

REPRESENT

Our Armed Forces' Strength Depends on Diversity

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Represent is a series from the CSIS International Security Program on diversity, inclusion, and representation in national security. In this article, Stevan Molinar, a former U.S. Army Infantry Officer, highlights the deep history and interconnectedness of the U.S. education system and military and argues why affirmative action is necessary for the diversity and success of the U.S. military.

Diverse teams are [smarter](#), and there exists a plethora of scientific research detailing the [benefits of diversity in problem-solving](#). However, our U.S. military officer corps remains [the least diverse group in our armed forces](#). [According to 2018 Pentagon data](#), just 10 percent of the officer corps was Black and 8.6 percent was Hispanic with that disparity widening as rank increases. This inhibits our warfighting capabilities and capacity to tackle the complex problems facing our nation in the 21st century. And while [the US military is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion](#), our armed forces' capacity to integrate the American population into its ranks depends on programs designed to increase diversity: affirmative action in schools.

The United States Supreme Court has decided to rehear cases opposing affirmative action. However, should the Court decide to strike down affirmative action, this will not only harm the United States' education system, but will debilitate the U.S. military's capability to diversify its forces and confront complex international problems.

The U.S. military commissions the [majority of its officers from military service academies, Reserve Officer Training Corps \(ROTC\), and Officer Candidate School programs](#)—that require either a 4-year college degree or some time spent in university classes. Essentially, our officers are educated in American universities and develop their critical thinking skills in the classroom for the battlefield. Additionally, as an officer's career progresses, many return to study in masters and PhD programs and may be [required](#) to do so for command. Essentially, universities serve as an incubation chamber for our national security leaders.

Not only does the military *need to diversify its own officer corps* to improve its effectiveness and represent the American population, our national security *requires military officers to work, study, and socialize in diverse environments* to confront a complex global security environment.

As the U.S. military struggles to diversify its officer corps, its capability to integrate and educate its commissioned officers will be hindered by our education system's inability to diversify its student population through affirmative action. Fundamentally, ending affirmative action will harm our national security interests.

THE DEBATE AROUND AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Affirmative action's origins date back to the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. During that era, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations took concrete steps to combat racial discrimination in all areas of American life. The phrase “affirmative action” comes from [President Kennedy's Executive Order 10925](#) requiring government contractors to take “affirmative action” to ensure employees are treated equally regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin. This was the result of decades of work by civil rights organizations to tear down Jim Crow policies that discriminated against people of color. [Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.](#) saw affirmative action as one of many policies that could help integrate America and heal our racial polarization. Lobbied by civil rights organizations and motivated by King and Kennedy's legacies, President Johnson carried on these efforts with [Executive Order 11246](#), charging the Secretary of Labor with administering affirmative action.

Opponents of diversity and affirmative action programs rely on two main arguments. The first one is a promise of becoming a “[color-blind](#)” nation or that the most effective method to end racial discrimination is to be “blind” to race. No racial identification, no way to discriminate. However, this method relies on a “race-blindness” which ignores racial disparities. How are you able to identify the lack of Black, Latino, and Asian American officers in our military if you do not identify race? It is a “see no evil” approach that unintentionally permits racial disparities to persist by ignoring them. Affirmative action, on the other hand, works to bridge these gaps through an acknowledgment of those racial disparities and taking “affirmative action” to recruit and retain people from all backgrounds.

The [second argument against affirmative action](#) is that it continues Jim Crow segregation by identifying someone based on their racial or ethnic background. However, this argument is a misrepresentation of what segregation was. Segregation was a policy designed to *exclude* Black, Latino, Asian, and Native Americans and deprive them of resources that were afforded to White Americans. Diversity, equity, and inclusion programs are designed to be *inclusive* of people from underrepresented backgrounds. Segregation *upheld* racial hierarchies and affirmative action *dismantles* racial hierarchies.

In fact, striking down affirmative action programs increases racial disparities. In 1996, California banned affirmative action. Research shows that this ban [harmed AAPI admission rates to California universities](#) and [lowered enrollment levels of Black and Hispanic students](#). We have a shared goal of integrating our country and ending racial polarization, but banning affirmative action outright has the opposite effect.

