

# Military Review

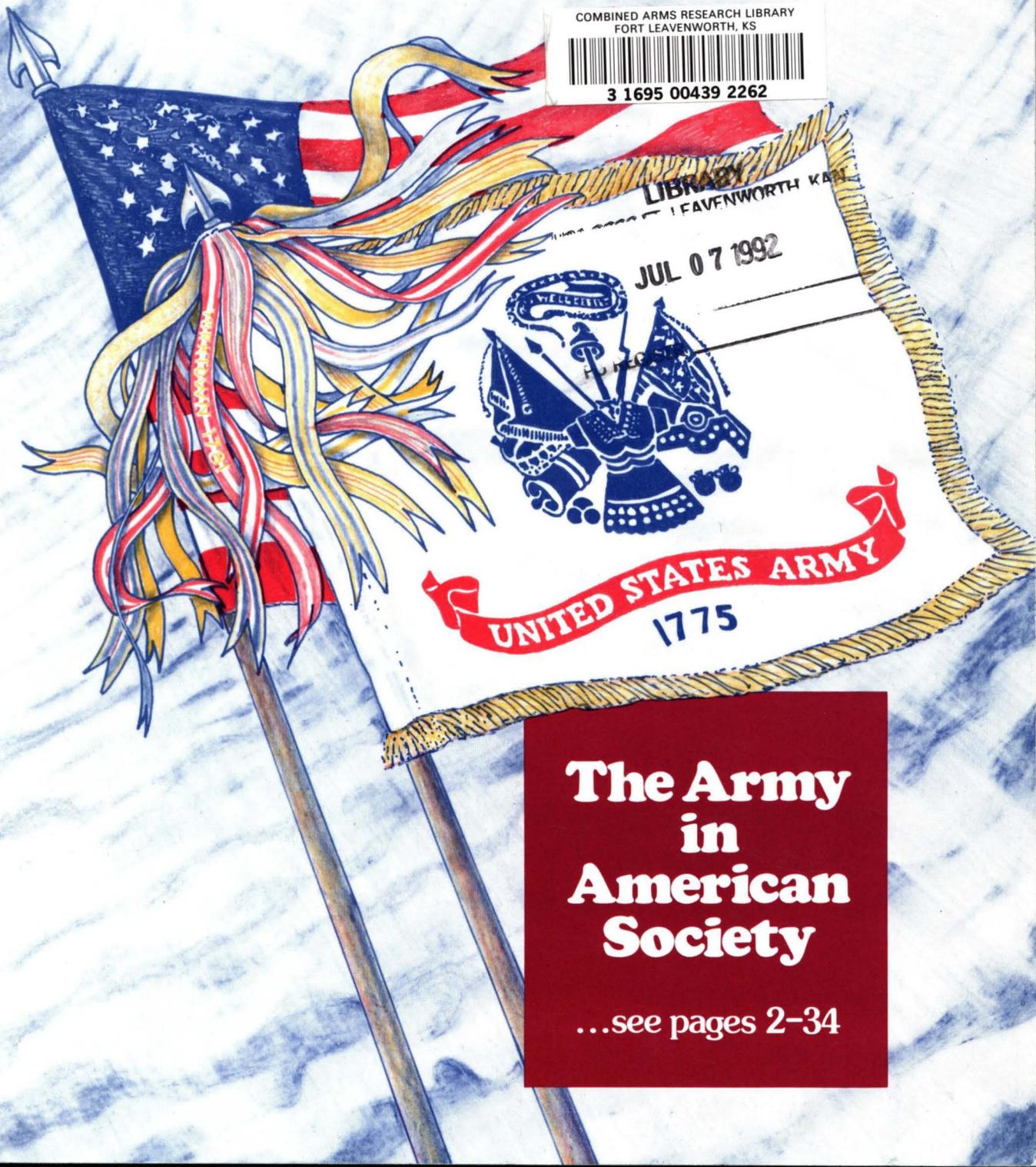
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**The Army  
in  
American  
Society**

...see pages 2-34

# Blacks, the Army and America

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*The author cautions that the relatively light losses incurred by American ground forces during Operation Desert Storm were atypical of a major war and should not cause us to gloss over a national problem of fundamental moral significance. He offers his views on the disproportionate racial composition of the US Army as a symptom of a larger societal illness that must be treated and cured.*

Proportion: A relationship between things or parts of things with respect to comparative magnitude, quantity, or degree. Disproportionate: Out of proportion, as in relative size, shape, or amount.

