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Put Them in Boots: Antiblackness in Military Higher Education at the United States Military Academy West Point

Dr. Khadija Boyd

Equality has been expounded upon by high-ranking military leaders since segregation was eliminated and the equal opportunity program was enacted ensuring that all military personnel were viewed and treated equally without prejudice. However, anti-blackness is a crisis for Black men and women who don the uniform at military academic institutions of higher education which has illustrated a sense of impartiality for Black cadets. Military colorblindness, the belief that dismisses racism in the military, is frequently used by white men in the top ranks because these leaders do not see racism as a problem. Military colorblindness only intensifies specific challenges that Black cadets and future Soldier's face in an organization whose entire framework was built on white supremacy.

Keywords: Military colorblindness; Antiblackness, Army, Racism, Military Academy

Racism and the United States Military Academy West Point

The epidemic of racism continues to affect the military just as it continues its affliction on society. At several military institutions of higher education, it has been reported that Black cadets are forced to withstand an environment of cultural insensitivity, hostility, and discrimination hindering their growth and full potential while possibly sustaining long-term effects of racial battle fatigue. The continuous exertion of racism in military higher education has been made grotesquely clear in recent public testimonies by Black cadets at the United States Military Academy West Point (USMAWP). Founded in 1802, the USMAWP is a four-year, co-educational, liberal arts college that offers scholarship to future Army Officers through an academic/military hybrid learning environment. At the USMAWP cadets are expected to master the curriculum, overcome social differences, build camaraderie and bonds through shared lived experiences, and live the Army's core values. This general framework is common in private and public institutions of higher learning only differing in the preparation for military service post-graduation.

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With an 11% admittance rate, those who are accepted have an SAT score between 1140-1350 or an average ACT score of 27-33 (USMAWP, 2020), creating a clear indicator that the upcoming academic requirements do not make space for mediocrity. In 2019 the USMAWP screened a pool of over 12,300 applicants and selected only 1,190 cadets, of which only 180 were Black (Public Affairs West Point, 2019). According to enrollment officials, the average cadet diversity population consists of an average and 63% white population and 12% Black population (USMAWP, 2019). Institutions of higher learning can be identified by their racial compositions. Based on this racial structure, the USMAWP is a Predominately White Institution (PWI) whose Black representation has only increased by 4.4% since 1999.

The purpose of this acknowledgment stems from much more than the number of white cadets as compared to Black cadets. The patterns of direct and indirect acts of racial oppression toward Black cadets make it significant in light of historical and recent events as an indicator that Black cadets must circumnavigate white supremacy as a means of survival while attending the USMAWP. Since the military is a representation of its society, a focus should be placed on military educational institutions where unchecked instances of racism are being shrouded in secrecy to maintain the elitism of the institution. Military intuitions of higher education should also be recognized so that the faculty, staff, and other leaders who are determined to uphold traditions rooted in white supremacy can no longer be given the space for racism to go unheeded. Furthermore, the concept that antiblackness in military higher education goes undetected and even more so overlooked by the outside world due to the charm and status associated with the military uniform.

Semantically, the uniform can be seen by the public as protection and camouflage not only from enemy forces but also from internal threats. Lastly, to put an end to newly promoted Army officers entering into the ranks of the military hierarchical structure with the intent on carrying out the same acts of oppression that were allowed to flourish at the academy. Therefore, this perspective of recognizing antiblackness at the USMAWP is pivotal to the work for tangible change at military institutions of higher education and the Army more broadly. The purpose of this article is to solidify the conceptual aspect of military colorblindness and deconstruct the cultural foundation of antiblackness as the De facto system at the USMAWP to gain insight into how Black cadets are entrenched in racism, and how racism thrives at the USMAWP.

Trigger Warning: The content beyond this point will involve descriptions of lived experiences of racism which may be emotionally and intellectually challenging to engage in.

