Integrating the Armed Forces

Today, many Americans consider the U.S. Army the country's most successful effort at racial integration. Colin Powell, the country's first African American Secretary of State, became a symbol of the Army's relative openness. He rose through the Army's ranks to become the first black head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Yet, the integration of the armed forces is a relatively recent development. As recently as the end of 1950, when the Korean War was entering its seventh month, African American troops were trained at a segregated facility at Fort Dix, New Jersey, near New York City. Even later, in the fall of 1954, an all-African American unit, the 94th Engineer Battalion, was stationed in Europe.

African Americans have participated actively in the country's wars. An African American minuteman, Prince Easterbrooks, a slave, was wounded at the Battle of Lexington, and, altogether, some 5,000 African Americans fought for American independence during the Revolution despite British promises of freedom to any slaves who defected to the Loyalist side.

It was not until the Civil War that African Americans were required to fight in racially separate units. In 1869, Congress made racial separation in the military official government policy. This policy remained intact through the Spanish American War, World War I when two African American divisions participated in combat, and World War II.

It was during World War II that the policy of racial segregation within the military began to break down under pressure from African American leaders, who pointed out the contradiction of a country that had a segregated military fighting Nazi racism. In March 1943, the War Department ordered the desegregation of recreational facilities at military bases. In mid-1944, the War Department ordered all buses to be operated in a non-discriminatory fashion.

Military necessity helped to shatter racial barriers. In December, 1944, 250,000 German troops launched a massive counteroffensive, later known as the Battle of the Bulge, in Belgium. With only 80,000 Allied troops available in the area to resist the German forces, black troops were invited to volunteer to fight alongside white troops. Some 2,500 African American troops volunteered. Although black and white troops served in separate platoons, this experience helped the Army break with its usual practice of placing African American troops in separate units and assigning them to non-combat duties.

In February 1948, President Harry S. Truman directed the U.S. armed forces to desegregate as quickly as possible. In July, he issued Executive Order 9981 calling on the military to end racial discrimination. It would take several years and another war before the military actually ended segregation. Three factors would ultimately lead to integration: the growing recognition that segregation undercut the United States' moral stature during the Cold War, the need to reduce racial tensions within the military, and the manpower needs produced by the Korean war.

Following President Truman's Executive Order, two boards were established to make recommendations about integration. A presidential commission chaired by Charles Fahy

recommended an end to discrimination in jobs, schooling, assignment, and recruitment. An Army board headed by Lieutenant General S.J. Chamberlin called on the Army to remain segregated and retain racial quotas. In the end, the Army agreed to open all jobs and military training schools on a non-segregated basis. There were isolated examples at unit-level integration, including at Camp Jackson, South Carolina in early 1951.

It was the Korean War that finally led to the desegregation of previously all-white combat units. After six months of fighting, insufficient white replacement troops were available and black enlistments were high. In February 1951, the Chamberlin board was asked to reexamine its conclusions. Although it acknowledged that integrated units had fewer racial tensions than a combination of segregated units, it continued to call for a ten percent Army quota of African Americans. At this time, 98 percent of the Army's black soldiers served in segregated units. In May, General Matthew Ridgway requested permission to desegregate his command.

In March, 1951, the Army asked Johns Hopkins University's Operations Research Office to analyze the impact of integrating its forces. Extensive surveys of troops and analysis of combat performance in Korea revealed that:

1. Integration raised the morale of African American soldiers and did not reduce that of white soldiers.

2. Integration was favored by black soldiers and was not opposed by most white soldiers, and

3. Experience in integrated units increased white support for integration. Integration improved fighting effectiveness.

An essential finding is that integration reduced racial tensions within the military. In December 1951 the Chief of Staff ordered all Army commands to desegregate.