

STATEMENT OF PETER LEVINE,  
FORMER ACTING UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE  
FOR PERSONNEL AND READINESS

HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL  
HEARING ON MERITOCRACY IN THE MILITARY SERVICE ACCESSION,  
PROMOTION, AND COMMAND SELECTION

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Chairman Banks, Ranking Member Kim, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here this afternoon for your hearing on merit-based decision-making in the accession, promotion, and command selection of military officers. The views that I express today are my own, based on my past experience in the Department of Defense, and should not be interpreted as reflecting the position of my employer, the Institute for Defense Analyses.

Even more than technology, our greatest military advantage over our competitors is our people: our Armed Forces are filled with countless highly-trained professionals, including officers whose leadership qualities are the envy of the world. The capability of our total force – officer and enlisted, active duty and reserve, military and civilian, organic and contractor – is multiplied many times over by the exceptional quality of our recruits and the unparalleled levels of their training and education.

I would like to make three basic points today.

*First, diversity strengthens our military, and military leadership is more effective when it appropriately reflects the force.*

Only about one in six of American young people today meet the academic standards for recruitment and are otherwise eligible to serve in the military. The numbers are even smaller when you look at high skills – such as technological savvy and computer literacy – that are increasingly needed for the future force. That is why our search for talent must draw on every sector of our society. Only by recruiting in every region of the country and in every demographic group can the Department access the personnel and talent that it needs.

As a result, we have a force today that reflects the diversity of the American people. The U.S. population is roughly 60 percent non-Hispanic White, 18 percent Hispanic, 12 percent Black and 10 percent Asian, Pacific Islander and other. Our active duty military has about the same mix, roughly 55 percent non-Hispanic White, 17 percent Hispanic, 17 percent Black, and 10 percent Asian, Pacific Islander and other. Only about 17 percent of active duty members today are female, but without these women our force would not only be smaller, it would also be significantly less capable.

A force as diverse as ours is at its most effective when its members feel respected and included. And a key to that feeling is a leadership that is as inclusive as the force. As Admiral Gary Roughead, then the Chief of Naval Operations, stated in 2010, “when someone who is attracted to the Navy . . . looks up that chain of command, they have to see themselves. If they can’t see themselves, they won’t believe.”<sup>1</sup> Admiral Roughead’s statement was reflected by the findings of the Military Leadership Diversity Commission, which concluded a year later:

“[S]ervicemembers’ vision of what is possible for their career is shaped by whether they see individuals with similar backgrounds excelling and being recognized in their Service. The performance of the Nation’s military is tied to the individual’s belief that he or she will be treated fairly regardless of his or her background.”<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services has found that women in senior positions enhance recruitment and retention by serving as role models and mentors for more junior servicewomen.<sup>3</sup>

Our best force is a force that draws on the strengths of all sectors of our society, and we are unlikely to achieve such a force without an inclusive leadership that sends the message that all are welcome and have an opportunity to succeed.

*Second, the military promotion system is merit-based, but that doesn’t mean that we have been able to make it as color-blind or objective as we might like.*

Promotion decisions are made by boards of senior officers who are convened to assess the performance records of eligible officers and advance those who are

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<sup>1</sup> From Representation to Inclusion: Diversity Leadership for the 21st-Century Military, Final Report, Mil. Leadership Diversity Comm’n (Mar. 15, 2011), 15 <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=11390>.

<sup>2</sup> From Representation to Inclusion, xvi.

<sup>3</sup> <https://dacowits.defense.gov/Portals/48/Documents/Reports/2019/Annual%20Report/DACOWITS%202019.pdf>.

best qualified. Federal law requires merit-based decisions, providing that selection boards convened by the military departments must recommend those officers whom they determine to be “best qualified for promotion.”<sup>4</sup> Board members take an oath that they will perform their duties “without prejudice or partiality,”<sup>5</sup> and each Board must certify that the officers it recommends are the “best qualified for promotion to meet the needs of the armed force concerned.”<sup>6</sup> Board members and Service staff involved in the selection process have described the process as exceptionally fair and expressed the belief that board decisions are made based solely on the strength of the record. There are no quotas or affirmative action in today’s military promotion system.

Saying that the military promotion system is merit-based is not the same as saying that it is or can be “color-blind,” however. In recent years, several military Services have tried eliminating photos from the files available to promotion boards in an effort to minimize consideration of race and gender. Research conducted by IDA and others shows that the elimination of these photos had no statistically significant impact on promotion rates. This is hardly a surprising result, since personnel files include many other indicators of race and gender, including names and personal histories. Even if these other indicators could also be removed from personnel files, the promotion process would not be “color-blind,” since the senior officers who write the officer evaluation reports that are at the heart of the process know exactly who they are rating.

