

# Military Diversity

## A Key American Strategic Asset

Gen. Michael X. Garrett, U.S. Army

**A**s commanding general of U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM), I am responsible for the readiness of more than 750,000 active and reserve component soldiers across the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Readiness is “the Army’s ability to provide adequate forces to meet the demands of the NMS [National Military Strategy],” and is reflected when the Army meets combatant command requirements, achieves high performance in operations and training exercises, and maintains a technological and tactical edge through modernization initiatives.<sup>2</sup> Readiness is the reason FORSCOM exists: our headquarters’ mission is to “train and prepare a combat-ready, globally responsive Total Force.”<sup>3</sup>

In my experience, one of the most essential indicators of readiness is a unit’s ability to operate as a diverse, cohesive team. The highest levels of trust com-

**Gen. Michael X. Garrett, U.S. Army,** is the commanding general of U.S. Army Forces Command. He holds a bachelor’s degree from Xavier University, and his military education includes attendance at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and a Senior Service College fellowship. Garrett has commanded at every level from company through Army Service Component Command, and he has led units in combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

combined with individual mastery of warfighting fundamentals prepare squads and crews to win at the point of contact against our Nation’s adversaries.

Former Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher C. Miller emphasized the connection between readiness, team cohesion, and fair opportunities in his 17 December 2020 memorandum on improving racial and ethnic diversity.<sup>4</sup> My experience as a

soldier and commander tells me diversity is much more than a force multiplier; it is essential at every level of mission effectiveness.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond the way a unit shoots, moves, and communicates, readiness in the U.S. Army depends on team members who represent all of America and operate with high morale and camaraderie. And while “the vast majority of the men and women of this Department [of Defense] serve with honor and uphold our core values,” even one intolerant or untrustworthy team member can have an outsized impact on a unit’s cohesion and reliability.<sup>6</sup>

Without diversity, a homogeneous team of soldiers would lack the resilience, perspective, and growth offered by teammates from different backgrounds. Without trust, these teams would inevitably make mistakes and miss opportunities on the battlefield—possibly at the cost of American lives. If compounded over time, these team-level effects could drive down American and U.S. military credibility, compromising our core, enduring interests.

This makes diversity not only a right but also a strategic military asset—essential to meet today’s security challenges.<sup>7</sup>

### One Soldier’s Experience

In one of his initial public messages to senior Department of Defense leaders, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III wrote, “Service members, DoD civilian employees, and all those who support our mission, deserve an environment free of discrimination, hate, and harassment.”<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps I am fortunate to have grown up and enjoyed serving in such an environment. Born into an Army family where my father eventually rose to the rank of command sergeant major, I have spent my entire life around the Army and experienced the best of



Second Lt. Michael X. Garrett (*center*) stands at attention as his parents pin his rank on his uniform during his U.S. Army commissioning ceremony in May 1984 at Xavier University in Cincinnati. Garrett's first assignment in the Army was at the 24th Infantry Division at Fort Stewart, Georgia, where his father, Command Sgt. Maj. Edward Garrett (*right*), served as the division command sergeant major. (Photo courtesy of the author)

its culture: duty, teamwork, and mission focus. While I have experienced and addressed everyday slights and unconscious bias as a Black soldier, I have not experienced the kind of overt racism or hatred I know others have. Army values and common purpose united soldiers and families—even though I knew there were significantly fewer Black kids to play with on the other side of post where the officer corps lived.

Although I did not think about it often, I knew most of the chain of command did not look like me. Gen. Roscoe Robinson Jr. became the Army's first Black four-star general in 1982, only two years before

I was commissioned as an infantry officer.<sup>9</sup> In 1989, when I was a captain, Colin Powell became the Army's second Black four-star general when he took command of the organization I lead today.<sup>10</sup>

I was not and am not ignorant to the presence of racism in the Army, but I believed the best thing I could do was follow my role models, be a role model myself, and exceed standards.

