency in bolder relief, the data are displayed graphically in Figure 5.

Year Group '84	White		Black	
	eligible / selected	percent	eligible / selected	percent
CPT, July 1986	1,659 / 1,483	89.3	361 / 303	83.9
CPT, Feb. 1987	3,759 / 3,196	85.0	577 / 480	83.1
MAJ, FY 1994	1,702 / 1,346	79.0	304 / 228	75.0

Year Group '85				
CPT, Sept. 1987	1,759 / 1,488	84.5	353 / 290	82.1
CPT, March 1988	3,383 / 2,823	83.4	467 / 379	81.1
MAJ, FY 1995	1,603 / 1,202	74.9	312 / 206	66.0

Figure 4. Selection Rates for Promotion, 1984 and 1985 Year Groups.

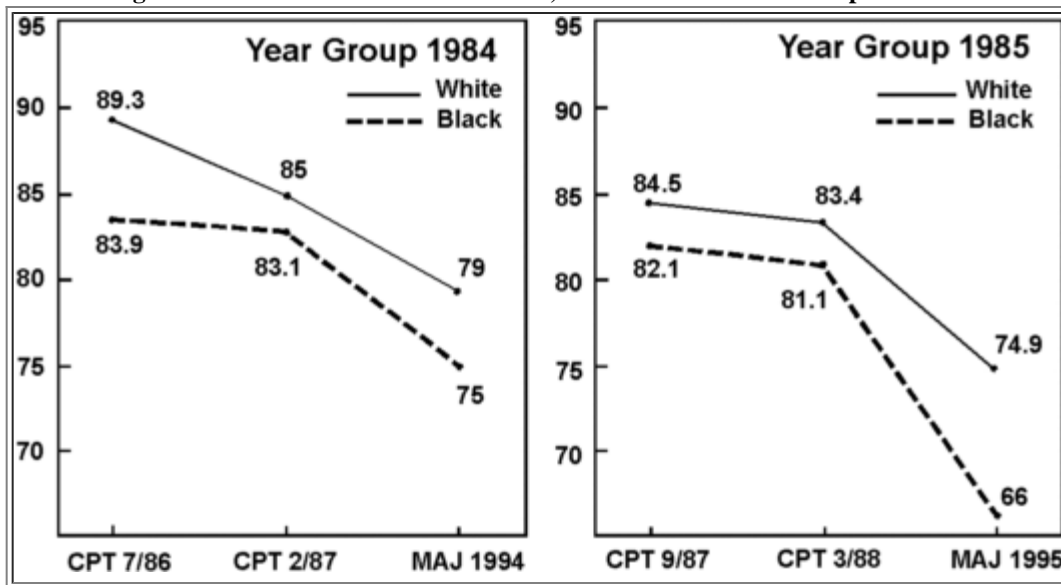


Figure 5. Diverging Selection Rates, 1984 and 1985 Year Groups.

These two cohorts, entering service a little more than a decade apart, are sufficiently separated that one can see the continuing trend. The 1984 and 1985 year groups also provided the first instances in which a year group was split, with two promotion boards for the same year group. The data from year groups 1984 and 1985 mirror the statistics from a decade earlier. Black and white select rates for captain are similar, but black select rates for major are lower by an average of six percent. Another aspect of the problem is that the pool of promotion-eligible black officers was reduced by a higher rate of attrition. For year groups 1984 and 1985, 72 percent of the black officers, compared to 66 percent of the white officers, had left the service before they were eligible for consideration for promotion to major.[6] Clearly there seems to be something wrong in the system if black officers leave the service at a higher rate and still continually fall behind in promotions to major.

Obviously, a lower select rate at any rank reduces the number of eligibles for the next promotion. When black officers fall behind at the rank of major, that reduces the pool of black officers eligible for promotion to higher ranks. Even if subsequent select rates are comparable as a percentage of the available pool, the number of black officers chosen for advancement will continue to decline in comparison with their white counterparts. Disparities in selection rates at lower grades thus have markedly adverse consequences on the numbers of officers subsequently promoted, even where the percentage rates may appear to be competitive.