The American Heritage Dictionary

**T**HE GULF WAR brought to the forefront of national debate a delicate and very difficult question—the issue of black overrepresentation in the Army. Only 50 years ago, the very suggestion of this problem would have been inconceivable. In 1942, blacks made up 5.8 percent of the Army.<sup>1</sup> Most black soldiers were draftees and served primarily in support roles in organizations such as the Quartermaster and Engineer corps. In the days of our segregated Army, black leaders fought to increase black enlistment, raise it to the level of black representation in the population and allow blacks to fight for America, albeit in all-black units. In those days, integration-wary Army leaders claimed that “the military should not be a laboratory for social experimentation.”<sup>2</sup> As it has turned out, the Army of today stands as the shining result of perhaps the most successful social experiment in

*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not purport to reflect the position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense or any other government office or agency.—Editor*

American history. The intervening 50 years have brought with them the end of enlistment discrimination, the end of Army segregation and a fivefold increase in the percentage of black soldiers on active duty. But because civilian America has refused to heed and follow this singular example, the Army’s great social success has become a problem the Army can acknowledge but cannot solve by itself.

## Overrepresentation in the Army

Whites make up 84.2 percent of America, yet only 65 percent of the Army, while blacks constitute 12.4 percent of America and an amazing 28.9 percent of the Army.<sup>3</sup> For every black person in America, there are 6.7 white persons; but in the Army, for every black soldier, there are only two white soldiers. The consequences for the black community, given across-the-board casualties in a major war (which the Gulf War was not) are of grave concern. In light of these numbers, the argument I want to make is that we should be concerned that blacks find themselves in the position of being prepared to make such a large sacrifice for a country that not only fails to extend equality to them but, through its social and economic practices, tends to steer blacks into armed defense of itself and its institutions—



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Army represents a clear-cut indictment of modern American society and, at the same time, sounds a ringing endorsement of today's Army and its equitable, color-blind policies. We should, therefore, regard the racial structure of the Army as the symptom of a larger societal problem and not blame the Army itself for being as attractive to blacks as it is.

We have several ways of viewing the large number of blacks in the Army. One way is to deny that black representation in the Army is in fact disproportionate. This clearly is not a reasonable position; for if to be represented in the Army at a rate that is two and one half times one's percentage of society is not disproportionate, what could possibly count as disproportionate representation? One might attempt to argue that this disproportionality is not a problem, but that is a different issue, one that acknowledges the obvious disparity in representation.

One might take the position that black soldiers are volunteers and that no one forced them to join, a view I will call "voluntarism." The holder of such a view could contend that blacks are guilty of inconsistency—they join the military to take advantage of increased opportunities and benefits and then balk when the possibility of combat arises. Conversely, the proponent of voluntarism might also say that blacks join the

Army out of the same deep feelings of patriotism and service as do their white counterparts. To suggest that they are forced by economics to join or join only for the benefits is to impugn the loyalty of the black soldier.

Still another view holds that American society has not been fair to blacks over the years, but the eve of the Gulf crisis was not the time for dissent. Service in the Gulf War would provide blacks an excellent opportunity to lay a claim to equal rights and treatment in mainstream American society. This view, which I shall call "absolutionism," advises blacks to sacrifice now for later rewards.

## **The Social Contract**

It will be helpful to analyze these two perspectives using the social contract theory of government and obligation. Traditional social contract theory, as propounded by John Locke, holds that the force of government derives from humans agreeing with each other to first form a society and, then, to establish a government based on an agency type of social contract.<sup>4</sup> This second contract is a conditional agreement between the people and the government. The people, in whom sovereignty resides, may dissolve the government should it not adhere to the conditions of its establishment—one of the foundations of our Constitution. The idea of obligation under the social contract comes about because part of the contract requires that each of us give up certain rights, such as the right to take the law into one's own hands, in exchange for the benefits and conveniences of a regulated society. If we partake of the advantages of society, that is, law and order, social services, protection from foreign invasion, on so on, then we are obligated to repay our society in the form of taxes, conventionally accepted behavior and general adherence to the norms of society. In a social contract scenario, the people agree to equally obey the government, and the government agrees to equally protect the people. We may apply the social contract theory of obligation to each of the views outlined above—the voluntarist and the absolutionist.