Standards drove my experience as a young officer, particularly in the competitive, hard-training 75th Ranger Regiment. What mattered for every member of the team was whether they met the standard: in their



physical fitness, tactical proficiency, and professional behavior. Instead of race, religion, or other differences, we talked about standards and relentlessly trained to be masters of our skills and soldier tasks. And while I always felt the standard was a little higher for Mike Garrett than anybody else, I do not believe race was a determining factor in my career. Today, I am proud to

Juan M. Alcantara, born in the Dominican Republic and posthumously granted American citizenship; Sgt. Nicholas A. Gummersall, a star athlete from Idaho; Cpl. Kareem R. Khan, a New Jersey native and Muslim soldier; and Staff Sgt. Jacob M. Thompson, a Minnesota native on his second combat tour.<sup>11</sup> This is one tragic example, out of many, of our force's diversity and strength:



Soldiers graduate from the Basic Leaders Course class 004-19, hosted by 3rd Battalion, 218th Regiment (Leadership), South Carolina Army National Guard, 1 March 2019 at the McCrady Training Center in Eastover, South Carolina. (Photo by Cindi King, U.S. National Guard)

lead in an Army that has also removed gender and sexual orientation as barriers to a soldier's ability to choose their career path and meet standards.

Commanding and leading soldiers as a brigade commander deployed to Iraq helped me value diversity in the U.S. Army on a deeper level. Soldiers from across the country, representing every part of our country, trained and served together in exceedingly complex and dangerous environments. Although they were not assigned to my brigade, I was in Iraq when four soldiers were killed in action together on 6 August 2007: Cpl.

soldiers from different backgrounds serving and fighting together. It is thoroughly and uniquely American.

The more I looked around, the more I realized the U.S. military looked and felt much more diverse than partner nations' largely homogeneous militaries. I came to quietly respect and appreciate the ways soldiers of different races, religions, cultures, and backgrounds worked together, representing the best of our Nation.

I am honored to be the Army's ninth Black four-star general, which means for all but six years since 1982, Black soldiers—at least Black male

soldiers—have been able to see themselves in one of the Army’s top billets.<sup>12</sup> Considering the importance of diversity to our Army’s identity, it is clear we have more work to do. We must continue to combat unconscious bias, microaggressions, and rare cases of overt extremist behavior before they corrode us from within.

most: at the point of contact. And through belonging, soldiers identify themselves as members of their teams despite their different backgrounds because they share a deep connection to the mission.

This is easier said than done. Unit cohesion, or interpersonal respect, is not as clearly assessed and

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Hopefully sooner rather than later, the Army’s tenth, eleventh, and one hundredth Black four-star generals will lead soldiers, alongside the tenth, eleventh, and one hundredth women and non-Black minorities who hold the same rank. More than ever, I am convinced diversity is one of the Army’s most valuable strategic assets; it deserves our attention and protection.

## Leader Responsibilities

It is every leader’s duty to ensure inclusion within their teams through their unit’s culture and command climate.<sup>13</sup> Like all strategic assets, leaders must deliberately preserve and sustain their diversity and inclusion. This takes time and energy but is otherwise relatively low cost. Few other U.S. strategic assets—such as military end strength or weapon systems—are available at the low cost of a small-team leader’s commitment and focus. Through diversity and inclusion, the Army has an opportunity to dramatically increase a strategic imperative—along with our people’s well-being and our force’s readiness—through nothing more than leaders’ daily actions.

