

U.S. Army Sergeant 1st Class Melvin Morris receives Medal of Honor from President Obama inside White House, March 2014 (U.S. Army/Mikki L. Sprenkle)



A Strong Fighting Force Is a Diverse Fighting Force

By Larry O. Spencer

A strong fighting force is a diverse fighting force. Said another way, diversity equals combat power. Therefore, we should strive to have diversity, both up and down the ranks, because it makes us better. In addition to the benefits of diverse views and opinions, it is important for the top echelon of military leadership to reflect the diversity of the Nation—not to

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achieve numbers for the sake of achieving numbers, but because young enlisted members and officers need to see a way to top leadership positions if they have the drive and talent to get there.

Up Close and Personal

I grew up in Southeast Washington, DC. In my neighborhood, and for the most part in my world, there was little diversity. As a kid, I played with African-Americans, went to school with and was taught by African-Americans, went to church with African-Americans, and my

role models and heroes were African-Americans. On the surface, I suppose there is nothing wrong with that. In fact, that type of “isolation” within one’s own ethnic group or “hood” is not uncommon. In hindsight, however, I realize that so many Americans spending their formative years this way is a problem because America, as a whole, is not represented and its diversity is not highlighted.

As I entered high school, my family moved just across the DC border into Prince George’s County, Maryland. At

the same time, societal views were changing about “neighborhood segregation.” Attending de facto segregated schools was deemed incongruent with building America’s leaders of the future, so the concept of busing was introduced. I was bused to a high school that, even though it was predominantly white (by the way, that statistic was reversed by the time I graduated), it was at least racially diverse.

The concept of disparity was not entirely foreign to me; my mother had told me stories about when she was a sophomore at Moton High School, a predominately African-American high school, in Farmville, Virginia. Concerned about the poor conditions and lack of resources, students (including my mother) protested and the entire student body eventually went on strike. As history records, the Moton High School protests became part of a Supreme Court decision, known as *Brown v. The Board of Education*, which declared segregating schools (known then as “separate but equal”) on the basis of race no longer permissible. Following that decision, the Prince Edward County School District decided to withhold funding from *all* county public schools to show its dissent. As a result, my mother did not graduate high school and did not receive a high school diploma until she was in her 40s.

During my formative years, I rarely encountered professionals who looked like me. Whether it was visiting the doctor’s or dentist’s office or going to a used car lot to buy a car, the doctors, salesmen, lawyers, pilots, military officers (my father was enlisted in the Army), police, firefighters, and store managers were all white. It would not be until much later in life that I understood the impact those images had on my self-esteem.

As I look back, my first day in high school was an eye-opener. To begin, I stepped onto a bus where the students were predominantly white. As a star football player, it was the first time I would play for a white coach, and the equipment and field conditions were better than any I had ever seen. As we began to blend together as one high school, I was exposed to varying ideas and ideologies, including music, that I had not heard before. This

was new and intriguing to me as it was to my white classmates. As we debated and discussed various ideas, I was struck by the varying views on a singular issue.

Years later, the infamous O.J. Simpson trial reminded me of these early high school days. When the verdict was announced, there was a large portion of the country that supported the decision and another large portion that was outraged. It always puzzled me how an entire country could watch the same presentation of evidence and reach completely opposite conclusions. But the key takeaway for me was that people from different backgrounds, education levels, and experiences can view a singular problem from varying points of view. Unfortunately, as with the O.J. Simpson trial, diverse opinions will lead to disagreement; however, healthy debate in an organization is not only desirable but also essential to approaching complex problems.

When I joined the Air Force, I began to see the absolute value of diversity and inclusiveness. When I lined up next to a fellow team member in high school, it did not matter what he looked like or where he came from. The only criteria were competence, commitment, and work ethic. Whereas I was taught to block and tackle a certain way, I quickly learned that my way was not the only way, and in many cases, my way was not the best way. The same is true for the Air Force—race or gender does not matter, but competence, integrity, trust, and respect do matter and what we should value most.