WHY DOES THE U.S. MILITARY NEED AFFIRMATIVE ACTION?

The Court found diversity to be a “compelling governmental interest” and has upheld that ruling for nearly a half-century since [California v. Bakke](#). The U.S. military has depended on this precedent to rebuild its forces after the Vietnam War [when only 2 percent of military officers were Black](#). In [Grutter v. Bollinger](#), the Court affirmed the military's interest in upholding affirmative action, “In order to cultivate a set of leaders with legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry, it is necessary that the path to leadership be visibly open to talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity.” This interest—[with the support of retired military leaders](#)—was reaffirmed in [Texas v. Fisher](#) where the Supreme Court upheld the admissions practices of recruiting students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. These rulings have empowered the U.S. military to transform its forces into the effective fighting force it is today with much work remaining.

Extensive research shows militaries that treat racial and ethnic groups as second-class citizens suffer more loss in battle. “[Unequal militaries have a 75 percent chance of suffering more casualties](#) than those inflicted on the enemy, compared with a 25 percent chance for more egalitarian belligerents.” Therefore, we have a national security interest to diversify our armed forces to be more egalitarian. In fact, [diverse organizations are shown to outperform their less diverse counterparts](#) and [can improve productivity in the armed forces](#).

Again, this *requires* the U.S. military to recruit from diverse backgrounds. And that fertile ground our armed forces depend on to cultivate our future leaders are American universities—schools that use affirmative action as a tool to diversify its student population.

But universities and schools not only serve as a *critical pipeline* for recruiting and diversifying America’s military officer corps: they also serve as a *critical environment* necessary to educate military leaders.

When we engage with foreign adversaries, we depend on foreign allies. Our allies’ diversity requires us to retain officers capable of forming alliances, building trust, and cooperating with diverse cultures. Not only should we communicate in a local language, but we must also understand cultural nuances, similarities, and differences to build trust. [Diverse educational environments have proven](#) to build that confidence in engaging with diverse populations and diversity remains [important to building](#) empathy, understanding, and open-mindedness.

Lastly, a diverse military is important for [civil-military relations](#). Military leaders must represent the same population it swears to defend. The authority from which our government draws its legitimacy and power is from the people. The military cannot maintain its democratic legitimacy if its leaders and key decision makers reinforce racial disparities in power and leadership. Americans must trust its armed forces and part of that trust requires our military to adhere to the fundamental American principle that all are created equal.

I attended University of Nevada Las Vegas, the [nation’s most diverse campus](#), and I firmly believe the people I met there enabled me to become an effective leader in the U.S. Army. All my strengths have come from those around me, and throughout my life it has always beneficial to meet and befriend different people from different backgrounds. I continue to seek out meeting new people, to always improve myself, and learn something new from someone else. Diversity is America’s strength.

- Steven Molinar

IN SUMMARY

Affirmative action is not always practiced perfectly, and neither are all diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. These programs can be awkward, poorly enacted, and inadequate. And there exist other obstacles to diversifying schools such as [legacy admissions](#), [unfair housing practices](#), and [socio-economic disparities](#). However, affirmative action programs are still a necessary tool to diversify our armed forces and educate our military leaders in diverse environments. If the Supreme Court invalidates affirmative action, there is little hope America can take the affirmative steps necessary to decrease and eliminate racial disparities. [Our people are rapidly diversifying](#), and it is important that our military reflect the American population. Integration is vital to bring the American people together, for a [“house divided against itself cannot stand”](#) and affirmative action serves as a bridge that can connect us.

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Author

Stevan Molinar is a former U.S. Army Infantry Officer who served for 4 and 1/2 years, with a deployment to Kenya, before receiving his MA in International Relations at the University of Chicago. His 2018 MA thesis examined Russia's use of military force in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine. Stevan currently sits on the Habitat for Humanity Chicago Associate Board fundraising for the organization and serves as an Inclusion and Diversity Lead at his job as a Management Consultant for Accenture. He continues to write, publishing articles on *Medium* in his free time advocating for voting rights and civil rights.

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