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PREJUDICE AND THE SOLDIER

Major De Reef A. Greene, *United States Army*

PREJUDICE and the Army do not mix. But whether we want to admit it or not, prejudice does exist among military personnel. Today, biased opinions and prejudices are being expressed more by implication than by overt acts. Nevertheless, the injustices which almost always result remain fairly obvious. I like to think that the evils of prejudice will cease to exist in the Armed Forces if every soldier places his obligations to the service above his personal convictions.

Discrimination because of race or religion is prohibited in the Armed Forces, but I dare say that many, if not all, military personnel indulge in

some type of prejudice. This ranges from the diehard segregationist who refuses to deal with Negroes on any terms and the Christian who can scarcely tolerate a Jew, to the moderate who accepts minorities as professional equals but avoids social contacts. To advocate the changing of personal feelings through regulation or legislation would be absurd, but we can and should perform our official duties undaunted by personal prejudices.

No doubt some readers will take exception to my claim that most military men are prejudiced in one way or another, for this is an admission one does not like to make publicly. I am

no exception. During World War II, I was a teenager who unwittingly became prejudiced against the Japanese people as a result of the tremendous amount of anti-Japanese propaganda which was generated during that period.

Pearl Harbor

Seldom were we Americans allowed to forget the infamous, sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. The slogan "Remember Pearl Harbor" had become the rallying point for intensifying efforts against Japan. We were constantly reminded that this attack was perpetrated while high Japanese officials were in Washington assuring President Franklin D. Roosevelt of Japan's good intentions.

Combined with these were the movies and other propaganda media in which the Japanese were always depicted as inhuman, bucktoothed soldiers who stabbed everybody in the back, burned all the villages, raped the women, and murdered babies. How could one, I reasoned as a teenager, trust or respect this race of people?

As I grew older I was able to reason out the situation, but my earlier experiences had left a mark in my heart which was difficult to erase.

It was not until some years later—while attending an Army school in Fort Riley, Kansas, with a Japanese-American officer—that I realized what a profound effect those early experiences had had on my outlook. He was

Major De Reef A. Greene is a Research and Development Coordinator with the US Army Combat Developments Command, Air Defense Agency, Fort Bliss, Texas. He has commanded a Nike battery in Europe, and received his Bachelor of General Education degree from the University of Omaha.

the first person of Japanese ancestry with whom I had ever come into direct contact.

Meeting him for the first time was a disturbing experience for me. Although I was seven years older and had gone to college, I discovered that I was psychologically ill-prepared for what followed. Instantly, his slant eyes recalled to my mind everything that I had come to dislike about the Japanese. Despite the fact that my commonsense, better judgment, intellect, and logic berated my reacting in such a manner, I was unable to dispel a feeling of uneasiness or animosity toward him. I wondered what it would be like working with him, and if he could be trusted. I confess that I actually had to force myself to treat him the same as any other officer. In time, I accepted him as a professional equal.

Wrong Attitude

My dealings with that particular officer were never characterized by violence or even real hatred. I simply concluded that the less I had to do with him, the better off I would be. In retrospect, I recognize the wrongness of my attitude, but it was no easy task to dispel the prejudices I had developed against the Japanese people.

My bout with prejudice prompted another question—if I found it difficult, for one reason or another, to erase prejudices, would it not be even more difficult for someone less motivated than I to erase his prejudices? I am convinced that the eradication of prejudice is easier said than done and is relatively unimportant. What is immediately important is not whether we have prejudices, but whether we permit them to interfere with our duties.

My personal experiences have led me to adopt two simple rules with which to govern my attitude and conduct when confronted with such matters:

● Am I an officer first? First and foremost, an officer must never think as a white officer, a Catholic officer, a West Point officer, a Negro officer, a Reserve Officer Training Corps officer, or an Officer Candidate School officer. An officer must think and act only as an Army officer. This is not to suggest that an officer should abandon his background or heritage, but I do submit that his primary responsibility is to the Army and the accomplishment of the mission. After the accomplishment of the mission comes the welfare of all men.