Are these statistics telling the true story? Or are black officers in fact reaching the upper ranks in the military in appropriate numbers? In 1995, two articles by Neff Hudson in the *Army Times* suggested that the numbers don't lie:

According to Defense Department statistics, women and minorities are consistently underrepresented above the rank of O-4 [major], although they have been in the military in large numbers since the 1960s.[7]

In the military promotions race, blacks tend to lag behind whites at the critical E-7 and O-4 levels, while women fare better than men according to a congressional study. After analyzing five years of Defense Department statistics, the General Accounting Office (GAO) found what it called "significant disparities" by race and gender in accessions, assignments, and promotions. The accounting office, which serves as a congressional watchdog, stressed that the differences do not prove discrimination exists. But it did

recommend that the Pentagon change the way it tracks the recruitment and career development of women and minorities. Defense officials had little reaction to the report except to agree with its findings and question its timeliness. "It's not new," an equal opportunity official said.[8]

The General Accounting Office report referred to above confirms that in the upper ranks there is a problem with black officers falling behind compared to the promotion rates of their white counterparts. In its analysis of promotion decisions from FY 1989 through 1993, the GAO reported:

We used the eligible pool of data for promotions reported in the services' military Equal Opportunity Assessments. In about 37 percent of the enlisted (E-7, E-8, and E-9) and officer (O-4, O-5, O-6) promotion boards we examined, one or more minority groups had statistically significant lower odds of being promoted than whites. We found statistically significant lower odds of minorities being promoted compared to whites most often (1) for blacks, (2) at the E-7 and O-4 levels.[9]

We analyzed accessions, assignments considered career enhancing, and promotions to identify possible racial or gender disparities in selection rates. Our analysis showed statistically significant disparities in selection rates in each of the three categories, although the number of disparities varied by category and service and by race and gender. It is important to note that the existence of statistically significant disparities does not necessarily mean they are the result of unwarranted or prohibited discrimination. Many job related or societal factors can contribute to racial and gender disparities.[10]

Many people reading the above quotation will focus on the sentence indicating that the disparities may not be not the result of discrimination. It is probably true that overt racism is not the principal reason for the phenomenon of black officers falling behind on the promotion ladder. But if overt racism is not the cause, then what are the reasons and how can we fix the problem?

To some extent this disparity may be a reflection of lingering racial differences in our country at large, as seen in disagreements over such issues as affirmative action. But if we still face problems and contentious issues related to race, they can be solved only by bringing attention to them, and then perhaps through communication, education, and working together we can find satisfactory solutions.

Let us proceed on the basis of the following assumptions: First, that the problem is not the result of institutional racism on the part of a white-male-dominated society. Second, that the problem is not innate among the young black officers entering the military, that those young black men and women are just as capable of succeeding as are their white counterparts. Third, that the Army is capable of seeking and finding a solution that is eminently fair to all.

Before going further, I shall digress a bit to discuss my research. The most difficult part of writing this article was getting access to information on why blacks fail in the military. Any issue dealing with race is discomforting; people would rather not deal with it. One example is indicative of the problem. After making numerous calls to different offices in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel in Washington and being passed around, I spoke to a captain who responded to my request for information with the comment, "Sir, do you really believe that there is a problem in the system? I don't." Her question and answer were unsolicited, but this gave me an indication of the problems that would have to be overcome in gathering information on this subject.

A second problem is that there is a lack of published information on blacks in the military. The information that I was able to obtain from US Army Personnel Command was adequate, but the fullest information came from General Accounting Office reports and the *Army Times*. I also was able to gather a great deal of information from a survey conducted in November 1995 at the Army War College by Lieutenant Colonel Maurice (Buck) Buchanan. This was a valuable source that showed how the different races viewed discrimination in the military. Another worthwhile product of student research at the Army War College is Craig T. Johnson's 1997 study, "United States Army Officer Professional Development: Black Officers' Perspectives." [11]

In addition to the foregoing research I conducted individual interviews with nine black officers and eleven white officers, most in the combat arms, and all members of Army War College Class of 1996. These interviews were semi-structured. The intent was to gain an understanding of the decisionmaking process of the officers being interviewed.