Leaders who infuse inclusion, respect, cohesion, and belonging within their teams will foster the level of diversity necessary for the Army’s strategic credibility. Leaders should create opportunities for soldiers to prove themselves and be judged against standards instead of their gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation. With their leaders’ respect, soldiers are welcome to perform and advance on these teams just as I was, without judgment or bias. Through cohesion, teams see past their differences and trust one another where it matters

validated as a platoon’s ability to conduct a live-fire exercise or a tank crew’s gunnery table performance. An inclusive and ready unit takes 365-day-a-year leadership; fortunately, soldiers have 365-day-a-year leaders. From the squad to corps levels, leaders must ensure their actions support the strategically diverse force we need, in the following ways:

**Develop leaders.** Teach all leaders and soldiers to identify unconscious bias, navigate difficult conversations, and address conflicts. Microaggressions—described as “a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group”—take many forms.<sup>14</sup> For example, as a general officer, I have been part of groups where a guest assumed one of my white staff members was the group’s senior member. While it is tempting to brush off a seemingly harmless assumption, doing so would be a missed opportunity. Leaders must be comfortable identifying microaggressions about to occur in their own behavior and be clear when correcting these indignities within their formations. Furthermore, subordinate leaders must be empowered to admit they cannot solve an inclusion or interpersonal problem on their own, and they must be connected with best practices and trained professionals.<sup>15</sup>

**Define and uphold standards.** In our fair and inclusive Army, all soldiers deserve the opportunity to prove themselves by meeting the standard. They rely on their leaders to communicate exactly what that standard is and then follow through by consistently applying this standard. Ill-defined or changing

standards leave room for subjective leadership and erode soldiers' trust in their leaders.

**Promote unity of effort.** Give small teams an opportunity to rally around a common purpose: a mission, a field training exercise, or a squad- or platoon-wide goal. The Army is made up of individuals from all different

build relationships. This is not time off from training, and in many cases, may incorporate small-team training opportunities where trust and teamwork are the principal outcomes.

These recommendations are relatively tactical-level actions for leaders of small teams and squads to ulti-

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backgrounds and parts of our Nation, but there is always the potential for common ground. People join the Army to serve, to become leaders, or to seek new opportunities and education—these motivations are not exclusive to any one race, ethnicity, gender, or religion.<sup>16</sup> Leaders who know their people can tap into these motivations and build connections across the team.

**Encourage difficult conversations.** When I run during physical training hours, I sometimes “hijack” a squad on the road, introduce myself, and ask questions about their team. Months ago, I asked one squad, which happened to include soldiers of different races, how often they had conversations about race. Their answer: “Of course not, why would we talk about that?” At their age, I would have had the same answer. What I did not appreciate in my twenties, and hope I helped these soldiers appreciate now, is that teams are better when they acknowledge their differences and learn about one another.<sup>17</sup> A team experiencing healthy conflict—such as respectful, empathetic conversations about personal topics—is genuinely building inclusion and belonging. Alternatively, a team that ignores its unspoken differences may fail to build camaraderie and risks silently condoning racist or extremist behaviors.<sup>18</sup>

Foundational Training Days—the FORSCOM-wide initiative in which leaders dedicate one day in each month's training calendar to building trust between leaders and team members—gives teams time to ask tough questions, tackle issues, and get to know one another's unique perspectives. Foundational Training Days rely on teams and leaders to approach each opportunity with an open mind and genuine desire to

mately achieve strategic results. The benefits of leaders who promote inclusion within their teams are clear, albeit best measured over the long term.

A culture of inclusion offers transformative experiences to those who do enter the Army with biases; soldiers and veterans who learn and grow in our teams come to represent the best of American values.

## Diversity as a Strategic Asset

*We will take urgent action to ensure that our national security workforce reflects the full diversity of America and all the strengths it brings.*

—President Joseph R. Biden Jr.<sup>19</sup>

National strategy exists to secure and advance our Nation's long-term, enduring, core interests over time.<sup>20</sup> Military strategy is the business of civilian leaders, generals, and admirals regarding force employment within the combatant commands and each military institution's direction for its future force.<sup>21</sup> As the commander of one such institution within the U.S. Army, I believe America requires, and will continue to require, a diverse force in order to be effective. Like America's partnerships, diplomatic corps, and cutting-edge technology, a diverse and inclusive military force is an essential element of our force's ability to compete, fight, and win around the world.<sup>22</sup>

A diverse and inclusive force is effective at the point of contact—the time and place where squads, platoons, and companies achieve victory or decisive advantage—because they combat group-think while trusting one another with their lives.



