DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION: THE DOD'S ROLE (EISENHOWER SERIES)

By Rebecca Connally, Aixa Dones, Adisa King and Ron Granieri, June 1, 2021
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Ron Granieri: Welcome to A Better Peace, the War Room podcast. I'm **Ron Granieri** Professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and Podcast Editor of the War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. For 50 years the U.S. Army War College's Eisenhower Series College Program or ESCP has been designed to encourage dialogue on national security and other policy issues between war college students and the broader public. In pursuit of dialogue war college students and the program travel across the country speaking to college classes, voluntary organizations, think tanks and other public forums. In our age of Corona and social distancing, the ESCP has unfortunately had to scale back the travels of our students. Here at A Better Peace, however, we aim to pick up the slack by giving Eisenhower program participants a chance to share their expertise and insights. Today's podcast is one in a series this spring. Today's topic is diversity, equity and inclusion, and the role of the U.S. armed forces in encouraging diversity in broader U.S. society. President Truman's Executive Order 9981 on July 26th, 1948 abolished discrimination "on the basis of race, color, religion or national origin" in the United States armed forces. In the decades since, the United States military has been both a laboratory and a shop window displaying the success that can come through, not simply reflecting but embracing the diversity of the society it is sworn to defend. After more than seven decades however, many questions remain about how well either the armed forces or American society as a whole have lived up to their stated values of diversity, equity and inclusion. Our guests today to deal with these questions include three members of the Eisenhower Series College Program and members of the United States Army War College Class of 2021. They are in order, **Colonel Rebecca K. Connally**, who is an army officer with over 22 years of active service with a bachelor's degree from Texas A&M and a law degree from Syracuse. Colonel Connally has advised commanders on the law of war and rules of engagement in combat operations as well as prosecuted federal cases in military courts martial. She also served as a military judge at Fort Hood from 2013 to 2016. **Colonel Adisa King** graduated from the United States Military Academy in 2000 as an infantry officer. He has served in mechanized, airborne, and air assault units in the United States and Korea, and has multiple deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq, where he most recently served as a task force commander and senior adviser to Iraqi army commanders. Additionally, Colonel King served in the Senate Liaison

Division within the DoD's Office of Chief of Legislative Liaison in Washington D.C., and as the military aide to the Secretary of the Army. And third, **Lieutenant Colonel Aixa Dones** enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1994. She graduated from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2001 with a degree in criminal justice and was commissioned as an officer in the United States Marine Corps in 2002. She also holds an MA in National Security and Strategic Studies from the Naval War College and an MS and international relations from Troy University. Lt. Col. Dones has experience in signals intelligence and human resources and has been a part of humanitarian efforts in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and combat operations in Iraq. She has been selected to assume command of 4th Recruit Training Station Battalion, Parris Island, South Carolina in July 2021. Welcome to A Better Peace, colleagues.

Adisa King: Hi.

Aixa Dones: Thank you.

Rebecca Connally: Thank you very much.

RG: It's great to have the three of you here. I'd like to give you each a chance to summarize the work that you're doing or plan to do with the Eisenhower Program—the speech that you would have given if we were in a public forum in short form now as part of our conversation starter. So I'm going to start with you, Rebecca Connally.

RC: Great. Thank you so much. Thanks for having us and good afternoon to my ESCP colleagues as well. I know Aixa and I are really excited about this opportunity. During this year I enjoyed the dialogue I had with many of our audiences about the importance and value of equal justice under the law. Our national security strategy proffers that equal justice under the law and the dignity of every human life are central to who we are as a people. But especially during this year, I was contemplating how can we champion these values to advance American influence if we do not espouse them at home? For example, a recent government report to Congress showed that black and Hispanic service members were twice as likely to be investigated and tried in military courts martial than their white counterparts. So until the promise of equality, the promise that was made by our forefathers, until that promise is fully realized, we must remain committed to change. And that's what I talked to the students and the various audiences and think tanks about this year. It was a really interesting and almost encouraging dialogue. So thank you for this opportunity.