● Do my personal beliefs prevent me from dealing with others impartially, or with properly performing my job? An officer may have many beliefs which are contrary to Army policy, but he cannot allow his beliefs to supersede his devotion to duty. He must act not without regard to these, for this would be to deny reality, but he must function in spite of these things which may detract from his position as a commander of men. He must function at all times without regard to ethnic, racial, religious, geographic, or other considerations. Neither his office nor the Army should ever be used as a means of furthering his personal beliefs or attitudes. For example, an officer who is a staunch segregationist has no more right to use his position to foster segregation than I have to use my commission to extoll the virtues of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. An officer is obligated to enforce the rules of the Army, but he should refrain from attempting to in-

fluence or control the personal beliefs of his men so long as such beliefs do not place the accomplishment of the mission in jeopardy.

Follow Rules

I believe that if these two rules are rigidly followed, an officer will earn the confidence and respect of both superiors and subordinates alike.

These two rules may be applied equally well to other than racial issues. I once had a lieutenant assigned to my unit who strongly believed in Catholicism. He felt that Catholicism was the only true religion and that all non-Catholics "should be shown the light." How the lieutenant felt seemed to be no secret in the unit.

Upon learning that the lieutenant had been attempting to convert Protestant soldiers to Catholicism through unit meetings and conferences, I informed him that he could not use his position as an officer to propagate the Catholic faith. The lieutenant told me that, knowing I, too, was a Catholic, he failed to understand my position. I discussed my two rules with him, only to have him reply that it was too difficult for him just to "stand by." I advised him that if he felt so strongly about the religious issue that he could not adjust, he should seriously consider resigning from the Army.

Fortunately, the lieutenant was an exception, but the incident does serve to reiterate the pertinence of my two rules. True, his conduct could be classified as immature rather than prejudiced, but is there a great difference between the two terms?

Very often I have been consulted by other officers for advice on solving racially-oriented problems, and I always offer my two rules as guidance.

As an illustration, a fellow battery commander once confided in me that

he had learned that some of the Negro soldiers in his unit wanted to talk to the battalion commander about a platoon leader whom they believed was prejudiced. The soldiers sought to do this because they feared they could not get any satisfactory response from a battery commander who was from Georgia. In another case, a battery commander informed me that some of the Negro soldiers in his unit had been involved in a racial disturbance in a local town and he did not "know how to handle it."

I believe that any leader, regardless of his race, religion, or geographic origin, who governs himself according to accepted standards of conduct need not worry about losing the confidence of any of his men.

To go a bit further, let us assume there are two men in a unit who are eligible for promotion, one a Negro and the other a white, and there is only one vacancy. Simply put, these considerations have no bearing on the situation, regardless of the commander's personal beliefs. As long as the unit promotion system is fair, there will be no cause to worry about accusations of prejudice. In my case, I would promote the best qualified man for the vacancy and not be concerned with being an "Uncle Tom" or prejudiced. The commander should not take a "what shall I do?" attitude. Commonsense should prevail.

Similarly, I would advise a commander to promote a soldier who happens to be from his same region if that soldier is clearly the best qualified for the vacancy. The commander should certainly not refuse to promote the soldier because he fears that if he did, he might be accused of prejudice.

That my convictions are shared by others is borne out in statements by

a commanding officer I once had who was a native of Mississippi. The colonel made the remarks during a conference he had called when he had learned that certain members of our staff had been bickering with other staff personnel. He stated:

Gentlemen, I am aware that there are some differences of opinion between you and the people with whom we must deal. If your opinions are based on fact and logic or military experience, then healthy differences of opinion cannot help but improve our organization. In this case, however, I sense a difference between people and personalities and not differences of opinion. I want to explain the military facts of life to you, gentlemen. When you have been in the Army as long as I have you will realize that you have to swallow your pride and that you cannot allow your personal feelings to interfere with your performance of duty or your relationships with any other member of the Army. Your mission must always be uppermost in your minds. I know this might be a difficult thing to do, but there is no other way. You must understand that the success of any command depends upon the contributions of the whole. It is dangerous to deal in personalities or personal feelings.

It is generally true that in any command or office, partiality or unfairness breeds something less than maximum efficiency. Prejudice definitely has no place in the military service.

We are well aware that prejudices and personal feelings and opinions are not easily overcome, but the immediate and most essential responsibility of every soldier is to ensure that his own prejudices do not prevent him from performing his duty according to the highest standards.