*The typical white high-school graduate has a wide hallway of many open doors, with military service being one of the possibilities. As a contrast, we can compare this to the experience of the average black high-school graduate who, first of all, has a narrower hallway with fewer doors open, and who, upon squeezing down the constricting corridor, finds that the military door looms wide open and far more attractive than most other possibilities.*

## The Voluntarist Argument

Probably the easiest argument to make is the argument of the voluntarist. Military service is voluntary. America did not impose a draft during the Gulf buildup; so, clearly, anyone in uniform was in uniform freely, voluntarily. Christopher Jehn, assistant secretary of defense for force management and personnel, typified this attitude when he said of blacks:

“Nobody’s making them enlist. They’re not victims; they’re willing, patriotic Americans.”<sup>5</sup>

The voluntarist approach assumes that one party to the social contract (America) has treated and protected the other party (all its citizens) equally and properly. In other words, the voluntarist assumes that America has fully upheld its part of the social contract. The voluntarist must make and defend this claim before the notion of volunteering can have any content insofar as black enlistees are concerned. Before concluding that the issue of a 28.9 percent black army in a nation that is 12.4 percent black is

nonproblematic, we must determine whether this disparity has in fact come about as the function of mere voluntary choice.

According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, to volunteer is “to enter into or to offer to enter into an undertaking of one’s own free will.” To illustrate the environment of a potential volunteer, the new high-school graduate, let us use the analogy of a hallway containing doors of opportunity, with high-school graduation representing the entrance to the passageway. The typical white high-school graduate has a wide hallway of many open doors, with military service being one of the possibilities. As a contrast, we can compare this to the experience of the average black high-school graduate who, first of all, has a narrower hallway with fewer doors open, and who, upon squeezing down the constricting corridor, finds that the military door looms wide open and far more attractive than most other possibilities. Should both these graduates opt to volunteer for military service, we

cannot, in good conscience, call both instances volunteering; or if we can, certainly not volunteering to the same degree. This disparity in options appears even more extreme when some

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one as high in the military establishment as the commander of Operation *Desert Storm*, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, speaking of black soldiers, says:

"I think it's a credit to the military because they come to the military because they understand that that's one place where they are going to be treated truly as equals and they have just as much opportunity to get ahead as anybody else."<sup>6</sup> Schwarzkopf and other Army leaders such as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin L. Powell, note that the racial disparity of the Army points to its being an institution that, in general, does not practice racial discrimination. According to Powell, "The Armed Forces have always provided opportunities for blacks, which blacks have found attractive and have gone after, and I see no reason to change that now."<sup>7</sup>

The statements of Powell and Schwarzkopf directly oppose the reasoning of Jehn. If the Army, as extreme and dangerous an occupation as it is, is so profoundly more attractive to blacks than the remainder of opportunities in America, there must be something fundamentally unattractive about black career options and chances for success in civilian America. If this is so, as both Powell and Schwarzkopf agree, then when the average black youth volunteers for Army service, he does so with less freedom than the average

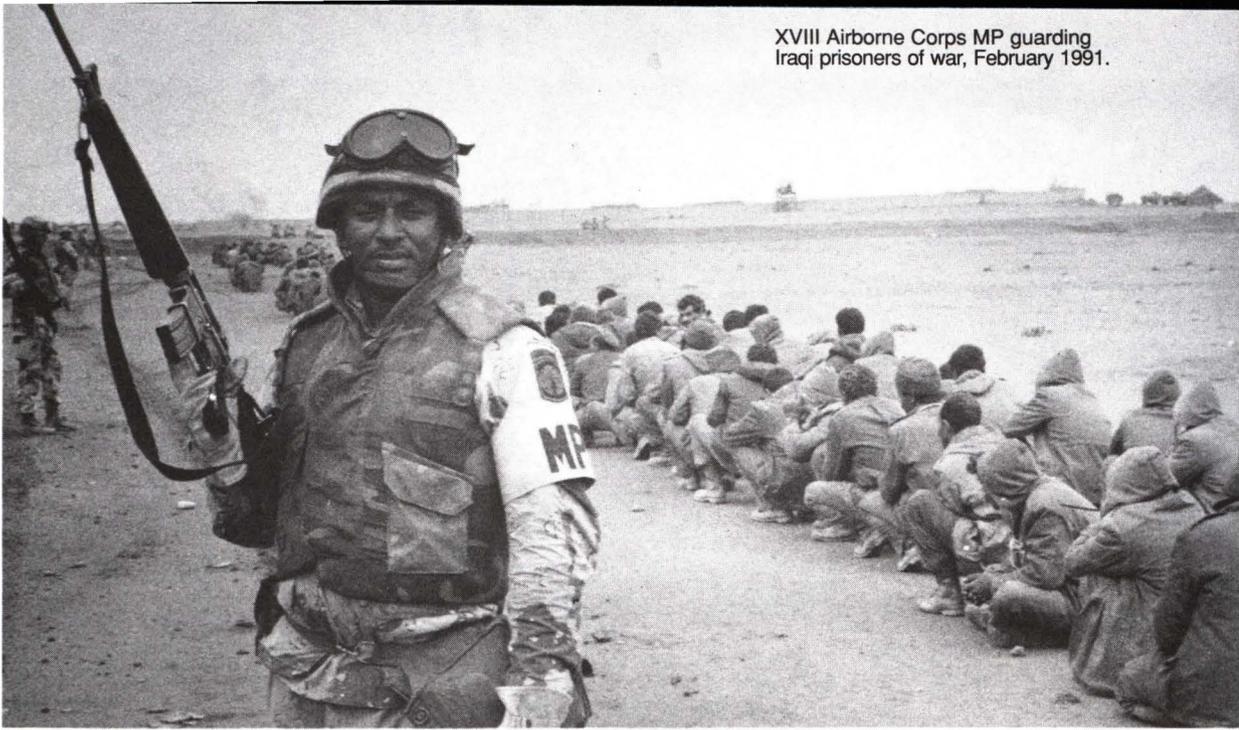
white youth. Imagine a situation where you have the following options in choosing a career:

