

U.S. Military Integration of Religious, Ethnic, and Racial Minorities in the Twentieth Century

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Throughout the twentieth century, the American military has brought together cultural, religious, and racial groups even when civilian life has been characterized by considerable prejudice towards such groups. Indeed, military integration has often proceeded at a faster pace than civilian integration.¹ Consider five examples from the past century:

CASE #1: THE MULTI-CULTURAL PLATOON

At the beginning of the twentieth century, tensions between Catholics and Protestants were extremely high, anti-immigrant sentiment was at its peak, and marriages across ethnic and religious lines were rare. Native-born Americans fled their neighborhoods as immigrants moved in while Irish, Jews, and Italians fled from one another. Despite these hostilities in the civilian world, the military placed foreign-born soldiers from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds into integrated units during World War I. "It is not the policy of the United States Army," wrote Brigadier General Harvey Jervey, "to encourage or permit the formation of distinctive brigades, regiments, battalions or other organizations composed exclusively or primarily of members of any race, creed, political or social group." The policy worked. According to one distinguished historian, "Many regiments drew on servicemen from every region of the country and from every religion and European nationality. Sometimes together for as long as four years, these units became extraordinary vehicles for melding the many streams of Euro-Americans into one."²

CASE #2: NATIVE AMERICANS

During World War I, 10,000 Native Americans served in integrated units. Except for the Navajo Code Talkers, a separate unit which sent messages concerning enemy troop movements in the Navajo language, 25,000 Native Americans also served in integrated units during World War II. Secretary of War Stimson opposed the formation of all-Indian units and resisted the efforts of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to establish separate units. According to historian Alison Bernstein, "Stimson even objected to assigning Indians to the same platoons, preferring that they serve among whites." Native Americans were integrated in the military at a time when they experienced intense social discrimination—Indian workers received lower pay than whites in defense industries, and when they moved to cities they were forced to live in separate "Indian ghettos." Historian Ronald Takaki writes that Indian people "faced discrimination in restaurants, night clubs, retail and department stores . . . and in housing."³

¹ As historian Gary Gerstle argues, "These advances, moreover, have generally been accomplished with far less racial recrimination and anger than that which accompanied parallel efforts . . . to desegregate schools, universities, and workplaces." Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 368. Kenneth Karst concurs with Gerstle's assessment of the U.S. military. He argues that ". . . it is hard to find any other institution in American society that has done better." Karst, "The Pursuit of Manhood and the Desegregation of the Armed Forces," *UCLA Law Review* 38 (February 1991): 520.

² Gerstle, *American Crucible*; Philip Perlmutter, *Legacy of Hate: A Short History of Ethnic, Religious, and Racial Prejudice in America* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999); "Ethnicity and Race in the Military," in *The Oxford Companion to American Military History*, ed. John WhiteClay Chambers II (Oxford University Press, 1999), 252-253; and "The American Military and the Melting Pot in World War I," in *The Military in America: From the Colonial Era to the Present*, ed. Peter Karsten (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 301-312.

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Alison Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II: Toward a New Era in Indian Affairs* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Ronald Takaki, *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2000); Jere Bishop Franco, *Crossing the Pond: The Native American Effort in World War II* (Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 1999); Bruce White, "The

CASE #3: AFRICAN-AMERICANS

African-Americans served in segregated battalions prior to and during the Second World War. Military officials supported segregation because they believed that blacks were unintelligent and that integration would cause severe social disruption. But segregation created its own set of problems—within the military, some 209 racial confrontations occurred between 1942 and 1945. After the war, President Truman issued a policy of “equality of treatment and opportunity in the military.” Despite the opposition of some senior commanders, more than 90% of African-Americans served in integrated units by the end of the Korean War. The Army’s research showed that racial integration enhanced combat effectiveness. Scholars agree that while the military was not able to eliminate all vestiges of racial discrimination, the military surged ahead of civilian institutions in this regard. In 1963, the Secretary of War mandated command responsibility in civil rights matters. In response to racial tension in the late 1960s, the military established the Defense Race Relations Institute. The Institute served educational, training, and research functions. In 1979, the Institute was renamed the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute to reflect its broadening mission to enhance leadership and readiness in a military that was diverse in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and religion. That Colin Powell, the nation’s first African-American Secretary of State, has risen through the military is a powerful testament to the success of military desegregation.⁴

CASE #4: JAPANESE-AMERICANS

Like African-Americans, Japanese-Americans served in segregated units during the Second World War. The viciousness of the war with Japan exacerbated animosity towards Japanese-Americans. A December 1945 poll found that almost a quarter of Americans surveyed wished that the United States had the opportunity to drop more atomic bombs on Japan before it surrendered. Despite this fact, the military integrated Japanese-Americans during the Korean War. One scholar suggests that the military accomplished the integration of Japanese-Americans with even less difficulty than that of African-Americans. Still, Japanese-Americans (and other minorities) have suffered from racial bias in promotions at the officer level. In response, the military has redoubled efforts to procure, promote, and retain minority officers, and to publish and enforce anti-discrimination policies at all military schools.⁵

