

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 50
Number 3 *Parameters Autumn 2020*

Article 6

8-14-2020

Two Worlds: African American Servicemembers, WWII and Today

Douglas W. Bristol Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>



Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), [National Security Law Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Douglas W. Bristol Jr., "Two Worlds: African American Servicemembers, WWII and Today," *Parameters* 50, no. 3 (2020), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2673.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

Two Worlds: African American Servicemembers, WWII and Today

Douglas W. Bristol Jr.

©2020 Douglas W. Bristol Jr.

ABSTRACT: The theory of social stigma provides a context for the subjective experience of African American servicemembers in World War II. Those experiences reveal the paradox the military faces when addressing racial discrimination. An examination of these experiences suggests only a collective response by African American servicemembers will solve this problem.

The death of George Floyd in police custody on May 25, 2020 galvanized Americans from every background to protest in the streets, where they demanded to know why racial inequities persist in the twenty-first century. Many Americans did more than protest, as unparalleled numbers sought to educate themselves about racism, driving the sales of books on mass incarceration, White privilege, and White supremacy to the top of the best-seller list.¹ Yet one perspective has been omitted from the public's reading list: the experience of African Americans in the US armed forces since World War II. This fact is surprising because, arguably, no other institution has done more to end racial discrimination and provide opportunities to African Americans.² As the last war America fought with a segregated military and the first war in which the US government promised to treat African Americans equally, World War II reveals the paradox the military faces when addressing racial discrimination. This article contends as long as the military views race as a meaningful difference between servicemembers, the armed forces cannot avoid making African American servicemembers feel inferior to their White counterparts.

Since historians have generally failed to analyze what it means to be judged inferior on account of one's race, this paper employs Erving Goffman's theory of social stigma, which sociologists have lately reevaluated to understand better the power dynamics of race relations. The article examines two incidents from World War II that reveal the impact of stigmatization on African American servicemembers and compares them to General Charles "CQ" Brown's description of

Dr. Douglas W. Bristol Jr., associate professor of history and fellow of the Dale Center for the Study of War and Society at the University of Southern Mississippi, is the author of *Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom and Integrating the U.S. Military: Race, Gender, and Sexuality since World War II*.

1. Mary Cadden, "Books about Race Flying off Shelves, Climbing Best-Seller Lists Following the Death of George Floyd, Protests," *USA Today*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/books/2020/06/04/books-race-flying-off-shelves-following-george-floyds-death/3143169001/>.

2. Douglas Walter Bristol, Jr. and Heather Marie Stur, eds., *Integrating the U.S. Military: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation since World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 219.

“living in two worlds.”³ This brief comparison suggests only a collective response by servicemembers will eradicate racial stigma in the military.

The US armed forces had a great deal of racism to overcome. As recently as World War II, the military rigidly enforced segregation. Black veteran Lamar Lenoir recalled the impact of segregation on his military service in Africa and Italy during World War II when he said: “You know, your area, your situation that you would really run into, they were segregated. It was just black and white.” Nonetheless, Lenoir said his time in the army “was a great experience.” He said he enjoyed seeing the world and meeting Europeans. Lenoir also said he got respect for being a well-trained medic in the army, something he would never have received back home in Mississippi. He said, “I had something that somebody wanted, you know.”⁴ The contributions of African American men and women like Lenoir during World War II paved the way for President Harry Truman in 1948 to order the desegregation of the armed forces, which began a long process of reform that reached a new milestone this spring with the appointment of Brown as the first Black Air Force Chief of Staff.

While Brown awaited Senate confirmation, Minneapolis police killed George Floyd, and the general responded by posting a video on Twitter that quickly went viral. In his video, Brown described his military experience as “living in two worlds,” one Black and one White, eerily reminiscent of the way Lamar Lenoir described his experience in the military 75 years before.⁵ The fact that Brown, on the eve of his historic appointment, still felt like an outsider in the military because of his skin color draws attention to the subjective experience of African American servicemembers.

Literature Review

The experience of African American servicemembers “living in two worlds” has been largely overlooked by scholars. As Christine Knauer observes, historians tend to look at the integration of the armed forces “mostly ‘from the top down’” and pay little attention to the daily lives of African American servicemembers.⁶ For example, one prominent scholar in the field, Bernard Nalty, said it was pressure “from elected officials, from the demands of war, or from Black Americans themselves” that led to successive waves of military reform during the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and in the all-volunteer force.⁷ Although they note the protests of African Americans served as a catalyst for reform, the primary

3. General Charles “CQ” Brown, “What I Am Thinking About,” Pacific Air Force Services, YouTube, accessed June 25, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mx0HnOTUkVI>.

4. Lamar Lenoir, “An Oral History with Mr. Lamar Lenoir,” in *Mississippi Oral History Program of the University of Southern Mississippi*, vol. 496 (Hattiesburg, MS: Special Collections, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, 1993), 6, 21, 26.

5. Brown, “What I Am Thinking About.”

6. Christine Knauer, *Let Us Fight as Free Men: Black Soldiers and Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 6.

7. Bernard C. Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 354.

concern of these historians is the problem of racial discrimination, so they focus on institutions and White people.⁸

A more recent trend has been to study African Americans in the military as agents in the Black freedom struggle. The pioneering work of Robert Jefferson, Leisa Meyer, and James Westheider gave voice to the Black men and women who fought for equal rights in the military during World War II and Vietnam.⁹ The latest studies employing this approach have broadened in scope to examine multiple wars and consider how the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements affected the views of African American servicemembers.¹⁰ Knauer herself joins a group of scholars who examine Black activism through the lens of gender, and their books focus on African American soldiers demanding recognition of their manhood.¹¹ The use of the Black freedom struggle as a model for studying the fight for equal rights in the military, however, still neglects the experience of typical African American servicemembers because this approach fails to consider why they served.

Simply put, most African Americans have tended to view their military service as a patriotic duty and as a means to realize their career ambitions rather than as an opportunity for activism. Historian Neil McMillen interviewed almost fifty Black World War II veterans in Mississippi before he reached this conclusion. He had expected the veterans to associate their military service with a claim to full citizenship, in line with the ideology of the Double V campaign urging African Americans to fight against the Axis overseas and against racial discrimination at home. To his surprise, he discovered none of them had even heard of the Double V campaign during the war. McMillen said, “most of these men and women insisted that, however resentful of social injustice, they served in uniform because this was their country too.”¹²

Charles Moskos looked at the early all-volunteer force and found the percentage of African Americans in the Army almost doubled from the 17 percent they comprised when the draft had ended, attracted by bonuses

8. Sherie Mershon and Steven Schlossman, *Foxholes & Color Lines: Desegregating the U.S. Armed Forces* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); and William A. Taylor, *Military Service and American Democracy: From World War II to the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2016).

9. Robert F. Jefferson, *Fighting For Hope: African American Troops of the 93rd Infantry Division in World War II and Postwar America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008); Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps during World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and James E. Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

10. Kimberly L. Phillips, *War! What Is It Good For? Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); and Jeremy P. Maxwell, *Brotherhood in Combat: How African Americans Found Equality in Korea and Vietnam* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018).

11. Knauer, *Let Us Fight*; Herman Graham, *The Brother's Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Steve Estes, *I Am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); and Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

12. Neil R. McMillen, “Fighting for What We Didn't Have: How Mississippi's Black Veterans Remembered World War II,” in *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South*, ed. Neil R. McMillen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 104–5.

and good pay.¹³ Beth Bailey confirmed this interpretation of African American motives for enlisting in the early all-volunteer force when she uncovered market research showing young Black men interested in joining the military “were more concerned about salary than were young white men.”¹⁴ So, what do African American servicemembers have in common over time? They share the experience of dealing with White servicemembers who view them as inferior on account of their skin color. To shed light on these interactions, this article employs the theory of social stigma, which, to the author’s knowledge, is the first application of this theory to military history.

Social stigma theory posits that face-to-face interactions can be analyzed, a sphere of activity best studied through microanalysis. According to sociologist Imogen Tyler, “what is most novel and influential” about Erving Goffman’s definition of stigma is it: “describes a relation between normal and stigmatized persons. What he means by this is that people acquire stigma in their exchanges with other people.”¹⁵ Goffman says stigma arises from “normals” devaluing an individual because he or she has an undesirable characteristic, whether it be a physical handicap, a questionable character, or they belong to the wrong ethnicity, race, or religion.¹⁶ Hence the reaction of others, as Goffman puts it, spoils one’s identity as a normal person. A stigma, according to the theory, makes “normal” people believe stigmatized individuals are “not quite human” and discriminate against them.¹⁷ There is also a tendency, Goffman said, to attribute many flaws to an individual based on the original stigma that, in turn, form the basis for ideologies rationalizing discrimination.¹⁸

As a result, a large gulf exists between how a stigmatized individual views him or herself and how other people view the stigmatized individual. These are the two worlds in which Brown lives. Black sociologist W. E. B. DuBois memorably described this double consciousness as, “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others . . . measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”¹⁹ DuBois’ remarks clearly indicate social relationships between different groups are structured by power. Tyler and other contemporary sociologists accept DuBois’ premise and criticize Goffman for analyzing stigma from the perspective of “normals,” which validates that perspective without considering how society uses stigma

13. Charles C. Moskos and John Sibley Butler, *All That We Can Be: Black Leadership and Racial Integration the Army Way* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 33–34.

14. Beth Bailey, *America’s Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 79.

15. Imogen Tyler, “Resituating Erving Goffman: From Stigma Power to Black Power,” *The Sociological Review* 66, no. 4 (2018): 747, 750.

16. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 5. Citations refer to 1986 edition.

17. Goffman, *Stigma*, 6.

18. Goffman, *Stigma*, 2–7.

19. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois, eds. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (1903; repr. New York: Bedford Books, 1997), 38.

to keep social groups lower in rank and position.²⁰ Bruce Link and Jo Phelan add that “stigma power” gives individuals an effective means to control or exclude others precisely because this power operates in ways that are hidden within every day interactions “that are difficult to recognize in the absence of conceptual tools that bring them to light.”²¹

Sociologists have been thinking critically about how “stigma power” applies to racial discrimination. Caroline Howarth argues conceptualizing race as a stigma clarifies the operation of racism, drawing attention to how “race is seen in or on the body.”²² This phenomenon relates to the origins of the term stigma, which came from the ancient Greek custom of marking the skin of people viewed as a threat to the community so they could be easily identified. Howarth also thinks because stigma is imposed on others in ways that clash with the identity of the stigmatized, the resulting tension can prompt challenges to the ideology of racism.

In her research on Black students in England, she found families, community groups, and schools could work together to counter racial stigma by making students aware of Black accomplishments and fostering pride in themselves. The key finding of her research is, “an individual cannot develop the confidence and the emotional strength to challenge stigma alone.”²³ Instead, her evidence shows, “resisting stigma can only be a collective enterprise.”²⁴

Imogene Tyler extends this insight about the possibilities of battling racial stigma collectively to reexamine the Civil Rights Movement. She claims, “Black freedom struggles remind us that racial stigmatization is a historical practice centuries in the making.”²⁵ In this context, Tyler reconceptualizes stigma as a political economy of devaluation that marked African Americans as inferior in order to limit their freedom, first in slavery and later in segregation. Tyler says the sit-in protests, where Black teenagers refused to give up their seats at Whites-only lunch counters after being denied service, dramatized the humiliations segregation inflicted on African Americans to mark them as inferior.²⁶

Tyler also notes the violent retaliation of angry Whites against the Black protestors galvanized many African Americans to challenge segregation. She quotes Stokely Carmichael’s explanation for why he joined the sit-ins in 1960: “when I saw those kids on TV, getting back up on their stools after being knocked off of them, sugar in their eyes, catsup in their hair—well, something happened to me. Suddenly, I was burning.”²⁷ Public demonstrations against segregation, therefore, both publicized and undermined the power of racial stigma in the

20. Tyler, “Resituating Erving Goffman,” 756.

21. Bruce G. Link and Jo Phelan, “Stigma Power,” *Social Science and Medicine* 103 (2013): 24.

22. Howarth, “Race as Stigma: Positioning the Stigmatized as Agents, Not Objects,” *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* 16, no. 6 (2006): 442.

23. Howarth, “Race as Stigma,” 449.

24. Howarth, “Race as Stigma,” 449.

25. Tyler, “Resituating Erving Goffman.”

26. Tyler, “Resituating Erving Goffman.”

27. Tyler, “Resituating Erving Goffman,” 759.

Jim Crow South. She not only demonstrates that the theory of social stigma can be used to interpret African American history, but she also notes an overlooked dimension of the Civil Rights Movement, namely, its participants sought to end racial stigmatization as well as to repeal discriminatory laws.

These sociological analyses of the role stigma plays in racial discrimination inform the following case studies from World War II in three ways. First, segregation, by marking African Americans as having a spoiled identity that dictated their separation from White people, inevitably harmed the self-esteem of African American servicemembers. Second, “stigma power” operated covertly, subordinating African American servicemembers without requiring blatant person-to-person discrimination. Third, although individuals might try to cope with racial stigmatization along the lines suggested by Goffman, only a collective response will overturn it.

Individual Responses to Stigma in World War II

During World War II, African American servicemembers had reason to be dissatisfied—they had been guaranteed equal treatment by the US government and did not receive it. The Selective Service Act of 1940, which established conscription during the war, stated there would be no racial discrimination “in the selection and training of men.”²⁸ The Selective Service system was required to conscript Black men in proportion to their share of the general population, and the armed forces had to train Black servicemen for whatever tasks they were qualified to perform.²⁹ Moreover, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, fearful of losing the Black vote in the 1940 presidential election, agreed to demands from Black leaders to give Black soldiers equal opportunities in all departments of the Army, including the Army Air Force (AAF).³⁰

Yet, as soon as the draft began, the government’s actions fell short of its promises. The Army had not established new units for Black troops, and as a result, only had six Black units consisting of 4,450 Black soldiers, which prevented the Selective Service system from calling up more than a token number of Black troops.³¹ By the end of 1943, the Army planned to reach the goal of African Americans composing 10 percent of its troops, equal to the proportion of African Americans in the general population, but 8 out of 10 Black soldiers were assigned to service units with a large proportion engaged in menial labor, a situation that fell short of the expectations these soldiers had been given.³² These

28. US Congress, *Selective Training and Service Act of 1940*, 50a U.S.C. §§ 302-315 (Suppl. 1 1940), <https://www.loc.gov/item/uscode1940-005050a003>.

29. Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1966), 73–74.

30. Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 304–5.

31. George Q. Flynn, *The Draft, 1940–1973* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 42–44.

32. Lee, *Employment*, 405–8.

assignments and the indignities of segregation wounded the self-esteem of African American servicemembers.

According to Goffman, Black servicemen could respond to the situation in two ways. Stigmatized individuals could choose to reject the standards of society and turn the views of “normals” on their head, asserting they are full-fledged human beings and those who discriminate are not quite human. Stigmatized individuals could also choose to play along with the “normals.” Goffman calls this reaction managing one’s spoiled identity, and he says to succeed at this task, one must accept the viewpoint of the wider society. Those who adhere to the official line are said to be mature and well adjusted; those who do not are “said to be an impaired person.”³³ An inherent contradiction resides in the attitude of “normals” toward stigmatized individuals. Stigmatized individuals are encouraged to work hard at meeting the standards of society as fully as he or she can. But if efforts at self-improvement are too successful and make the individual appear to be normal, she or he will be regarded with heightened suspicion.³⁴

Goffman says society also expects stigmatized individuals to suppress feelings of anger or depression caused by their spoiled identity. Instead, these individuals are told they should be cheerful because, after all, the “normals” are tolerating their stigma and have their own problems. Navigating life with a spoiled identity requires an extreme courtesy toward “normals” that overlooks slights and always tries to reduce tensions caused by the stigma.³⁵ The notion of managing a spoiled identity captures the experience of Colonel Benjamin Davis Jr., the commander of the first all-Black air unit, the 99th Pursuit Squadron, when he returned to America after his first combat engagements.

A reminder of his racial stigma marred Davis’ triumphant return. Davis came back from Italy in September 1943 to take command of the 332nd Fighter Group, a larger all-Black unit preparing for deployment overseas, only to learn top generals in the AAF sought to discredit the 99th and reassign Black pilots to coastal patrol duty. A Colonel Momyer had written a report stating the 99th lacked discipline and teamwork. In addition, Davis recalled in his memoir the report said “that its formations had disintegrated under fire,” raising questions about the courage and the composure of Black pilots.³⁶

Notes added to the report by AAF officers while they read it show at least some of them viewed Davis and his pilots through the lens of racial stereotypes that associated a range of defects with Black skin. In this line of thinking, the stigma of race discredited Black pilots automatically. One officer, for example, wrote, “the Negro type has not the proper reflexes to make a first-class fighter pilot.”³⁷ In fact, as Davis would argue

33. Goffman, *Stigma*, 115.

34. Goffman, *Stigma*, 115–6.

35. Goffman, *Stigma*, 115–6.

36. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., *American: An Autobiography* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 103.

37. Davis, *American*, 103.

before the McCloy Committee that oversaw policies for Black troops, the 99th had performed just as well as White squadrons. A subsequent investigation ordered by Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall confirmed what Davis had said. The debate over the quality of Black pilots ended finally in January 1944 when the 99th, in just two days, shot down 12 enemy fighters over Anzio.³⁸

Yet, before Davis could respond to the false charges against the 99th, he had to suppress his anger. He said, "I was furious." He later remembered his presentation to the McCloy Committee "did not come near to expressing the depths of the rage I felt." The root of Davis' anger was his understanding that he and his pilots were being stigmatized for their race. The report, he said, "was only a reflection of the prevailing AAF attitude toward Blacks." He understood it was up to him to help White officers accept the fact that African Americans can make good pilots. The controversy has to be, Davis said: "handled with the utmost discretion. It would have been hopeless for me to stress the hostility and racism of Whites as the motive behind the [report], although that was clearly the case. Instead, I had to adopt a quiet, reasoned approach, presenting the facts about the 99th in a way that would appeal to fairness and win out over ignorance and racism."³⁹

The debate over the performance of the 99th Pursuit Squadron illustrated the limits of individual efforts to cope with racial stigma. In his recollections of those events, Davis admitted he was unable to challenge racism directly. Instead, he had no choice other than to rely on the goodwill and political calculations of White officers. He suffered greatly in the process. He had to restrain his anger at the injustice of the charges against his unit and play the role of the respectful subordinate, which must have been humiliating. After the war, he received a general's star, evidence he was adept at managing an identity spoiled by his race. But he also must have been painfully aware some of his fellow officers viewed him with contempt for no other reason than his skin color, a stigma he would never overcome, regardless of how many promotions he earned.

Collective Responses to Stigma in World War II

Sociologists today argue the only acceptable way to deal with racial stigma is through a collective effort. A 1942 incident in Houston provides an example of Black soldiers choosing to take a stand against racial stigmatization as a group. Three off-duty Black soldiers were having drinks at a bar in one of Houston's Black neighborhoods when a White police officer barged inside. One of the policeman yelled a racial epithet at the soldiers, "You [...] soldiers," and began to lecture them on the inadequacies of African Americans. One of the soldiers, a Black sergeant, refused to tolerate being degraded and said, "I am not a [...] soldier, we are American soldiers." The policeman shot back, "You are

38. Davis, *American*, 105–7.

39. Davis, *American*, 106.

a [...] soldier if I say so, and if you don't like it I will kill you," and then called for help.⁴⁰

Several policemen came to assist, as did a White military police officer. The White military police officer told the Black soldiers, "they were in the South and were [...] and that they would be treated as such as long as they were there." A standoff ensued, and the White policemen threatened the Black soldiers with death. Yet, because the three Black soldiers stood their ground, the confrontation ended without violence, even though White military police officers patrolling Houston's Black neighborhoods regularly clubbed Black soldiers with their nightsticks. The three soldiers were arrested instead.⁴¹ Their decision to confront racial stigma together had unnerved the White policemen and effectively took away the officers' "stigma power."

Increasingly, Black soldiers chose to fight racial stigmatization in groups, and their resistance began to pose a major threat to the war effort. In 1943, Black soldiers rioted at Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi; Camp Stewart, Georgia; March Field, California; Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky; Camp San Luis Obispo, California; and Fort Bliss, Texas, to name just a few.⁴² Marshall called the racial clashes "an immediately serious problem" and sent a memo in July 1943 threatening to remove commanders who did not "personally and vigorously" address problems with race relations.⁴³ The modest policy reforms that followed provided the legal basis for Black soldiers to adopt the tactic of nonviolent protest. A detailed analysis of military records found, "the share of racial confrontations caused by organized protest by Black soldiers rose from 3.4 percent in 1942 to 19.4 percent in 1944," while the share caused by fighting declined.⁴⁴ Black soldiers had not ended segregation, but their collective resistance had imposed limits on racial stigmatization.

Responding to Stigma Today: Living in Two Worlds

When Brown talked about "living in two worlds, each with their own perspective and views" in his video, he confirmed racial stigma is still a problem.⁴⁵ His memories of situations where he always shouldered the burden of meeting the standards of White people bring to mind DuBois' words about "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." As a child, Brown and his sister were the only African Americans in their elementary school, and he remembered "trying to fit in." In high school, although half the students were African Americans, he said he was still "trying to fit in." In the Air Force, Brown said he "was often the only African American

40. Truman K. Gibson Jr., *Knocking Down Barriers: My Fight for Black America* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 96.

41. Gibson, 96.

42. Gibson, *Knocking Down Barriers*, 121; Lee, *The Employment*, 366–74; and Daniel Kryder, *Divided Arsenal: Race and the American States during World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 146.

43. Kryder, *Divided Arsenal*, 147.

44. Kryder, *Divided Arsenal*, 157–8.

45. Brown, "What I Am Thinking About."

in my squadron, or as a senior officer, the only African American in the room.” Most of his mentors, people who gave him “sound advice that has led to my success . . . could not relate to my experience as an African American” because these individuals lived in a different world than he did. His sense of disconnection from the White people who surrounded him was intensified when they chose to use their “stigma power.”⁴⁶

Brown said those experiences of racial stigmatization were unpleasant. In his understated way, he recalled overhearing “insensitive comments made without awareness by others.” One particular incident, however, stood out in his memory—“I was 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?’”⁴⁷ The man obviously did not know him, and given Brown’s uniform was identical to those worn by White airmen, the only characteristic that made him different was the color of his skin. By asking a simple question, this servicemember was able to make Brown feel excluded from his own squadron. The interaction follows the logic of racial stigma by equating difference with inferiority.

In general, Brown thought White airmen, who “don’t have to navigate between two worlds,” had a mixed commitment to addressing racial discrimination. Some, he said, are empathetic, while others do not see racism as a problem “since it didn’t happen to them.”⁴⁸ The results of a 2019 survey of 1,630 active duty *Military Times* subscribers showed Brown is not the only servicemember who observes racism within the ranks. More than one-third of all active duty troops and more than half of minority servicemembers said they had personally witnessed examples of White nationalism or racist ideology in the military. The situation appears to be getting worse, with the number of active duty servicemembers who said they personally witnessed racism increasing by 14 percent from the 2018 *Military Times* survey.⁴⁹

Brown also discussed how he has coped with racial stigma throughout his Air Force career, and his strategy fits Goffman’s description of an individual managing a spoiled identity. He clearly sought to be perceived as mature and well adjusted, so he worked hard to meet the expectations of White supervisors, even when he thought they were prejudiced. He talked about “the pressure I felt to perform error-free, especially for supervisors I perceived had expected less for me as an African American.” Brown said he responded “by working twice as hard to prove their expectations and perceptions of African Americans were invalid.”⁵⁰

46. Brown, “What I Am Thinking About.”

47. Brown, “What I Am Thinking About.”

48. Brown, “What I Am Thinking About.”

49. Leo Shane III, “Signs of White Supremacy, Extremism up Again in Poll of Active-Duty Troops,” *Military Times*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/02/06/signs-of-white-supremacy-extremism-up-again-in-poll-of-active-duty-troops/>.

50. Brown, “What I Am Thinking About.”

Conclusion

Brown discussed separate Black and White worlds in order to raise awareness that race continues to stigmatize African Americans. In turn, the persistence of racial stigma raises questions for scholars about continuities with the past. On the face of it, major changes such as the end of segregation and affirmative action programs have made today's armed forces into a completely different institution than it was during World War II. Yet the awareness of having an identity spoiled by the stigma of race is a direct parallel between the experience of Brown and his World War II predecessor Davis.

Both men cracked the glass ceiling in the armed forces, attaining general officer rank, by navigating between two worlds and trying to fit in. They succeeded by working harder than their peers and not showing the anger they felt when White superiors questioned their competence. The consequences of racial stigma for Davis, who faced the possibility Black pilots would be removed from combat, were admittedly more serious than for Brown, who faced the possibility of being passed over for promotion. Nevertheless, the feeling of living in two worlds—an existential dilemma forcing African Americans to redefine constantly who they are depending on the situation—remains strong in the twenty-first century. Incidents from the experiences of Davis and Brown in the military illustrate both the hardships caused by racial stigmatization and the limits of trying to cope with them as individuals.

The collective resistance of Black soldiers during World War II to racial stigmatization, however, appears to have been more effective. Black soldiers increasingly responded as a band of brothers, heedless of the consequences, to oppose “stigma power.” In Houston, the determination of three Black soldiers to stand their ground in the face of threats to their lives resulted in arrests—the way White soldiers would have been treated—rather than beatings. And by 1943, the scale of protests by Black soldiers grew to the point that Marshall could no longer ignore the everyday humiliation these soldiers experienced living under White supremacy. Although reforms following Marshall's order were modest in scope, the very existence of these reforms put White servicemembers on notice there were limits to their “stigma power.”

By making his video, Brown appears to have adopted a new strategy for coping with racial stigmatization. His public response to the killing of George Floyd breaks with the tradition of active duty US military officers not commenting on political issues, but to be fair to the general, his remarks strike one as more sociological than political. His decision to speak publicly about his experience of racial stigma make it seem that, like Stokely Carmichael, what he witnessed on television gave him a new frame of reference for understanding how racial discrimination operates. According to recent polls, the protests surrounding George Floyd's death and the #BlackLivesMatter movement were larger than the civil rights protests of the 1960s. Somewhere between 15 to 26 million Americans, in the middle of the worst public health crisis in 100

years, participated in demonstrations, which makes it the largest mass movement in the nation's history.⁵¹

Brown ends his video by talking about the expectations that come with his historic appointment as the first African American to serve as the Air Force Chief of Staff. He appears to realize he can no longer deal with the problems of racial stigma as an individual because he says, "I can't fix centuries of racism in our country, nor can I fix decades of discrimination that may have impacted members of our Air Force." What is his solution? He says he wants: "to lead, participate in, and listen to necessary conversations on racism, diversity, and inclusion . . . I want to hear what you're thinking about, and how together we can make a difference."⁵² In other words, General Brown seeks a collective solution to the problem of racial stigma, which is hopeful because it is the approach sociologists think is most likely to succeed.

51. Larry Buchanan, Quoc Trung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," *New York Times*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>.

52. Brown, "What I Am Thinking About."