In Exchange for Your Service

Enslaved Black men have taken part in America's warfighting since the Revolutionary War by supporting the side that offered the greatest chance to escape slavery (Elder et al. 2010; Webb & Herman, 2002). In 1775, Virginia's British Royal Governor, Lord Dunmore, delivered a decree stating that he would free any enslaved Black man who served in the British forces, causing an increase in Black military service (Elder et al. 2010; Webb & Herman, 2002). During the War of 1812, enslaved Black men fought in the Battle of New Orleans with the promise of freedom, and were also offered the same bounties, pay, and 160-acre land grant as their white counterparts (Webb & Herman, 2002). At the beginning of the Civil War, statements made by Alfred M. Green, Charles Sumner, and Frederick Douglass may have made Black men more inclined to serve. These esteemed figures presented Black military service as an opportunity to gain racial equality, financial stability through the Union Army Pension Social Program, and citizen rights (Wilson, 2010). Black men immediately offered their services to the nation for their emancipation to bring chattel slavery to an end.

During World War I & II, Black men fought in the Army, which remained segregated, and took on their responsibilities while still being confronted with racial discrimination in exchange for the promise of a learned skill set, military pension, and benefits to provide a more honorable way of living (Elder et al., 2010). Post 9/11, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom have created a path of opportunity for many Black Americans by providing monetary enlistment bonuses, skill training, educational benefits, loan repayments, medical and dental care, housing assistance, child-care, household maintenance, clothing allowances, and consumer subsidies. Black Americans, as a socially marginalized group, are more likely to enlist than whites (Elder, 2010) because the incentives are more appealing to individuals from systemically disadvantaged backgrounds. Over the years, Black service members have been tormented, treated unfairly, and murdered for simply wearing the uniform (National Archives, 2019). To most, the long-term benefits supersede the historical likelihood of enduring antiblack military terrorism that they could endure. So, when the USMAWP, one of the most prestigious academic military institutions, offers a full scholarship in exchange for your service, it is hard for most to reject a chance for socioeconomic advancement and the respect that is associated with the credentials of the academy.

Chronic and Continuous Exposure to Racist Events

With such a small Black representation at the USMAWP and the Equal Opportunity (EO) framework being used as a broad effort to increase human potential (AR 600-20, 2020), there is still no guarantee of fairness to ensure Black cadets are being treated fairly and equally. There is also no guarantee that Black cadets are

reaching their full learning potential without being obstructed by barriers created by biases, prejudices, and systemic racism. Black cadets entering the dining facility and campus library have chattel slavery forced down their throats with portraits of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee memorialized in full confederate uniform with an enslaved Black man guiding his white horse. (Byrn & Royal, 2020). Black cadets don't have the pleasure of resting easy in their bunks at night as they sleep then awake in the Lee Barracks. The USMAWP romanticizes the legacy of the Confederate general as a graduate and superintendent of the academy, all while ignoring the fact that he fought to keep Black people in chains. Leadership dismisses complaints and the demands to have his name removed under the guise of "upholding tradition" with the contextualized argument that confederate statues, flags, and monuments are American history and not symbols of racial oppression.

At football games, Black cadets see, hear, and chant the academy football team motto of "God Forgives Brothers Don't," which was removed by the academy in 2019 due to its connection to white extremist groups including the Aryan Brotherhood (Diaz, 2019). Hate has been on display during the Army/Navy football game in 2019 where cadets were televised showing the "ok" hand gesture, which according to the Anti-Defamation League (2019), is a symbol meaning white power used by many extremists and white supremacists. Since the integration of the academy and in the 52 years of the EO program's existence, there has been no significant movement forward in dismantling white supremacy and creating a conducive learning environment for Black cadets at the USMAWP. While the USMAWP may admit Black people, there are still many ways Black cadets are not fully accepted, including the lack of curriculum addressing antiblackness and how to actively be anti-racist. Such a curriculum has never been established at the institution with apocryphal confidence that the mention of racism, white supremacy, and privilege breeds hostility because "not all white people are racist".