- The civilian environment, where you face racial discrimination, fewer educational opportunities and generally lower pay than your white counterpart.

- The military environment, which Northwestern University military sociologist, Charles C. Moskos Jr., has called "the only major institution in America with something like a level playing field."<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, in such a scenario, one would tend to favor the military option as the one with the greatest potential for satisfaction and advancement. This is the situation, and these are the options of the average black youth prior to enlisting. The average white youth does not face this dilemma; for him, either option guarantees relatively fair treatment, freedom from discrimination and equitable pay. Thus, we counter the voluntarist by noting that if the relative conditions for volunteering for Army service are not equivalent, then the resultant volunteering is not equivalent.

Going back to the social contract, we can see that, historically, America has a woeful record of fulfilling the contract in regard to its black citizens. It was only 37 years ago that racial segregation in public schools was constitutional. The positive changes that have come about in America over the past 50 years such as desegregation of public schools, integration of the military and the guarantee of voting rights have been the result of militancy and protest by blacks—these changes were not the result of voluntary, justice-based redresses by America. On the social contract model, America has failed to uphold its end of the contract and has created such disparate social conditions that blacks are joining the Army at a rate two and one half times their proportion in society. To say this is not to imply that these black enlistees are unpatriotic—patriotism and a quest for personal social improvement are not incompatible. What is fundamentally unfair and misleading is to ignore the different treatment America affords its black and white citizens and then to say, of both types of enlistees,



*It was black congressmen and civic leaders who began to complain about the disproportionate representation of blacks in the Army, not black soldiers. . . . As long as conditions in civilian America continue to make the Army such an overwhelmingly attractive career alternative to blacks, it will remain the sharpest of double-edged swords: one edge—a powerful, efficient tool for social advancement; the other—war, disablement and death.*

that each chose to volunteer based on the same wide range of career options.

### **The Absolutionist Argument**

The absolutionist recognizes the inconsistencies inherent in the voluntarist position. The absolutionist accepts that America has yet to make good the “bad check” Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. In the absolutionist view, blacks are completely justified in their complaints about social conditions in America and the unequal burden they shoulder in its defense. But absolutionists cautioned blacks that instead of demanding justice, equality and recognition of their cause prior to the Gulf War, the best course of action was to serve proudly and without complaining so as to gain a warrant for making a case for racial equality after the war. On its surface, this admonition may seem prudent, but when considered in the context of the past historical sacrifices of blacks for the Army and America and the results these sacrifices have gained them in achieving racial equal-

ity, it seems rather hollow indeed. There was no reason to suppose that after this sacrifice, after this war, America would do what it had not done after all the other wars in which blacks served and died for their country. In fact, the absolutionist position almost seems to imply that blacks must somehow prove their worthiness to make any claim for racial justice. It is incongruous to, on the one hand, tell blacks that their complaints about social inequality are justified and, on the other, to say that they must first prove themselves by fighting in yet another war. This incongruity is made all the more plain for blacks returning from service in the gulf who sense a continuing erosion of the civil rights gains made in the last 50 years. On the social contract model, America, as described above, has failed to uphold its part of the contract insofar as black citizens are concerned. Recognizing this, it is doubly wrong to then require those citizens to again make the ultimate sacrifice before addressing their acknowledged grievances.



