

Selection boards may not be fair, but neither is life

A while back I was enjoying one of those special father-son talks when my son suddenly blurted out, "But, Dad, that's not fair." I think every parent has heard that one. And I suspect they usually reply as I did: "Life ain't fair, son."

To me, this axiom is one of life's great truths. Those who accept it suffer less frustration throughout their lives, and perhaps are a little happier in the long run.

The issue of fairness keeps cropping up on the opinion pages of *Army Times*. The reason for these letters may be the current day contradiction between pure objective fairness, which exists only in the abstract, and the attempt to maintain the perception of fairness. The way promotion boards are conducted provide a most familiar example.

Promotion boards are tasked to select the best-qualified officers. In the main, I believe they accomplish this task. But there might be exceptions, not the least of which is that these promotion boards additionally are tasked to meet "goals" for the promotion of minorities and women. The word goal, as opposed to "quota," is used for obvious reasons. Nobody likes the word quota.



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To establish a hard and fast quota would be patently unfair. Essentially, though, the net result might be the same for some.

To compensate for past and present prejudiced minority and female efficiency reports, the Army, at the bidding of our civilian leadership, established selection goals for minorities and women — thereby attempting to create a perception of fairness. This sounds OK on the surface. Everybody wants to be fair. But achieving the perception of fairness is a slippery issue with some very real unfair results for some.

Promotion boards — at least the way they are currently constituted — select the best qualified and fully qualified first. The best qualified, regardless of minority and gender considerations, will be promoted. The fully qualified list is a "different kettle of fish." If the numbers of those selected are not commensurate with minority and female general population of those considered, then a revote of those files can be done. Minority and female soldiers who rank at or near the top of the nonselected group can be moved up to meet the board's goals.

Soldiers who are on the bottom of the promote list are removed and placed below the line. All records of who was selected on the first cut are destroyed, perhaps, to preclude the potential for attempted legal redress on the part of those first selected and then dropped below the line in order to achieve the desired result — to create the perception of fairness. It is important to note that no officer will be raised up from any category other than "fully qualified."

Obviously, this system can be construed as unfair to those first selected for promotion and then dropped below the line. I assume white males come off the list. This system penalizes some. How many? Nobody knows, because the records of the revote are destroyed.

There is no doubt that individual and institutional prejudice both exist in our nation. In my experience the Army has done a better job than any other portion of our

society in attempting to be fair and equitable in providing equal opportunity for all soldiers, regardless of ethnicity and gender.

It is important to understand that our civilian leadership has made a de facto decision that maintaining the perception of fairness within the Army is more important than other considerations. This is a plain unvarnished fact.

Unfortunately, this whole process has put the promotion process in disrepute with many soldiers. I have heard of officers and NCOs wondering aloud whether or not their minority or female boss was promoted because of quality or because of minority status.

Our elected leadership is maintaining the perception of fairness at a price. The judgment of whether or not it is worth that price I will leave to others.

One partial solution would be to remove all mention of gender and color from future efficiency reports or any other documents a promotion board sees. Perhaps files could be considered based on Social Security numbers alone. One immediate benefit is that it would mean removal of the much maligned official photo from consideration.

The reason this would only be a partial solution is because it would do nothing to address current-day prejudices of the Army's white male population at large, who, it is assumed, will continue to write efficiency reports based, at least in part, on their biases concerning minorities and women.

I don't know whether or not the current promotion system is as fair as it might be. It may not be right and proper for everyone, but nothing ever is. It might do us all well to remember the essential truth in the words, "Life ain't fair, son."

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