

REPRESENT

“The Talk”

OCTOBER 2020

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Represent is a series from the CSIS International Security Program on diversity, inclusion, and representation in national security. In Part I of a two-part article for the series, Tony Johnson addresses the threat structural racism poses to U.S. foreign policy and national security and the “supply and demand” aspects of this problem.

For weeks, since I was asked to contribute to this series, I wrestled with what to write. What should I say — that has not already been said — about the [structural racism](#) that afflicts America’s national security and foreign policy establishment? Is there really a need for further explanation of the historical complexities, institutional consequences, and volatile passions at the heart of the present national debate about structural racism in our society? What more can be said about the [clear and present danger](#) that structural racism poses to U.S. foreign policy and national security, and the price we pay for letting the problem persist?

Some people will be uncomfortable with what I write here. Some people may say I did not go far enough, while others will say I went too far. It is difficult to discuss this subject at a “safe” level of truth-telling, which reveals anger, frustration, pain, and resentments that are deemed unseemly in our profession. Even for the most enlightened among us, taking on the subject of white privilege and inequities in our foreign policy and national security workforce means talking about things that make us all feel uneasy. This subject feels dangerous because we can’t know what turn the discussion will take. At the moment it’s trendy to be supportive. But I think we are all aware of the passions that threaten to turn folks off and rile things up. Anger, cynicism, fear, and guilt are powerful forces that stand in the path of any march to progress. But we must face the problem together to push through.

So now that I’ve diagnosed the potential discomforts a reader might feel, I invite you to keep an open mind and explore this topic with me in more depth. Let’s have “the talk.”

Why do I think structural racism is a threat to U.S. foreign policy and national security? What are the demand side and supply side aspects of this problem? What should be done to address the problem. What can be done by individuals to combat structural racism in the foreign policy and national security workforce? These are the questions I will address in the text that follows.

STRUCTURAL RACISM IN AMERICA'S FOREIGN POLICY AND NATIONAL SECURITY WORKFORCE

The problems facing people of color in the U.S. national security workforce are well researched and described. [Decades of institutionally-sanctioned bias](#) have discouraged minorities and talented people of color from careers in the diplomatic corps, blunted the career prospects of promising enlisted service-members and [military](#) officers, and blocked the advancement and promotion of energetic and resourceful civil servants into the senior-most ranks of [national security policy circles](#). The well-documented lack of diversity in the intelligentsia working in American foreign policy and national security think tanks is striking. Demoralizing attitudes in [academia](#) and frustrating [gaps in representation](#) at America's elite universities are facts of life for America's small cadre of foreign affairs and national security experts of color. The studies are many and compelling, and the evidence is visible to anyone who looks.

So too are highly visible [success stories](#) that we lean on to reflect the progress we have made in American race relations. But I can think of only a handful of Americans of color who have served in the Executive Branch at the highest echelons of U.S. foreign policy and national security over the last 30 years.¹ That number is anemic, and the level of participation is on the decline. Decreased participation has an impact on progress – real or imagined. A [2018 survey](#) by Inclusive America reported that 93 percent of officials running the federal government were white. About 40 percent of active duty military servicemembers are people of color, but only [two African American four-star generals](#) are among the 41 senior most military commanders. Only [18 African Americans](#) have held rank of four-star general since our nation was founded.² When one considers that the combined African American, Asian Pacific-Islander, Native American, and LatinX communities account for roughly [38 percent](#) of the total U.S. population, these statistics are puzzling – why does the problem persist?

Look at the face-pages of the leadership at any major U.S. national security organization. If you see what I see, then you see the reality we face in 2020. There is little to no racial diversity in our national security leadership today. The problem is embarrassingly apparent. Moreover, we don't just have a representation problem, there is a functional issue as well. Typically, the greatest diversity in senior civilian and military leadership is found in essential agency support and combat service support roles.³ There are far fewer people of color serving as foreign policy and national security principals or combatant commanders. The voices of people of color in high-level foreign policy and national security decisions is muted at best. To sum up, structural racism not only affects what U.S. national security leadership looks like, it affects how the engine of national security performs.

What are the consequences of doing nothing about it? We can look at the problem as issues of supply and demand. Let's start with the demand side.