Lieutenant General Calvin Waller, deputy commander, CENTCOM, speaking with General Powell during a briefing in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, December 1990.

*The Army of today stands as the shining result of perhaps the most successful social experiment in American history. The [past] 50 years have brought with them the end of enlistment discrimination, the end of Army segregation and a fivefold increase in the percentage of black soldiers on active duty. But because civilian America has refused to heed and follow this singular example, the Army's great social success has become a problem the Army can acknowledge but cannot solve by itself.*

## **A Double-Edged Sword**

Not only are our black soldiers patriotic, but they are uncomplaining as well. It was black congressmen and civic leaders who began to complain about the disproportionate representation of blacks in the Army, not black soldiers themselves. Herein lies the difficult irony of blacks and the Army. For blacks, the Army represents by far the surest way to achieve fair treatment and merit-based advancement in American society. As President George Bush said during his speech at the United States Military Academy graduation on 1 June 1991:

“Martin Luther King dreamed of an America in which one day our children would—and to quote—‘not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.’ In the Army, just as here at West Point, that ‘one day’ has arrived.”<sup>9</sup>

But we must not allow ourselves to discount the fact that the cost to blacks of partaking of that opportunity and of participating in their nation's

one sure egalitarian institution is the risk of death or serious injury in the event of war. As long as conditions in civilian America continue to make the Army such an overwhelmingly attractive career alternative to blacks, it will remain the sharpest of double-edged swords: one edge—a powerful, efficient tool for social advancement; the other—war, disablement and death.

The problem is easy to state, but the remedy, in terms of what the Army can do, is elusive. To try to make black representation in the Army proportional to that in society, or to merely lower it, would deprive many young blacks of the only sure chance they have of improving their condition in society. On the other hand, to leave levels where they are or to allow them to rise invites cultural disaster in a major war since “unlike white enlistees who tend to be poorer and less educated than their civilian counterparts, most black servicemen and women are high school graduates or better from working- and middle-class families. . . . Black communities who have

already lost great numbers of men to drugs and crime will now lose 'the good ones' to war."<sup>10</sup> In a major ground war with casualties at their traditional levels, black soldiers, who for the most part are widely distributed across the combat, combat support and combat service support arms, would die in numbers far greater than their 12.4 percent representation in society could justify.

The Army has become a cherished institution in America's black community. The irony and tragedy of the Army's dedication to equal rights lie in the gulf that exists between the Army and America as comparative color-blind societies. The Army has done such a manifestly excellent job of creating a progressive, discrimination-free environment that it draws striving, hardworking blacks to it as a magnet attracts iron. The Army cannot solve this problem because the problem lies not with it, but with the nation. Black overrepresentation in the Army can end through only one of two means: quotas limiting the numbers of blacks in the Army, which would surely be an even greater tragedy; or America's becoming as free and open a society as the Army is, so that other career options come to equal the Army in terms of fairness, opportunity and likelihood for advancement. We should want the Army to continue its commitment to equal rights and equal opportunity, and we should likewise demand that America, as a nation, follow the Army's lead and demonstrate its own dedica-

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tion to these cornerstones of our great republic.

There was a time when the US government had to direct the Army to desegregate, integrate and grant equal opportunity. On 26 July 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981, which stated that "there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin."<sup>11</sup> It took years for the Army to stop its bitter resistance and foot-dragging, but it finally took the policy to heart, and the result is the highly trained, fine-tuned Army we have today. Now, it is the Army that can lead the way for an American society desperately needing an Executive Order 9981 of its own. **MR**

#### NOTES

1. Martin Binkin and Mark J. Eitelberg, with Alvin J. Schnexnider and Marvin M. Smith, *Blacks and the Military* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1982), 42.
2. *Ibid.*, 17-19.
3. These numbers come from two sources, "United States of America," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica: World Data Annual*, 1991 ed., and Isabel Wilkerson, "Blacks Wary of Their Big Role in Military," *The New York Times*, 25 January 1991, A12.
4. The main ideas of John Locke to which I refer are found in chapters 3, 7 and 19 of his *Second Treatise of Government*, 1698.

5. Wilkerson.
6. General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, "Address to United States Military Academy Cadets," 15 May 1991.
7. Wilkerson.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Chuck Eisele, "Chief hails graduates at West Point," *Pointer View* (7 June 1991):1.
10. Wilkerson.
11. Bernard C. Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 242.

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