The first questions were: Did you have black officers under your command? If so, how did they perform? The responses generally differed according to the race of the officer being interviewed. Most of the white officers started off with the same sentence: "I had one real good black officer." This led to other questions, such as what made him good and the others bad, and in general stimulated some very good dialogue. On several occasions, it made the officers being interviewed look at some of the decisions they made, and the effects of those decisions, and helped them understand why they made those decisions. The typical response from the black officers was: "Yes, I had some black officers under my command and some were good, some average, and I had one that was sorry."

One of the perceptions I took away from the personal interviews was that none of the officers was racially biased. They made their decisions based on their personal knowledge and honest appraisals of their subordinates and their capabilities. Their decisions were not specifically based on race or gender. However, I do believe that race does enter into the equation because of the subtle contributions of the cultural misperceptions we tend to carry with us.

In addition to the interviews, another source of information was an informal group of black officers in the 1996 Army War College resident class who met monthly to discuss issues of common concern. Most of the officers in the group answered a questionnaire designed to get opinions from successful black officers on why the overall success rate for blacks is so low. This questionnaire asked a range of questions, including: Is there a problem? Do you think that black officers fail at a disproportionate rate? How does education or the school that the young black officer attended affect him? Is black culture a part of why blacks fail? Is there anything in the Army system that contributes to the failure of black officers?

The answers to these questions were insightful and, to the chagrin of some, placed a portion of the blame squarely on the shoulders of some black officers themselves. They also pointed out that there are some systemic problems which make it a little bit harder for the black officer to be as successful as his white counterpart.

Four Areas to Address

Based on the results of my research, the personal interviews, the questionnaires, and my own experiences, I believe there are four principal determinants of the success or failure of black officers: education, developmental assignments, mentoring, and the clash of cultures. Improvements in each of these areas might go a long way toward correcting inequities in promotion rates.

Education

In the opinion of several of the black officers interviewed, the biggest problem for black junior officers is the poor military education that many of them receive before coming on active duty. White and black senior officers alike saw a correlation between where an officer was educated and his subsequent success.[12] Black officers who graduate from West Point or a predominately white institution seem to have a better chance of succeeding than black officers who graduate from historically black colleges. The difference may lie in the quality and professionalism of the ROTC programs offered at the latter and the career competitiveness of the instructors who teach there. One of the questionnaire respondents put it this way:

As you are well aware, a number of young blacks self-destruct (DUI, drugs, fraternization, etc.). I don't know if this is due to immaturity, poor mentorship, or poor ROTC programs. Rarely does a black officer from the military academy get caught in an embarrassing situation. Maybe our ROTC programs are not stressing professional behavior and need closer observation.[13]

The caliber of officers in ROTC assignments must be high, and if that is to happen then these officers must remain competitive for subsequent promotions and career advancement. This is not to imply that the officers who presently teach in ROTC programs aren't high-quality, competitive officers. However, if one assumes that selection for battalion command is a quality cut, the data clearly show that only a small percentage of ROTC instructors overall are selected, and the percentage is even smaller for those who teach at historically black colleges. On the other side of this coin, a large percentage of the officers selected for battalion command in 1993, 1994, and 1995 had served as instructors at West Point.[14] Is the Army sending the message that West Point is the premier institution, that it therefore gets the best instructors, and that our ROTC programs get what's left?

Most of the black officers who graduate from West Point or a large racially integrated school seem to do quite well in adjusting to military life. The greater problems seem to come from the black officers who graduated from historically black colleges. Since public colleges and universities are the most fertile field for our next generation of officers, it would seem logical that the Army would assign some of its premier officers as ROTC instructors. The Army would make a great investment in the future by putting some of its stars in ROTC assignments where they could dramatically influence the future officer corps.

As one looks through the list of officers who have served in ROTC assignments, it becomes clear that most of the ROTC instructors at historically black colleges were black.[15] Why don't more white officers teach at historically black colleges? If our military is going to continue to lead the way to better race relations in our country, then having excellent white officers teach at predominately black colleges and excellent black officers teach at predominately white colleges would contribute mightily to that goal. This would have many positive influences on young officers of all races before they are commissioned. What kind of signal does the status quo send to the black ROTC student? Where is his opportunity to get involved before commissioning in the kind of cross-cultural relationships that he will find every day after he pins on his lieutenant's bars? Many of these ROTC students--black and white--have never had a meaningful relationship with a person of another race. We can change that, and lay an excellent foundation for the cadets' success in the real Army, by elevating the quality of our ROTC instructors and by altering what appear to be race-dependent decisions on which officers teach where.