CASE #5: KOREANS (THE KATUSA PROGRAM)

During the Korean War, negative attitudes towards Koreans were very prevalent in American popular culture and public opinion and even our South Korean allies often were referred to as ‘barbarians,’ ‘beasts,’ and ‘gooks.’ However, the U.S. military utilized Korean nationals in integrated units during the Korean War as part of the Korean Augmentation to the U.S. Army program (KATUSA). Initially, the program met with some difficulty. The Korean soldiers were poorly trained, and despite the fact that high-level policy had dictated that they be treated as equals in every respect, cultural and language

American Army and the Indian,” in *Ethnic Armies: Polyethnic Armed Forces From the Time of Habsburgs to the Age of Superpowers*, ed. N.F. Dresziger (Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990), 69-88; and “Native Americans in the Military,” in *The Oxford Companion to American Military History*, 477-478.

⁴ David R. Segal, *Recruiting For Uncle Sam: Citizenship and Military Manpower Policy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press), 1989; “African Americans in the Military,” and “Race Relations in War,” in *The Oxford Companion to American Military History*, 7-9 and 584-586; Edwin Dorn, “Race in the American Military: Past and Present,” in *Ethnic Armies*, 89-122; Richard O. Hope, *Racial Strife in the U.S. Military: Toward the Elimination of Discrimination* (New York: Praeger, 1979); and Daniel Kryder, “Race Policy, Race Violence, and Race Reform in the U.S. Army During World War II,” *Studies in American Political Development* 10 (Spring 1996): 130-167. The standard works on African Americans in the military are: Bernard C. Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York: Free Press, 1986); and Morris MacGregor, Jr., *Integration of the Armed Forces: 1940-1965* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1981).

⁵ Gerstle, *American Crucible*; Takaki, *Double Victory*; “Asian Americans in the U.S. Military,” in *The Asian American Almanac: A Reference Work on Asians in the United States*, ed. Susan Gall (Detroit: Gale Research, 1995): 371-401; and “A Review of Data on Asian Americans,” Prepared by Directorate of Research, Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, Patrick Air Force Base, 32925-3399, Rod Series Pamphlet 98-2.

barriers were substantial. The military responded by increasing the educational level of the Korean soldiers, by stating the need of American soldiers to be aware of the problems of cross-cultural interaction, and by preparing a “Commander’s KATUSA Program Checklist” that outlines American obligations in the program. As Korean soldiers became more proficient in English, many of the difficulties subsided. By the end of the war, 98% of KATUSA soldiers reported that they were happier in the U.S. Army than in the Republic of Korea Army, and more than half of the American officers felt that they had KATUSAs who were capable of being NCOs in the U.S. Army. While the KATUSA program has not been without its challenges, it has, in the words of one historian, ‘had more positive than negative results.’” As of 1995, the KATUSA program was ongoing, with 6,200 KATUSA soldiers serving in the U.S. Army.⁶

CONCLUSION:

Why has the U.S. military been able to integrate different racial, ethnic, religious, and national groups so effectively? Military scholars suggest several reasons. First, inter-group contact itself has eased inter-group conflict, as Samuel Stouffer’s classic 1949 study *The American Soldier* demonstrated with regard to white-black relations. The more contact that white and black soldiers had with one another, Stouffer argued, the more favorably they felt about racial integration. Second, the military has, as Charles Moskos Jr. has written, “a bureaucratic ethos [and] . . . formality . . . that mitigated tensions arising from individual or personal feelings.” Third, the military employs powerful sanctions (not available in the civilian world) to implement integration. As Lt. Colonel Bruce A. Brant observes, “Commanders are held directly responsible for equal opportunity [and] the ability to deal with people of diverse backgrounds is an item on performance evaluations.” Finally, personnel needs have led military leaders to see equal opportunity as a necessary part of creating a viable military organization.⁷

⁶ Jai Poong Rya, “Koreans in America: Past and Present,” in *U.S.-Korean Relations, 1882-1982* ed. Tae-Hwan Kwak (Seoul, Korea: Kyungnam University Press, 1982): 157-195; Alexander DeConde, *Ethnicity, Race, and American Foreign Policy: A History* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992); David Curtis Skaggs, “The KATUSA Experiment: The Integration of Korean Nationals into the U.S. Army, 1950-1965,” *Military Affairs* 38 (April 1974): 53-58; and Gall, *The Asian American Almanac*, 381-382.

⁷ Samuel Stouffer, *The American Soldier* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1949); Charles C. Moskos Jr., “Minority Groups in Military Organizations,” in *The Military in American Society* (New York: Free Press, 1972), 192-201; and Lt. Colonel Bruce A. Brant, U.S. Army, “Vanguard of Social Change?” in *Military Review* 73 (February 1993): 12-19.