A diverse and inclusive force is resilient. When squad members come from various backgrounds and cultures and share few of the same life experiences, their common bonds are the shared hardships of training and operations.

A diverse and inclusive force attracts and retains talent. In 2015, Pentagon data said 71 percent of all young Americans were ineligible to serve in the military for various reasons such as health issues, obesity,

A diverse and inclusive force helps young Americans, families, and veterans trust and relate to the U.S. Army. Outside of recruiting and talent management, the Army is also a symbol of our Nation's values—a source of pride for the American conscience and our partners. A recent Reagan Foundation survey found that Americans' trust in the U.S. military has declined since 2018, though it is still above the public's trust in six other public institutions.<sup>25</sup> In the wake of a divisive 2020 marked by racial



Gen. Michael X. Garrett (*right*) cheers on soldiers assigned to the 7th Army Training Command 29 October 2019 during the final stretch of an esprit-de-corps run in Grafenwoehr, Germany. (Photo by Spc. Ryan Barnes, U.S. Army)

physical fitness, education, and criminal history.<sup>23</sup> Our all-volunteer military needs the best talent from the remaining 29 percent and cannot afford a reputation that turns off our country's smartest, healthiest, and most moral women and people of color. For example, we do not know how many women have declined to consider joining the Army in light of the horrifying death of Spc. Vanessa Guillen.<sup>24</sup> We may never know, but we have likely missed the chance to train and develop some future senior leaders.

tension and conflict, the military can and should be a source of national unity.

A diverse and inclusive force represents American values abroad. In 1997, a Bolivian army corporal named Rodrigo Mendoza trained alongside soldiers from 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) during a training exchange in his own country.<sup>26</sup> Inspired by this experience, Mendoza completed his mandatory national military service, moved to Puerto Rico, enlisted in the 82nd Airborne Division, gained U.S.

citizenship, and eventually earned a Special Forces green beret of his own. Every day, diverse and cohesive teams of soldiers across the world represent the democratic values that make America strong. And while these exchanges are meant to build partner capacity,

to balance “people” and “readiness” in their units. Specifically, diversity and inclusion within the military are vital strategic assets that keep our force strong and set our Nation apart on the global stage. However—beyond strategy—diversity, inclusion,

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not recruit foreign citizens, Mendoza’s story demonstrates the reach and impact of American values. Without this reach, we would not only lose influence abroad but also present adversaries with opportunities to undermine our Nation’s credibility.

As an organization that has declared “People First!,” we have an obligation to follow through on this promise by ensuring respect and decency across our formations.<sup>27</sup> And ultimately, a diverse Army will attract the best of America’s next generation when they see themselves in the chain of command and know they have equal opportunities to lead and advance.

Leaders who look at the Army’s top priority, “People First!,” in a strategic context are well-prepared

tolerance, respect, and fair opportunities are essential rights for all people. Leaders who disagree with the idea that diversity is a strategic asset have no less responsibility to ensure inclusion at their level. It is their legal and ethical responsibility.

This article’s strategic context is a new way for leaders to think about diversity, but at the end of the day, these justifications are not the reason the U.S. Army takes care of its people. We take care of our people because it is right, because we care, and because they deserve it.

The Army is fortunate to have leaders who have the heart to take care of people today and the perspective to understand the long-term impacts of unit culture on military readiness. ■

## Notes

1. As of 17 February 2021, U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) includes 230,444 active component soldiers and 188,091 U.S. Army Reserve soldiers. An additional 334,542 Army National Guard soldiers are not formally in FORSCOM’s chain of command but fall within FORSCOM’s training and readiness oversight responsibility for the Total Force. These numbers total 755,039 personnel.