Developmental Assignments

After accession, then what? One of the most critical factors in an officer's advancement to higher rank and positions of greater responsibility is to have the right series of jobs, the necessary developmental assignments that lead one on a successful career path. The following excerpt from an *Army Times* article discusses minorities and job assignments:

Senior commanders should be asked to monitor company-level assignments to help female and minority officers advance through the ranks, according to the director of an equal opportunity study.

Keith A. Maxie, who is studying the officer promotion pipeline, said women and minorities lag behind white men in earning prime assignments at the beginning of their careers. Since long-term success in the military often depends on getting early command jobs, Maxie said, women and minorities fall behind almost as soon as they are recruited and trained. As a result the military might be losing qualified women and minorities before they reach the upper ranks.[16]

The GAO report alluded to earlier also reported that blacks fall behind in career-enhancing assignments, especially in the combat arms.[17]

The data collected from interviews corroborate this. In the early years of their careers, black officers tend to fall into only two perceived categories: those who are extremely good, and the rest. If a black officer is only average or needs help in his early years, he or she will likely be forced out early or, if lucky, will retire as a major.

My own experience also sheds some light on this phenomenon. Having had the privilege of sitting on a promotion board for major, I can report that the board process is as fair and objective as possible. All the files are reviewed dispassionately and the best get selected. The problem lies in what is contained or not contained in the files. The selections center on developmental assignments and Officer Evaluation Reports (OERs). Colonel Keith Maxie, whose study is alluded to in the *Army Times* article quoted above, believes that the problem starts when a young black officer reports to his or her unit and receives little or no guidance on career-enhancing assignments and the importance of a good OER. In today's smaller Army, an officer can't have a weak OER and continue to be promoted. Unfortunately, some young black officers are being told that a weaker OER gives them room to grow, and therefore they accept one without questioning it.

Even higher on the promotion ladder the pattern has persisted. Developmental assignments are critical to success. In the selection rates for the Command Designated Position List (CDPL), determining which officers will receive battalion command positions, black lieutenant colonels have been in the position of falling behind. Battalion command

is perceived to be a quality cut and is virtually a prerequisite for promotion to colonel. Figure 6, below, shows the lieutenant colonel CDPL selection rates for black officers and white officers for fiscal years 1995 through 2000.[18]

Fiscal Year	Selection Rate, Whites	Selection Rate, Blacks
1995	11.30%	4.83%
1996	9.55%	4.75%
1997	9.05%	7.78%
1998	12.05%	11.17%
1999	11.70%	10.13%
2000	14.66%	13.95%

Figure 6. Selection Rates, Lieutenant Colonel Command Designated Position List.

In fiscal years 1995 and 1996, we see much lower selection rates for black officers, and consequently the cohort of black lieutenant colonels was put at a significant competitive disadvantage for promotion to colonel. That disadvantage, of course, subsequently affects the potential for black officers to be promoted to the general officer ranks and positions of greater responsibility and higher command. In more recent years the gap has narrowed significantly, though it has not been eliminated.

One more aspect of Army assignments needs to be addressed, the "old boy network." Despite the objectivity of promotion and selection boards, this phenomenon--choosing an officer for a particular position because the commander making the selection knows the officer--is alive and well in the Army. This is what the GAO study and the study by Colonel Maxie refer to when they recommend that senior commanders should monitor company-level assignments. The key gates for success in the Army are company command, executive officer (XO), and operations officer (S-3). Commanders usually have great influence in the selection of their S-3 and XO. Unfortunately, many commanders never get to know the young black officers in their units. Consequently a black officer is probably not going to be the commander's first choice simply because that black junior officer is an unknown quantity, not because of his or her quality and ability to do the job. To level the playing field, these critical assignments must be monitored above battalion level. This idea will be considered heresy because every commander wants the authority to choose "his man." But if we are ever to achieve equal opportunity, the Army culture must change in this respect from "who you know" to "what you know."

Mentoring

Because there are relatively few senior black officers, there are fewer role models for young black officers to emulate, and few black mentors to show them the ropes and the pitfalls. The Army puts a lot of effort into the mentoring program, but unfortunately most young black officers seem to receive little or no mentoring or counseling except at OER time. Many young black officers don't even realize that they have the right to talk to their senior rater.