In my view, diversity and inclusion have everything to do with success and little to do with numbers. Steve Jobs stated, “A lot of people in our industry haven’t had very diverse experiences. So they don’t have lots of dots to connect, and they end up with very linear solutions without a broad perspective on the problem. The broader one understands the human experience, the better design we will have.” Former Secretary of State and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell stated, “America is a nation of nations, made up of people from every land, of every race and practicing every faith. Our diversity is

not a source of weakness, it is a source of strength, and it is a source of our success. The fact that America is the strongest most powerful nation on earth is not an accident and that achievement was not earned by fate. Hard working Americans, from every walk of life, from every race and ethnic group, both male and female, made it that way.”

Achieving diversity in senior military positions is a challenge to be sure because, unlike industry, we cannot simply go out and hire a general or flag officer or senior noncommissioned officer. But there are specific actions we can take that are not one-time-only events but rather ones that require constant focus and reinforcement.

Achieving a Diverse Fighting Force

The Air Force has successfully accomplished its mission. Going forward, it is likely that any future conflict the Nation faces will rely heavily on air, space, and cyber power as well as the capabilities of the other Services. And this means we should strive to become even more diverse. Like many organizations, we have norms that tend to support the ideas, culture, and experiences of the majority. While these norms work to help the organization achieve its goals, we must be careful to ensure that they do not also cause the organization to view new or different ideas as countervailing or irrelevant. Diversity forces organizations to understand and accept differences, which fosters a more culturally sensitive workforce that could reduce problems such as discrimination and sexual assault/harassment.

This is more than a conceptual or aspirational discussion because the demographics of the Air Force will change in the near future. As of 2012, the racial breakdown of the U.S. population was 63 percent white and 37 percent minority (17 percent Hispanic, 12.3 percent African-American, 5 percent Asian, and 2.4 percent other). By 2060, the projected U.S. population breakdown will be 43 percent white and 57 percent minority (31 percent Hispanic, 13 percent African-American, 8 percent Asian,



Airman walks perimeter of C-130J Hercules, November 2014 (U.S. Air National Guard/Matt Hecht)

and 5 percent other). More telling, the Air Force is projected to recruit from a population in which the minority is the majority by 2024.

With that said, first, we must *recruit* a diverse population. As I stated, unlike all other employment opportunities in the United States, the military is unable to hire uniformed personnel directly into senior leadership positions. Because of this, the senior leadership candidate pool is directly tied to recruiting efforts. It takes roughly 24 years to develop and season an Air Force general officer. To put a finer point on it, if the Air Force recruiting pool is not diverse today, we will lose the opportunity for a diverse general officer pool for the next 24 years. This means we must make a concerted effort to recruit a military force that represents the American public.

Second, we must *retain* a diverse force. When it comes to a diverse force, retention is merely an extension of

recruitment. We can recruit the best folks, but without a good retention strategy, we may not be able to keep them. Obviously, like all decisions in the Air Force, a good retention strategy is based on the Air Force mission. This mission—the deployment of air, space and cyberspace power to achieve political objectives—is expected to remain constant for the foreseeable future. Because of this, the Air Force retention program is essentially the management of the relationship between leadership and the people they lead. The management of this relationship comes down to two things: delivering a clear message that hard work and living Air Force core values are keys to a successful career, and purposeful and focused mentorship.

The Importance of Hard Work

My father was a career Army noncommissioned officer who earned a Purple Heart during the Korean War and went

on to serve a full career as an amputee (something that is not uncommon today, but was not the norm in the 1950s and 1960s). He grew up on a farm and learned the value of hard work. He instilled that work ethic in my siblings and me. He often said that he had a high school diploma from his local high school and a Ph.D. from the “school of hard knocks.” His philosophy was that one does not have to be the smartest or brightest to get ahead, but absent those things, one must be the hardest worker.

So commanders and supervisors must ensure that everyone understands there are no shortcuts. Our talent, drive, and work ethic will ultimately determine how far we climb up the military rank structure. Natalie Crawford, a senior fellow at and former vice president of RAND Corporation, stated, “As a woman working in an environment dominated by men, I learned quickly that management

will always remember who you are—they remember if you are good and/or they remember if you are not good—so as a woman I had to be good.” Is this fair? I am not sure but perhaps it is not. Is this reality? My experience says it is. Along those lines, I have to point out an important fact: no minority member or woman I know ever wants to achieve a position based solely on race or gender. Conversely, everyone I know wants a fair and equal chance to advance in the organization—nothing more, nothing less.