2. Army Regulation 525-30, *Army Strategic and Operational Readiness* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2020), 2.

3. Army Regulation 10-87, *Army Commands, Army Service Component Commands, and Direct Reporting Units* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2017), 2.

4. Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher C. Miller memorandum, “Actions to Improve Racial and Ethnic Diversity and Inclusion in the U.S. Military,” 17 December 2020, accessed 5 April 2021, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Dec/18/2002554854/-1/-1/0/ACTIONS-TO-IMPROVE-RACIAL-AND-ETHNIC-DIVERSITY-AND-INCLUSION-IN-THE-U.S.-MILITARY.PDF>.

5. See also Kristy N. Kamarck, *Diversity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity in the Armed Services: Background and Issues for Congress*,

Congressional Research Service (CRS) No. R44321 (Washington, DC: CRS, 23 December 2015).

6. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin memorandum, “Stand-Down to Address Extremism in the Ranks,” 5 February 2021, accessed 5 April 2021, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Feb/05/2002577485/-1/-1/0/STAND-DOWN-TO-ADDRESS-EXTREMISM-IN-THE-RANKS.PDF>.

7. U.S. Const. art. XIV, § 1.

8. Secretary of Defense, “Stand-Down to Address Extremism in the Ranks.”

9. “Resume of Service Career of Roscoe Robinson, Jr., General,” General Officer Management Office, accessed 5 April 2021 (CAC access required), <https://www.gomo.army.mil/ext/portal/Officer/Resumes.aspx?Ltr=R&Type=Deceased>.

10. “General Colin Luther Powell,” General Officer Management Office, accessed 5 April 2021 (CAC access required), <https://www.gomo.army.mil/ext/portal/Officer/Resumes.aspx?Ltr=P&Type=Retired>.

11. Clyde Haberman, “Becoming an American Citizen, the Hardest Way,” *New York Times*, 18 September 2007; Jeff Papworth, “Local Gold Star Mother Remembers Son’s Commitment to Serving His Country,” *Idaho State Journal*, 6 November 2019; Karen Tumulty, “Kareem Rashad Sultan Khan,” *Time*, 19 October 2008; Mark Steil,

"Soldier from North Mankato Killed in Iraq," Minnesota Public Radio News, 8 August 2007.

12. "Welcome to GOMO," U.S. Army General Officer Management Office database, accessed 5 April 2021 (CAC access required), <https://www.gomo.army.mil/>.

13. This is a frequent topic in Army leadership discussions. For example, see "Leaders Listen, Act on Diversity and Safety Issues," Association of the United States Army, 23 July 2020, accessed 5 April 2021, <https://www.ausa.org/news/leaders-listen-act-diversity-and-safety-issues>. During a virtual town hall on 22 July 2020, Gen. James McConville, the chief of staff of the Army, said, "We have to make sure, as leaders, that every single soldier in our Army is treated with dignity and respect, and every single soldier is taken care of."

14. "Unconscious Bias," University of California, San Francisco, accessed 5 April 2021, <https://diversity.ucsf.edu/resources/unconscious-bias>. "Unconscious biases are social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness." The Army has taken steps to eliminate the potential unconscious bias, sometimes called implicit bias, in the organization's decision-making. One example is through its removal of photos in promotion boards, as described in Kyle Rempfer, "Army Ditches Officer Promotion Photos as Part of an Effort to Eliminate Unconscious Bias," *Army Times* (website), 25 June 2020, accessed 6 April 2021, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2020/06/25/army-ditches-promotion-photos-as-part-of-an-effort-to-eliminate-unconscious-bias/>; Merriam-Webster, s.v. "microaggression," accessed 26 March 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/microaggression>.