¹ There is the unparalleled example of President Barack Obama; his National Security Advisor, [Dr. Susan Rice](#); Attorney General [Eric Holder](#) and his successor [Loretta Lynch](#); Secretary of Homeland Security [Jeh Johnson](#), and his Deputy [Alejandro Mayorkas](#). [Colin Powell](#) served the nation as the 65th Secretary of State under [President George W. Bush](#), and the [12th Chairman](#) of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, under [President George H.W. Bush](#). He was the first African American to hold either position. [Dr. Condoleezza Rice](#) was the first African American woman to serve as our nation's chief diplomat and lead the U.S. State Department. [Jose A. Rodriguez Jr.](#) served as CIA's Counterterrorism Center Chief and Director of the National Clandestine Service.

² Two African Americans currently hold the rank of four-star general in the United States Military, [General Charles Q. Brown Jr.](#), the newly-minted Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force, and [General Michael X. Garrett](#), Commanding General, U.S. Army Forces Command.

³ JP 4-0 defines combat service support as the essential capabilities, functions, activities, and tasks necessary to sustain all elements of all operating forces in theater at all levels of warfare. Also called CSS. (JP 4-0)

THE DEMAND SIDE AND WHAT AMERICANS OF COLOR BRING TO THE DIALOGUE ABOUT U.S. SECURITY

Are there good reasons that Americans from diverse backgrounds should have an active part in the policy dialogues that shape U.S. foreign affairs? The answer is yes.

First, diverse perspectives and insights shape policies that advance American foreign policy objectives, safeguard U.S. security interests, and promote American values. Second, foreign policy and national security leaders should be Americans whose cultural roots give them broad and deep insight into U.S. national interests and the challenges and threats to U.S. national security. Third, America's free, open, and vibrant multicultural society is a strategic asset. We need to leverage these advantages to strengthen American foreign policy and give the United States an edge in 21st century strategic competition.

There is a view that Americans of color are more interested in domestic issues than foreign policy, and this notion has some merit. But it is a fallacy to think that foreign policies of nations are separate from their domestic policies. Every country's foreign policy is heavily influenced by domestic policies and politics. Given the long history of discrimination against people of color in the United States, Americans of color are especially tuned in to the tensions and potential for conflict that can flow from the ways in which governments choose to deal with the intersection of domestic politics and foreign affairs. That greater sensitivity is a great asset in anticipating and analyzing the international actions of foreign governments.

For example, how can we understand the actions of Turkey's military against the Kurds in Syria without understanding their fear of Kurds inside Turkey? Don't we need to assess the fears of immigrants to understand the popular support for far-right parties in Germany? Would it be useful to unpack the anxiety of European migrants who sense danger in public support for Brexit in the United Kingdom? Or the fears among the people of Hungary and Poland as they watch their governments turn to autocracy and nationalism? Is there something to be learned closer to home in looking at support for building a wall along the U.S.-Mexican border? The politics and cultural sensitivities of those domestic conflicts — most of which involve the concerns of a majority group about a minority group — are complex, intense, and important.

Minorities in America face these complex domestic social tensions more frequently and from a different perspective than the majorities who have historically crafted our foreign policies. The history of Americans of color provides some insight into the forces that shape the views and politics of minority populations. Our lived experience gives us insights into civil societies abroad, and could expand U.S. understanding of government-society dynamics. [How we experience](#) and navigate the world around us makes us social barometers, natural diplomats, and shrewd analysts. It has prepared Americans of color to analyze the internal conflicts within other countries that drive so much of their international behavior. By definition, lived experience cannot be taught, and so is not something one learns at university. A foreign policy and national security workforce that includes that perspective is an empathetic, strategic asset and a force multiplier for the United States.

THE SUPPLY SIDE AND WRESTLING WITH CYNICISM

Certainly, it is right to celebrate the trailblazers and leaders whose perseverance and excellence have pushed the boundaries of progress in America's social and institutional attitudes. Their stories are inspiring. But look closer. Read their biographies. Take in the cringeworthy anecdotes that pepper the personal stories of their rise to prominence and power. What these heroes had to overcome to win a seat at the decisionmaking table, and then to navigate the rapids of power, just to do their jobs, is a compelling indicator of the promise of an America not yet realized. It's also a telling reminder that full participation in the American project still lies out of reach for so many.

I'm African American. Some of my fellow Americans of color might ask, "why should I want to get involved in foreign policy when the folks who 'made it' were treated poorly? Why should I care about national security and the trouble over there, when my personal security is threatened right here at home?" These are fair questions. I get it.

I am a national security professional with over 20 years' experience dealing with difficult questions, contradictions, and uncertainties. I don't do this alone. I am part of a team of experts who work to understand threats to the United States and to find solutions to our nation's most confounding national security challenges. We all suit up every day to do the essential work of protecting the nation, but a number of us need extra armor to get through the day.

Not only am I an American patriot, I am black, Jewish, gay, and a veteran. I embrace all those identities proudly. Each day I walk a tightrope to ensure that others view me first as a professional, and then as someone who just happens to be X, Y, or Z... The effort is a taxing reality of my working environment, a burden that my colleagues who are not "other" do not have to bear. The structural racism that has been a part of my working environment for my entire professional life is both a personal and professional reality.

It is understandable that Americans of color should be laser-focused on the most pressing domestic issues plaguing our communities — affordable healthcare, equal education, criminal justice reform, and good-paying jobs. As an African American, I am sensitive to the tensions underlying those domestic issues. I imagine white Americans may be sensitive to the ongoing policy debates flowing from demographic projections that show the U.S. population will become a [minority-majority country by 2045](#).

CONCLUSION

In 1857, Frederick Douglass delivered a [speech](#) in which he said: "[people] may lie down until [they] ha[ve] sense enough to stand up," and "power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." Americans of color must be full participants in the dialogue about where, when, and how the United States acts abroad. Our perspectives should be integral to U.S. foreign policy and national decisionmaking at every level of government, from the White House Situation Room to the halls of Congress to the E ring of the Pentagon. Our perspectives ensure that U.S. security policy is not blind to the cultural factors and nuances that influence foreign relations. Without multicultural perspectives and advice, our leaders will make important decisions about American foreign policy [through a mirror darkly](#).

On Friday in Part II of this article, the author will discuss some ways to address bias and structural racism in the foreign affairs and national security workforce.

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Anthony “Tony” Johnson is the Strategic Red Team Chief in the Joint Advanced Warfighting Division at the Institute for Defense Analyses. A 20-year veteran of the national security field, Tony specializes in U.S. special operations and Irregular Warfare policy, Defense Institution Building, and Security Sector Assistance. His expertise and experience include defense strategy and policy, operations planning and military capabilities assessments, Joint Forces concept development and experimentation.

Tony began his career as a U.S. Navy Officer, serving on the staff of Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Europe, and in Direct Support signals intelligence Units of the U.S. 6th Fleet. Since then he has served in a number of national security roles, including DoD Advisor and U.S. Security Governance Initiative Country Team Director for Ghana and Niger at the U.S. Department of State (2015-2017), Advisor for Special Operations and Irregular Warfare in the office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict (2011-2013), Deputy Chief of Staff to the Director for Technology Transition at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, as well as a policy and research advisor to the Defense Science Board (2006-2008). In addition, Tony has led multidisciplinary teams serving nondefense agencies of the U.S. federal government, including the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Department of the Treasury, U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Tony is a passionate advocate of greater diversity and inclusion in the U.S. foreign and national security policy communities. He is a dedicated mentor to young people who look to build careers in public service – civilian and military. Tony joined the Truman National Security Project in 2013. He co-founded the TruDiversity Initiative, a community of Truman members who are champions of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the U.S. foreign policy and national security profession.

Tony holds an M.A. in International Security Studies from Georgetown University’s Walsh School of Foreign Service, and a B.A. from Norwich University. He is currently pursuing postgraduate studies in Public Policy and Leadership in the Executive Education Program at the Harvard Kennedy School. Tony is a 2016 Institute for Defense Analyses Scholar, and a 2012 Aspen Ideas Festival Scholar, and Chairman Emeritus of the Board of Fellows for the College of Liberal Arts at Norwich University. In December 2018, Tony was honored as one of 35 [Black American National Security & Foreign Policy Next Generation Leaders](#) “making a difference in the national security sector” by the Diversity in National Security Network; and in April 2020 he was invited to join the Advisory Council of the Global Special Operations Forces Foundation.

Tony grew up in Las Vegas, NV. He currently lives in Washington, DC with his husband, Juan.

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