It seems to be harder for some young black officers to adjust to certain performance and leadership challenges because of cultural differences, as will be discussed below. While in a perfect world mentoring should transcend race, the reality doesn't match that ideal.[19] A black mentor who understands the black culture and who also has been successful in a military environment that predominately reflects the culture of the white majority can usually relate best to the young black officer. *It is critical for young black officers to find a good mentor.* Regrettably, young black officers too often fail to get attached to a mentor early on; they tend to seek assistance only during crises.

In many cases the white officers interviewed in the preparation of this article indicated that they had a difficult time getting to know their black junior officers. One white officer from Georgia took a great deal of pride in telling me how he basically forced his black lieutenants to become part of the unit. He said that he often had to draw them out by

letting them know that he was there for them and if they had a problem they could come to him. Getting them to trust him was the hardest part, but once that bond was established it was easy to guide them in the right direction. Unfortunately, the more common theme in the interviews was "I really didn't get to know most of them but I had one good one." The good one usually came from West Point or a large integrated university and had something in common with the commander.

When the white officers were asked why they didn't get to know many of the other black subordinates, the answer routinely was that the black lieutenants seemed hostile or somehow gave the impression that they didn't want to be bothered. When asked about their white junior officers, most of the white colonels interviewed spoke quite fondly and at great length about several of them. When asked about the difference in their responses, the colonels all said race had nothing to do with it; they had just established a good relationship with those particular subordinates. Returning to the discussion of the "old boy network" above, given that these colonels have established relationship disparities between their black and white junior officers, we must ask, "When it is time to give someone that great job, who will get it?"

The Clash of Cultures

The perception of whether discrimination exists in the Army is evidently race-dependent. The 1995 survey conducted by Lieutenant Colonel Buchanan reported:

Other sharp differences in respondent groups exist. . . . 100 percent of black males, 75 percent of white females, and 50 percent of Hispanic males agree that institutional racism still exists in the Army while only 40 percent of white males agree. . . . 100 percent of white males, white females, and 50 percent of Hispanic males agree that the nature of discrimination is more sporadic than pervasive compared to only 40 percent of black males who agree. . . . Black males consistently responded . . . oppositely from white males, white females, and Hispanic males on minorities getting a fair shake.[20]

Institutional racism and discrimination were least likely to be perceived by those least subjected to discrimination, the white male officer. This is the group that needs to be educated and sensitized to the problems that minorities encounter on a daily basis.

It should go without saying that Americans of all races and creeds love our country. In the 1996 summer Olympic games in Atlanta, black athletes and white athletes alike were moved to tears at the sight of their flag being raised and their anthem being played--just as were black citizens and white citizens watching at home. We have much common ground, yet there are distinct cultural differences that tend to divide black and white Americans. And those differences influence the way we in the military interact. In this vibrant, multi-cultural society, how much do we actually know about one another? How do we view our differences in dress, music, and attitudes? If we don't know or understand each other, we will carry with us some misconceptions that could interfere with our good judgment.

It's important that we look into ourselves and do some critical thinking. It's important that we ask of ourselves, "How can I help to solve this problem?" Are we promoting cultural awareness and education in the Army in a positive, beneficial way? If we can bridge some of the societal differences that divide us, we can make our Army and our country better and stronger.

The Army is primarily a reflection of a white-male-dominated culture with which many young blacks have little or no experience. And since many whites have little or no experience with black culture in America, it is difficult for many white commanders to understand and acknowledge the difference with a sense of neutrality or an unbiased perspective.

Although we sometimes claim to have a homogeneous society in the United States, there are racial differences in attitudes on everything from politics to religion to music to dress. For a young black man or woman who has grown up in a predominately black neighborhood, possibly in a family with no previous military background, and who perhaps attended one of the historically black colleges, the jump into the white-male-dominated culture of the military can be a real culture shock. Social conflict is bound to complicate his or her challenge to build a successful military career.

It's understandable that white officers have difficulty empathizing with the situation of a young black officer. Many white officers, perhaps most, have never participated in a social event where a majority of the participants were black.