15. For example, see guides such as Derald Wing Sue, *Facilitating Difficult Race Discussions* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, n.d.), accessed 5 April 2021, [https://www.colorado.edu/center/teaching-learning/sites/default/files/attached-files/facilitating\\_difficult\\_race\\_discussions.pdf](https://www.colorado.edu/center/teaching-learning/sites/default/files/attached-files/facilitating_difficult_race_discussions.pdf); Elizabeth P. Cable, *Conversations that Matter: A How-to Guide for Hosting Discussions About Race, Racism, and Public Health* (Charlotte, NC: The Lee Institute; Omaha: CityMatch, 2012), accessed 5 April 2021, [http://www.leeinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/FINAL\\_CityMatCHField-Guide.pdf](http://www.leeinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/FINAL_CityMatCHField-Guide.pdf).

16. Todd C. Helms et al., *Life as a Private: A Study of the Motivations and Experiences of Junior Enlisted Personnel in the U.S. Army* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018). The study found soldiers join the Army for family, institutional, and occupational reasons, including a call to serve, perception of honor, thirst for adventure, and pay and benefits.

17. Dori Meinert, "Is It Time to Talk About Race and Religion at Work?," Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 28

November 2017, accessed 5 April 2021, <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/1217/Pages/is-it-time-to-talk-about-race-and-religion-at-work.aspx>. The SHRM "Better Workplaces, Better World" initiative advocates that the workplace is one of the best places for discussions about diversity and inclusion because "work is one of the most desegregated environments in American society."

18. Ella Bell Smith et al., *Easing Racial Tensions at Work* (New York: Center for Talent Innovation, 2017), accessed 5 April 2021, [https://www.talentinnovation.org/private/assets/EasingRacialTensions\\_Infographic-CTI.pdf](https://www.talentinnovation.org/private/assets/EasingRacialTensions_Infographic-CTI.pdf). Analysis from the Center for Talent Innovation shows employees benefit and feel more comfortable when they feel they can discuss race relations. The report also acknowledges Black, White, and Asian (notably, not Latino) employees who say "it is never acceptable at their companies to speak out about experiences of bias" feel more isolated and/or alienated at work.

19. The White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2021), 22, accessed 5 April 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

20. Joint Doctrine Note 2-19, *Strategy* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 10 December 2019), v.

21. *Ibid.*, vii.

22. The White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*.

23. David Vergun, "Army Sees Challenges Ahead to Recruiting Future Soldiers," *Army.mil*, 25 August 2015, accessed 5 April 2021, [https://www.army.mil/article/154299/Army\\_sees\\_challenges\\_ahead\\_to\\_recruiting\\_future\\_soldiers/](https://www.army.mil/article/154299/Army_sees_challenges_ahead_to_recruiting_future_soldiers/).

24. Kay Jones and Ray Sanchez, "Pfc. Vanessa Guillen Bludgeoned to Death on Army Base, Family Attorney Says," *CNN*, 3 July 2020, accessed 5 April 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/02/us/vanessa-guillen-fort-hood-disappearance/index.html>.

25. "February 2021 Reagan National Defense Survey," Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institution, accessed 5 April 2021, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan-institute/centers/peace-through-strength/reagan-institute-national-defense-survey/>. The survey found public trust in the U.S. military had declined from 70 percent in 2018 to 56 percent in 2021. In both years, the military ranked ahead of law enforcement, the presidency, the Supreme Court, public schools, news media, and Congress.

26. David Chace, "Where This Brotherhood Began," *Army.mil*, 14 March 2012, accessed 5 April 2021, [https://www.army.mil/article/75608/where\\_this\\_brotherhood\\_began](https://www.army.mil/article/75608/where_this_brotherhood_began).

27. Marie Pihulic, "CSA: Put People First, Winning Follows," *Army.mil*, 1 October 2020, accessed 5 April 2021, [https://www.army.mil/article/239597/csa\\_put\\_people\\_first\\_winning\\_follows](https://www.army.mil/article/239597/csa_put_people_first_winning_follows).