Military Colorblindness

A common military cultural phrase used to ignore race and dismiss race-related incidents is "I don't see color, I only see green.". This cultural phrase has been recently conceptualized by Dr. Khadija Boyd as military colorblindness. Although this phrase may have been well-intentioned however, the comment in itself is discriminatory. Military colorblindness allows racism to thrive because it is easier to erase the differences in others rather than having to accept them. After all, in many inviable ways, whiteness is implied and the only acceptable standard in American culture and institutions. Military colorblindness is an expansion to colorblind theory which highlights white privilege and identifies the connections between the acceptance of blatant racial acts and coping mechanisms (Offermann et al., 2014). Therefore, "I don't see color" only translates to "I don't want to see you because my whiteness allows me the privilege to not see you". Military

colorblindness is also connected to Critical Race Theory, which addresses colorblindness by focusing on how racism is so ingrained into American society, that it has become the social norm for discrimination to exist (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Savas, 2014). Therefore, the theoretical aspect of military colorblindness delivers a false semblance of objectivity, which intensifies the sense of white ascendancy and supports the normative racial ideology of the historical context of colorblind and Critical Race Theory.

Moreover, the acceptance of military colorblindness as the organizational cultures raceless norm limits racial awareness and actively undermines military doctrine by institutionalizing the centering of white comfort. Military colorblindness uses the importance of successful completion of military training/missions as its foundation, and to cease operational training over racial incidents is inconceivable. The idea of “I don’t see color” only intensifies specific challenges that Black cadets face in an organization whose entire framework was built on white supremacy. So, how can this PWI which has historically subscribed to the ideology of white supremacy expect that the majority of their cadets who have grown up in white families in predominately white neighborhoods and mingle in predominately white social groups, to understand and accept the differences in others when they have never been provided the space to do so? For every overt racial act that the USMAWP thinks has vanished, there are thousands of contemporary microaggressive acts of violence that seek to keep Black cadets from reaching their full academic potential.

One of the biggest problems noted by cadets/service members is that white men in the top positions do not see racism as a problem (Cooper, 2020). Military colorblind leaders are reluctant to believe or are in denial that racism exists in the military. Also, believe that discussing racism only delaminates comradery and diminishes the team-building effort. Military colorblind leaders believe that the mission outweighs any racially fueled incident that may occur, hindering the opportunity to create space for systemic change of the organizational culture. In July 2019, General John E. Hyten, the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a Senate committee that “Racism in the military was a thing of the past compared with the issue of sexism.” He then added, “Now when I am in uniform, I feel colorblind, which is amazing” (Cooper, 2020). This statement not only belittles the lived experiences of Black cadets but denies that racism is not a crisis for Black men and women in uniform, is problematic, and counterproductive since terms like “night ranger” which refers to Black Soldiers’ skin tone, and “non-swimmer,” which is used as a racial slur referring to the age-old stereotype that Black people cannot swim, are still used toward Black cadets and Soldiers during training events.

In August 2017, the Army Chief of Staff General James C. McConville tweeted that “the Army doesn’t tolerate racism, extremism, or hatred, it goes against our values and everything we’ve stood for since 1775.” (Doubek, 2017). This statement

is not only false, but it is dismissive of the documented historical acts of racial violence towards Black cadets and Soldiers. Such acts include but are not limited to the mass hangings of the 19 Black Soldiers in Camp Logan (Jeffery, 2017). At Fort Benning, Georgia in 1941 Private Felix Hall, a Black Soldier who is the only known lynching to happen on a military installation was found hanged after arguing with his white superior (Mills, 2016). To Isaiah Nixon, Daniel Mack, L.B Reed, John Green, Robert Truett, and the countless others who were targeted by anti-black military terrorism which ended in death by white civilians, white officers, and other white enlisted personnel while they served.

These statements are also contemptuous to the legacies of the Black cadets who paved the way at the USMAWP. James Webster Smith, the first Black cadet admitted into USMAWP in 1870, was expelled one class short of graduation by a professor who unjustly gave him a failing grade (Stillwell, 2019). Henry Ossian Flipper, the first Black man to graduate from USMAWP who was later court-martialed after being falsely accused of embezzlement, and later pardoned by President Bill Clinton in 1999 after it was found that racism played a part in his trial (National Archives, 2017). Flipper (1878) later wrote in his autobiography, *The Colored Cadet at West Point*, that his white peers and professors socially ostracized him during his four years at the academy. Johnson Chestnut Whittaker was attacked in his room and was found with his hands and feet bound behind his back and was later court-martialed for “propagating a hoax” (Hansen, 1999). Benjamin O. Davis became the first Black man to graduate of the USMAWP in the twentieth century but was shunned by his classmates when no one would room with or speak to him his entire four years at the academy (Hansen, 1999; Stillwell, 2020).

General James C. McConville and General John E. Hyten stands in direct contradiction to the testimonies of Black cadets recorded in 2020 during a survey conducted about the lived experiences of racism at the USMAWP. Black cadets described excessive use of the anti-black slur nigger, the violent act of being spit on, being referred to as thugs and rebellious slaves by professors, having confederate flags on full display in the living quarters, being over-policed with discriminatory punishments, the use of intimidation factors such as a noose being put on a Black cadets’ desks, and being told to go back to Africa (Bindon et al., 2020). This among other seemingly unchecked anti-black efforts to silence Black voices, discourage Black attendance, and diminish Black presence at the academy with no repercussions to the aggressors from the faculty/chain of command. First Lieutenant Simone Askew, a 2018 graduate, Rhodes Scholar, and the first Black woman to become West Point’s First Captain, wrote a phenomenological narrative about how other cadets often gave her notes with her picture with a photoshopped monkey over her face, among other racist caricatures including Satan (Bindon et al., 2020).

Not only has the organizational culture been sustained through the patterns and

history of anti-blackness which continues to manifest at this institution, but the USMAWP has sadly not metamorphosed from a blatantly racist organization or taken any necessary strides as claimed to combat racism and ensure the EO environment as directed by Army Command Policy. Instead, it is an organization of anti-Black military terrorism that bestows and allows direct and indirect violence towards Black cadets. The USMAWP hides under the guise of diversity with 180 Black cadets and military colorblindness where the privileged frequently ignore systemic, covert, and overt acts of racism because they are not personally affected by it as confirmed by the comments made by the Army Chief of Staff and the Vice Chairman to the Joint Chief of Staff. Both of these high ranking individuals have the privilege to ignore the cries of mistreatment from Black cadets and impose the ideology of white manning by allowing their white maleness and privilege to take up an alarming amount of space, leaving no consideration for Black people's lived experiences (Engram, 2021).

The Way Ahead

A summary of action manifesto has brought light to the ongoing racial division at the academy in an attempt to reject the anonymity of racism and anti-blackness within the institution. After 75 years post-integration, policies that espouse the philosophy of absolute commitment to non-discrimination and uncompromising standards of performance have failed and no significant changes have been made to support the claim that racism do is not a problem or tolerated at the USMAWP or in the military, in fact, the opposite proves to be true. Black cadets are only left with a promise, brought forth by the USMAWP superintendent, to investigate allegations and identify and rectify anything that is not in line with policy. However, the damage has been done and the perpetrators of these heinous acts are still staffed at the USMAWP or now actively serving in the Army. This promise to investigate will not magically erase the trauma that Black cadets faced and may carry generationally, nor will it account for future injustices of antiblackness. This solution is a performative non-tangible effort to pacify Blackness while making whiteness feel accomplished by continuing to toe the Long Gray Line. The USMAWP must uncompromisingly evaluate its problem with antiblackness and its military colorblind leadership tactics by setting an explicit framework that undermines the status quo. Until then to be a Black West Point graduate not only means that you accomplished the academic rigor and the physical toughness of the military training, but it also implies the survival of the academic social conditions rooted in anti-blackness, white supremacy, and other systems of oppression without having to mention it. With the understanding that Black cadets should be grateful to be given the opportunity to have done so.

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