Having had the opportunity to witness this phenomenon in my home, I can tell you that in my experience, most whites react very uncomfortably in such a situation. They tend to seek out any other white person at the party and stay close to them. They find that they don't quite know what to say, and it is hard for them to follow some of the conversations. They may try to speak in the black vernacular, but don't really understand how to use it. One summer day, for example, while some of my black neighbors and I were sitting outside having a beer, a white neighbor (and War College classmate) came by and said "What be it?" Obviously he was just being friendly, but none of us had any idea what he was saying.

These individuals have been in the military for a few years and have been repeatedly exposed to blacks in their careers. If whites who have had experience with blacks behave inappropriately, why do we expect a new black officer to react any differently, especially when he or she has probably had little social interface with whites?

Military social life is fairly complicated and structured, and can be confusing even for old hands. It is not intuitively clear how an officer should behave in all military social settings. If a young officer does not behave as expected, it would be unfair to assume that he or she knew the expected behavior. For example, if a young black officer fails to attend a hail and farewell event, it may not be a result of diffidence or disrespect, and it wouldn't be fair to assume so. Many young black officers and their spouses simply don't know what is expected of them socially in the military and how they are supposed to act in various military social settings. Some take the easy way out and just don't attend rather than be embarrassed. Any type of social setting for a new officer can be a frightening experience, especially if you are the only minority member there.

If an officer arrives in a unit without sufficient education about military etiquette, someone must teach him. That officer needs someone experienced who can teach him or her the norms and expectations of military society. Again, mentoring is essential. This education also might be accomplished through ROTC programs, but only if quality, motivated instructors are assigned there. This is a subject that could also be incorporated into the officer basic course. The only place that gives formal detailed training in military customs and courtesy to incoming officers is the US Military Academy.

Most officers are extremely conservative in their mode of dress and look at anything out of the norm as radical. There have been moments when I thought that white officers were issued khaki pants, pullover shirts with collars, and loafers. This seemed to be the universally accepted casual dress for officers. At social functions, many khaki-clad officers seem compelled to comment on the dress of any officer not dressed in the norm. In the military, anyone not strictly conforming tends to stand out and be perceived as a rebel.

Even something as innocuous as an Army-regulation mustache can be seen as something that sharpens the differences between black officers and white officers. Trimmed mustaches are allowed in the Army, yet they seem to clash with the mores of the military culture. Some people even correlate job performance with the presence of a mustache. One day I was in the hallway of a headquarters, standing by a row of pictures of general officers, and a gentleman said, "You know, one day your picture will be on this wall." I replied that I didn't think I would ever be a general, but he was adamant. He said, "No, I believe that one day your picture will be up here, but can you tell me what is different about you and every picture here?" After considerable thought I said, "They are all white." Although true, this was not the answer he was looking for. He was subtly informing me that successful officers who advance to the rank of general don't have mustaches; therefore the only thing that would hinder my career was my mustache. For a black or Hispanic male, having a well-groomed mustache may be a matter of cultural identity; for some white officers, it is a sign of rebellion.

Discussing khaki pants, socialization skills at parties, and mustaches may seem silly. But the point is that they demonstrate the differences in the cultures we come from. And when we allow such insignificant matters to affect our evaluations of junior officers, or when we fail to recognize that such cultural differences do affect our judgment, then we don't serve the Army or each other very well. Such culture-based problems or misconceptions are among the causes of black officers falling behind early in their careers. There is an old adage in the Army that generals make people who look like themselves generals. This is true not only at the general officer level but at all levels of the military.

Conclusion

My purpose in writing this article is not to throw stones. Most who read this are products of our Army system and have thrived under our system. Perhaps taking a moment to see things from the perspective of a black officer will help us to make the present system better.

The data from DCSPER, the GAO studies, *Army Times* articles, surveys, and personal interviews certainly indicate that a problem does exist. They show that black officers are failing. Black officers are not progressing in rank and responsibilities at the same rate as their white counterparts. If we proceed from the assumption that the cause is not simple racism, and I believe that assumption is correct, then perhaps the cause lies in the way our ROTC cadets are educated and assimilated, the way developmental assignments and OERs are managed, the need for better mentoring of young black officers, and our mutual shortcomings in terms of cultural awareness.

