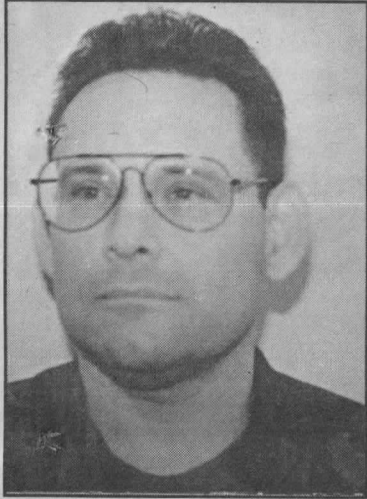


By Robert B. Adolph Jr.

Affirmative action's death knell



"The kind of discrimination that existed once in our Army is a thing of the past."

It may be time to end affirmative action programs in our Army. As a matter of principle, the U. S. Army should be the world's best administered meritocracy. Merit alone should determine what soldiers receive promotion, command and advanced schooling. To use any consideration other than merit is a potential betrayal of the young men and women we lead — perhaps placing lives at risk. All soldiers must know that their leaders have been chosen because they were the best and brightest.

The current system of establishing goals for the promotion and selection of ethnic minorities and females, although well intended, places the meritocracy in grave doubt. I believe most selections are based solely on highest quality; others perhaps not. There are endless arguments that surround this issue. Most of these arguments are tied to various political agendas and differing definitions that ultimately cloud what is truly important: protecting the lives of those we lead.

If you ask a young soldier, male or female, black or white, facing a potential enemy, the issue is irrelevant. Young soldiers only want to know their leadership is the best. They want to have faith in their superiors. The current system of color and gender preferences places that faith in jeopardy.

The political reasoning that supported the establishment of affirmative action programs 20 years ago concerned itself primarily with correcting the very real inequities of the past. As my mother used to tell me, "Two wrongs

don't make a right." This simple but elegant truth has apparently escaped many American lawmakers. Giving some groups preferences automatically disadvantages others and is just plain wrong.

Let me be clear on a very important point. None of the officers or NCOs selected for positions of responsibility under the current system of goals are unqualified. All are qualified. The question is: are these the best qualified? In some cases the answer may be no. Anyone willing to argue this point to the contrary doesn't understand the Army board system which selects soldiers for promotion, command and advanced schooling.

The kind of discrimination that existed once in our Army is largely and gratefully a thing of the past. Discrimination based on race or gender is seldom blatant these days. Bigots can't easily survive in today's army. The overwhelming majority of Army leaders today are concerned with competency alone.

Affirmative action programs may have served a positive purpose over the last 20 years by giving deserving ethnic minorities and females an extra added boost at a time when discrimination in our Army was much more pronounced than it is today. That time may now be in the past.

Unfortunately, affirmative action may have done some harm. These policies have had a tendency to drive a wedge between white males and ethnic minorities and females. Many white males have come to perceive that individual members of these groups

have been given an unearned advantage merely because of their gender or ethnic group. Also, and perhaps even worse, the very existence of such preferential programs places into question the very real accomplishments of the overwhelming majority of those who would have been successful without affirmative action.

Unfortunately, the fact is that affirmative action policy appears deeply flawed. More than that I know many senior officers who disagree with the policy but will not say so publicly out of fear of institutional reprisals. They all no doubt enthusiastically support equal opportunity, but perhaps find affirmative actions' numeric "goals" objectionable.

Most soldiers perceive goals and quotas as practically the same thing. This is because final reports are always reduced to numbers. Decisions, sometimes bad, are often made based on those numbers.

Retired Gen. Colin Powell's memoir, "My American Journey," had an interesting view on affirmative action. He states, "Preferences, no matter how well intended, ultimately, breed resentment among the non-preferred. And preferential treatment demeans the achievements that minority Americans win by their own efforts." I believe that Gen. Powell's feelings reflect the majority of America's opinion.

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