Moreover, a merit-based process is not the same thing as an objective process. One of the vital purposes of the accession, promotion, and command selection processes is to identify and advance future military leaders. Although academic achievement and proficiency at tactical tasks are important, they are not the only attributes that matter, and may not even be the attributes that matter most. A retired officer for whom I have the deepest respect says that integrity is far more important in a future leader than intelligence. He has explained:

First, last, and always is people have to believe you and you have [to] believe in them... They don’t necessarily have to like you...but they [have to] believe that they can trust you when you look them in the eye and say, “This is it. This is what I need. This is what I have to do.” They [have to]

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<sup>4</sup> 10 U.S.C. Section 616.

<sup>5</sup> 10 U.S.C. Section 613.

<sup>6</sup> 10 U.S.C. Section 617.

believe that it's true—or at least you think it's true. Integrity is the foundation for everything else.

For this reason, officer evaluations and promotion decisions include assessments of character traits in areas such as judgement, innovation, and communication, along with capabilities as a leader, mentor, motivator, and team player. The evaluation of these character traits and capabilities is merit-based and candidates are rated on a numeric scale, but the ratings are inherently subjective in nature. I may recognize leadership skills that you don't and vice versa, because what we see is the product of who we are, where we have been, and what we have experienced. This inherently subjective nature of character evaluation does not have to be a weakness. It can be a strength – as long as we use it as a tool to recognize and advance talent in all of its many shapes and forms.

*Third, the military has limited – but important – tools with which to promote diversity without undermining merit-based decisions.*

The twin objectives of promoting on the basis of merit and developing a diverse and inclusive leadership may sound inconsistent, but they are not.

One step that the Department can take to build diversity without undermining merit is to ensure that the pipeline of individuals who enter into the merit-based promotion process is as diverse as possible. For this reason, the Services work extremely hard to develop a robust and diverse applicant pool from which to select future officers. Just as the military Services seek to recruit enlisted members in diverse communities and in all segments of our society, they work to fill the officer candidate pool with the full range of talent that our country has to offer by reaching out to appropriate geographic regions and academic sources, including Minority Serving Institutions and affinity-based professional organizations.

The need to ensure a diverse pipeline to senior ranks does not end with accession. The Services have also worked hard to ensure that officers with diverse backgrounds are not disadvantaged in the promotion process being pigeon-holed into career fields and assignments with historically low promotion rates.<sup>7</sup> For

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<sup>7</sup> Research has shown that certain career fields in which women and racial and ethnic minorities have historically been underrepresented— primarily operational and combat specialties – are more likely to lead to promotion than others. Julie Lockwood et al., Explaining Differences in Predicted O-5 Promotion Outcomes by Race and Gender among Naval Officers, IDA Paper P-20452, December 1, 2020; Beth J. Asch, Trey Miller, & Alessandro Malchiodi, A new look at gender and minority differences in officer career progression in the military (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/technical\\_reports/TR1159.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR1159.html); Beth J. Asch, Trey Miller, &

example, the Air Force recently initiated an action plan to provide more resources and exposure on operational career fields to minority recruits, increase recruiter awareness and appreciation for diversity in career field matching, and support mentoring to foster officer development and career objectives.<sup>8</sup> Efforts like these to inform career choices and provide a fair shot at key assignments can help ensure that our military leaders appropriately reflect the force that they lead *without* undermining the merit-based selection processes.

A second step that the Department can take is to ensure that the boards that make promotion decisions are themselves diverse. A few years ago, I interviewed a senior executive at a large corporation who told me that his company's attempts to diversify its executives were unsuccessful until the company recognized that personal recommendations by the existing, non-diverse executives carried a large weight in the promotion process. His point was not that personal recommendations need to be eliminated for a company to successfully identify a diverse set of future leaders, but that the people making these personal recommendations should be diverse themselves. I have spoken to many senior military leaders who have told me similar stories.

This is undoubtedly why Section 612 of title 10, U.S. Code requires that "The members of a selection board shall represent the diverse population of the armed force concerned to the extent practicable." By ensuring that women and minorities are represented on selection boards, the military Services seek to avoid the trap of "group think," in which individuals who look alike and think alike continue to advance others who look and think like them. This does not mean that the Services are now acting on a basis other than merit or promoting less qualified officers. Rather, it is an indication that they are now able to recognize talent where they may have been unable to see it before. The result is a better and stronger force, and one that draws on all of the many strengths of our society.

Thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing. I look forward to your questions.

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Gabriel Weinberger, Can We Explain Gender Differences in Officer Career Progression? (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1288.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1288.html).

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/2021SAF/09\\_Sept/RDR\\_6\\_Month\\_Assessment.pdf](https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/2021SAF/09_Sept/RDR_6_Month_Assessment.pdf)