Might there be other explanations for the data? Perhaps. For example, it has been suggested that in the mid-to-late 1980s, when businesses were expanding and looking for ways to improve their racial mixes, the private sector may have taken from the Army the cream of the young black officer crop. I haven't the data to either prove or disprove such a contention, but it does not ring true in my opinion. Certainly some young black officers with good educations and leadership experience are attractive candidates to fill positions in the private sector, but based on my personal experience and anecdotal information from others, I don't believe that factor could account for the disparities in the data on promotions. To the contrary, I know of bright young black officers who are leaving the service and are scrambling to try to find jobs worthy of their talents.

So if the data are accurate and we are drawing the right inferences, the question then becomes, What are we going to do with this information? If we take the traditional approach, we will talk about it, study it, analyze it, and then hope it doesn't raise its ugly head on our watch.

One step forward would be for senior commanders to focus on performance and potential and to do what they can to minimize the workings of the old boy network. The only way this can be done is for standards to be set on how jobs are given. Once standards are set they must also be monitored. Any manipulation of the system that results in unfairness must be dealt with squarely and swiftly. If this happens, the playing field will automatically become more level. This problem has been commonly acknowledged but never dealt with directly. "Taking care of one's buddies" seems like a positive cultural trait within the Army, but most young black officers don't have anyone to take care of them, and they are thus left out of the old boy network to the detriment of the officers themselves and the Army as a whole.

Another important step would be to increase the stature of ROTC assignments, and thereby the quality of our instructors. Improving the racial mix of instructors would similarly enhance the ROTC experience of our soon-to-be lieutenants.

After accession, providing quality mentoring for young black officers is essential. The importance of this can hardly be overstated.

Finally, we can start educating our officers and senior leaders in cultural awareness. How that is done is important, though. Spending money and wasting time in pursuit of political correctness or some new catch-phrase would be counterproductive; it would annoy and aggravate rather than enlighten the participants. But actually making an effort to understand why blacks and whites react differently in military and social settings would be of great value in helping us to work together and understand each other. As professional soldiers we need to learn to communicate across cultural lines, not unlike the cross-cultural communication in which the US Army Special Forces excels in external scenarios. Army schools spend a lot of money on tools like the Myers-Briggs test to tell us what most of us already know about ourselves. That time and money would be better spent teaching us why soldiers act the way they do, why blacks and whites act differently, and why some are perceived to have bad attitudes. Teach us how to overcome some of our cultural biases, or at least make us aware that we all have some. Once we acknowledge that we have these biases, then we can start to work through them.

Sometimes even our best efforts tend to backfire. Sometimes in our efforts to avoid racial quotas, for example, we end up excluding blacks from the mix altogether, hindering the kind of cross-cultural communication that we most need.

During my year at the Army War College, for example, each of the student seminar groups had at least one female student, two foreign students, a civilian, and a reservist. But though there were more black officers than the number of seminars, not all seminars included a black officer. Thus the perspective that black officers share was not voiced in each seminar group. It should have been. Gratifyingly, the policy was changed effective with the Class of 1997, so that now black officers are evenly distributed among the seminar groups.

The socialization process of understanding and overcoming our cultural differences will require time, patience, and energy at all levels. But we must start to educate the officer corps on the cultural differences that exist in our society, and how to deal fairly with these differences in our military. This education should start in the pre-command course if not earlier. Every year the Army loses a lot of talent because some black officers do not feel that they are part of the team. If we can correct this situation, we can help black officers and our Army to succeed.

NOTES

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Colonel (P) Remo Butler is Deputy Commanding General, US Army Special Operations Command, Fort Bragg, N.C., and previously commanded the 1st Special Warfare Training Group (Airborne) at the JFK Special Warfare Center and School, Ft. Bragg. He was commissioned from the ROTC, graduating with a B.S. degree in political science from Austin Peay State University in 1974. He received an M.S. in personnel management from Troy State University in 1983 and graduated from the US Army War College in 1996. Overseas assignments have included the Republic of Korea and Panama. Colonel Butler has commanded at the platoon, company, battalion, and group levels, including command of the 1st Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group. He participated in Operation Just Cause in Panama in 1989. Colonel Butler was recently selected for promotion to brigadier general.

Reviewed 20 August 1999. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil