

# REPRESENT

## A Call for Persistence

APRIL 2021

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*Represent is a series from the CSIS International Security Program on diversity, inclusion, and representation in national security. In this piece, Simone Williams reflects on the intersection of racism and national security, and the need to invest time, funding, and intention to fully achieve equality and inclusion in the national security community.*

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Each February, we recognize and celebrate Black History Month. Founded in 1926 as “[Negro History Week](#)” by Dr. Carter Woodson, it originally took place in the second week of February to include the celebration of President Lincoln’s and Fredrick Douglass’ birthdays. President Ford extended the week to be a month-long celebration in 1976. Since I was a child, I have dedicated every February to learning something new. For me, Black History Month has always been a time to learn, recognize, and celebrate the contribution of Black people throughout history. It is a reminder that Black history is American history, and our history is more than slavery. It is important to recognize how slavery has impacted our country, our institutions, and our policies. However, as we reflect, we must also look forward to change. We must be intentional and fair about the continuous representation and incorporation of Black Americans in all aspects of society.

As a professional in national security, Black History Month is a reminder that racism is embedded in our society and manifests itself as a threat to our national security. In the same way that we should not think of Black history as separate from American history, we cannot divorce race issues from security. Unlike traditional external threats to U.S. security, racism is an internal threat. It is a socially created construct that can be eliminated but persists because we fail to acknowledge and confront the damaging role it plays in our institutions and policies. If you look at any security issue carefully, you will see how racism affects it. Few people recognize the full extent to which racism touches both our society and security. It impacts the development of new technologies and capabilities, damages U.S. credibility, and is weaponized by our adversaries to be used against us. While these challenges persist, they provide an opportunity to extract lessons that can be used to help move the needle toward progress.

The development and advancement of technology, especially machine learning, is consistently at risk of replicating prejudice and discriminatory behavior if we fail to recognize the impact of race and unconscious bias. In 2015, [Google](#) faced heavy criticism when its facial recognition technology labeled two African Americans as gorillas in Google Photos. More worryingly, facial recognition technology used by [Customs and Border Protection](#) was found to have racial and gender bias in its software. In a post for the Council on Foreign Relations, former Department of Homeland Security senior policy adviser Camille Stewart outlined how [systemic racism is a threat to cybersecurity](#) and noted the importance of incorporating anti-racism and diversity into technology policy and development. To combat bias in technology we must be vigilant. Machine learning is not perfect, and if we are not intentional about considering the role of race in the development of technology, we risk perpetuating the negative effects and influence of racism.

[Lessons](#) from the cases above and others illustrate the importance of maintaining humans in the decisionmaking process to review and provide feedback on unintended bias rather than relying solely on autonomous decisions by artificial intelligence. In addition to the decisionmaking process, it is crucial that the tech sector promote a diverse workforce and design intentional and thoughtful machine learning technologies that help mitigate bias.

From facial recognition technology to the State Department, instances of racism continue to permeate national security. A recent [GAO report](#) found that there are persistent barriers to advancing diversity in the State Department. U.S. credibility on the international stage is questioned when its diplomatic core is not representative of its society and when domestic strife over racial issues force allies to question U.S. resolve and focus. When people of color are not at the table, America is not fully represented. Furthermore, the lack of a diverse diplomatic core and the effects of racism can implicitly influence our foreign policy. The main recommendation from the GAO report recognizes the importance of change directed by leadership, consistent acknowledgment of barriers, and the need to take steps to address diversity issues.

Finally, racial injustice is not a thing of the past. Rather it is a [vulnerability](#) that weakens our democracy and continuously makes our institutions and processes more susceptible to foreign interference. Evidence suggests that race played a factor in Russia's attack on the 2016 elections. By aggravating injustice that was already present, Russia exploited the effect of racism in the United States and disproportionately [targeted minorities](#) with the intent to foster greater distrust in our institutions and democracy. Race continues to be a national security issue and a tool for our adversaries to exploit.

These are only a few examples of the many ways in which race impacts various aspects of our national security. While it is worth acknowledging these incidences, we need to prevent the repetition of history. Whether it is machine learning replicating human biases or adversaries fragmenting our confidence in institutions on the basis of racial strife, we must acknowledge the impact of racism on our national security and foreign policy, move beyond reflection, and advocate for change to ensure these problems do not endure. Numerous studies have proven that diversity [strengthens](#) and improves groups, leads to [innovative](#) thinking, and prevents groupthink. If we are to truly take the next step to becoming a *more perfect Union*, we need to address head on the role of race in America. Just as the issues are not new, neither are the solutions. In the same way that we celebrate Black History Month annually, we must continually amplify and advance representation of people of color and all types of diversity at all levels. Furthermore, we must be intentional and persistent in our anti-racist efforts. Otherwise, our racial issues will not go away. While these challenges may appear daunting, progress is being made. In a promising development, advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion is at the forefront of the Biden administration. President Biden's first [executive orders](#) included [overturning](#) an executive order from the Trump administration that prohibited federal diversity trainings. In addition to policy changes, President Biden has also prioritized diversity in his nominations as well. His cabinet picks have illustrated what an intentional commitment to diversity should look like. As a result, the Biden administration is on track to become the most diverse administration of modern-day presidents.

Several senior national security officials within the administration have also made it a point to investigate and take action on the effects of race. On February 4, shortly after being confirmed, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin ordered a [stand down](#) to address extremism throughout the Department of Defense (DoD). During her confirmation hearing Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks, noted "[violent extremism, systematic racism... and other inhibitors](#)" as factors that impact military readiness. Even at the service level within DoD, leadership is advocating for change. The Department of the Air Force directed [a review of unit emblems and symbols](#) to ensure diversity and inclusion within the service. In ordering this review, Air Force leadership highlighted that derogatory symbols and language ostracizes

group cohesion and impedes mission readiness. Further, separate oversight has even been given to the Air Force Inspector General to conduct an additional [independent review](#) of racial, gender, and ethnic disparities in the service. In the State Department, Secretary Antony Blinken is taking a top-down and bottom-up approach to addressing diversity and inclusion. He [announced](#) the creation of a chief diversity and inclusion officer, a new senior leadership position, and is charging bureaus to dedicate an existing deputy assistant secretary to oversee diversity and inclusion efforts.

These are all promising efforts, especially from the highest levels of leadership in national security-focused departments. But we must keep going and be intentional about our approach at all levels. Racism is not going to disappear in a day, or after a single initiative or review. Progress is in the DNA of our country, and to truly be just, we must continue to take action beyond this moment. Combating racism is a daily issue. While it is good and important to use Black History Month to reflect, commemorate, and educate ourselves about the contributions of Black Americans, we must recognize that addressing racism and working to make society better is a perpetual task.

Dedicated efforts to improve diversity at all levels will not only make us a better country by acknowledging our faults and improving ourselves domestically, but it will strengthen our foreign policy credibility, national security, and truly make us a country that is representative of all our people. It takes time, funding, and persistence; but we need to continue to be intentional. Race relations are challenging, but as we continue to learn and grapple with how to best move forward, we will be one step closer to affecting change. One day, when we no longer use race to differentiate ourselves, we will remove a threat to our security. The late Georgia congressman and civil rights icon John Lewis once said, “Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime.” As we continue to recognize the impact of race, we can enact change that will build a more equitable society and ultimately enhance our national security and foreign policy enterprise.

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