I think the responsibility of Air Force leaders goes beyond what I have stated. Leaders should cultivate an environment that is empathetic and understanding of diversity. We must promote critical thinking skills to foster acceptance of differing viewpoints and experiences. In the end, Airmen must understand that the ideas, culture, and experiences of *all* Airmen are valid. That does not mean different ideas are always better; neither does it suggest that there will not be disagreement. Rather, we should be open to hearing ideas from varying perspectives and experiences and respect those suggestions that differ from our own. Healthy debate within an organization is critical to achieving ultimate success.

The Importance of Mentoring

Mentors from and for majority and minority members are particularly important in retaining a diverse force. Minority mentors can offer advice based on their experiences while majority mentors can help interpret the unwritten “rules.” As a minority officer, I know this is critical. For example, as a second lieutenant I grew a mustache, which at the time was not uncommon for African-American males; however, a mentor of mine constructively pointed out that it was a violation of the unwritten rules. At the time, casual dress to me meant jeans. Again, I was pulled aside and “schooled” on the definition of “officer casual.” Mentors can provide networking opportunities and identify specific military support resources for both peers and subordinates.

I have had great mentors during my career. As an enlisted member I had a

great chief master sergeant, who encouraged me to complete my college degree and become an officer. As a second lieutenant, I had a great lieutenant colonel boss who taught me to be “eager and enthusiastic.” As a first lieutenant and captain, already assigned to the Pentagon, I had numerous mentors who challenged and encouraged me and taught me the ropes of the Building. As a major and lieutenant colonel squadron commander, I had a wing commander who made me want to someday become a wing commander (something at the time that was unheard of for someone with a resources management background).

This constant lineup of mentors has followed me throughout my career. There have always been Air Force members, both Active duty and retired, who wanted to see me do well and get ahead. Interestingly enough, most of my mentors did not look like me or come from a similar background. As a wing commander, my two-star boss literally gave me the keys to the wing and let me go. He was always in the background encouraging and guiding, but I always knew he had my back, and I could sense that he wanted me to succeed—something that I will be forever grateful for. Even as a three-star director on the Joint Staff, the two Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff I worked for were great mentors and leaders who provided overall guidance, let me go, but watched and guided from the background.

The point here is the term *mentor* is much more than a title; it is, if done right, a relationship. A relationship that can help steer a career in the right direction. A relationship that transcends gender or race. A relationship that can turn a mediocre performer into a great performer. A relationship that provides someone to bounce ideas and challenges off of. A relationship that provides honest and candid feedback. A relationship of trust. And finally, a relationship that teaches the mentee to become a mentor for others.

When I entered the Air Force, there had been no African-American officers promoted to the four-star rank. Additionally, there had been no officers

with a primary career-track of budget/resource management promoted past the grade of major general, and none of those were women or people of color. Do not get me wrong—at that point in my career I was not thinking about being a four-star or general officer, period. But I did wonder why those in top leadership positions all looked the same and if there was some barrier or glass ceiling that precluded someone like me from achieving that level of rank and responsibility.

Some may feel there is no point in pursuing diversity. They may point to the fact that the Air Force has performed spectacularly well in every endeavor since its inception—and that is certainly true. However, the world is becoming increasingly complex, and the threats to our nation and the associated challenges are asymmetrical. The more diversity of thinking we apply to these challenges, the more opportunities we will have to discover innovative approaches to problem-solving.

Today, our Airmen are the best in the world. Our country relies on them to perform a host of missions from gaining and controlling the skies to launching and operating space satellites, from sustaining two-thirds of the U.S. nuclear arsenal to providing real-time intelligence and surveillance, from conducting humanitarian missions to, when called upon, putting bombs on target. The Air Force should seek to represent the demographics of the society it defends, but we should also embrace and seek a diverse military because it produces stronger combat power for the Nation. We can better accomplish our mission with a more diverse fighting force because diversity makes us a more flexible and innovative force. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor wrote that “effective participation by members of all racial and ethnic groups in the civic life of our nation is essential if the dream of one nation, indivisible, is to be realized.” Likewise, the strength and vision of our Air Force are underpinned by embracing and achieving diversity. JFQ