RG: You bet. Thank you, Rebecca. Adisa King.

AK: I'll tell you this. When we talk about DEI, several things come to people's minds. They're like, oh no, here we go again. What are we doing? And I understand it because I was one of

those. I was. But when you sit down and take a step back and look at the research and look at some of these things, what I have found through my research and through my discussions and my experiences is sometimes there's a rush to failure. And that's what I spoke to several of the audiences about. Sometimes we have to stop rushing to failure with the multiple initiatives that we have when it comes to DEI. I'll talk about it later, but Christine Cox is a phenomenal innovator and a leader that I've come to understand and understand her concepts, but also what she talks about is the vicious cycle and it's really sometimes trying to solve the wrong problem and you just keep adding initiatives and people get frustrated and you go through the same cycle again and I've seen it. I've experienced it. And that's where I think sometimes we probably need to stop and really, truly understand what the core problem is. And some of the recommendations that I came up with were, first, using the OODA loop. I'm sure when people here OODA loop they think, here we go again. But when you really dive down into it, sometimes we have to really slow down and really orient on what is the true core problem and really look at how do we observe what's going on? How do we decide and then how do we act? And understand that it's not linear. And that's the unfortunate part. We all think it's, you do ABC and you get to diversity and boom, we're done. No, it is a continuous process that goes on. Again, the whole point of my conversation was we need to start the dialogue. Understand our biases and get down to the nitty gritty of how we can engage in this whole process.

RG: Thank you, Adisa. Now, Aixa Dones, please.

AD: So good afternoon, Ron and to my colleagues as well. My area of research for the diversity topic was, and the title of the speech that I would have given is, The Female General Officer Chasm. And it was not only meant to point out a lack of distribution when it comes to female general and flag officers within the armed forces, but it more so centered on the chasm of diversity within those that are female and are general flag officers within the armed forces. If you look at that group, you will notice that there is very many, over 90% of them, that are just white females. So we talk about there being a race concern or issue within our senior and strategic leadership billets and as a whole, within the armed forces, and much of that argument centers around their specific military occupational specialties where they were groomed from being in the combat arms. Well, that argument does not necessarily hold true when it comes to the female population, because combat arms was not even a consideration for that population until 2013. So you're talking about, maybe there is something to the fact of, we need to ensure that we put a little bit more research, a little more thought in the race aspect of the representation within our armed forces, because even within our minority groups there seems to be a race disparity. And I'm open to the questions.

RG: Great, so all of these are of course big and interesting topics and we only have a little bit of time, but I hope we can touch on all of them. Aixa, I hope you don't mind. I want to start with a question to you because reading your bio, of the three participants today, you are the only one

who has experience as both an enlisted person and an officer. I am curious because you are a woman, a member of a minority group and you have been both an officer and an enlisted person. How would you describe the differential experience as enlisted person and as an officer in the way you felt the Marine Corps treated you and your place within the armed forces?

AD: So a great question, and it's an interesting question that I can give almost two different responses to, depending if I look at it from the lens as an enlisted person or the lens as an officer, so I'm going to provide both very short, very condensed. As an enlisted marine, I think the challenge that I felt was supposedly most challenging for me or that others told me would be more challenging was the fact that I was a female. In the enlisted ranks, it has been. When I came in 1994 until now, it has always been very diverse. I have never felt as if my background in being Hispanic or shared friendships from others of different races was an issue. I thought that they were very prominent, a huge melting pot in the enlisted ranks. So it was being a female that people thought, well, you came in 1994, women were about 5% women in the United States Marine Corps back then and they were like, you're going to have challenges. And to be honest with you, maybe I'm one of the few, but I have never had any issues in being a female within the enlisted ranks, nor in the officer ranks. Now the officer side of the house, interestingly enough, diversity became an issue because I started to realize I am one of a few minorities when it came to my background and being Hispanic as well as gender and being a female. So I never had any challenges in that I wasn't ever treated any differently as a female marine officer. However, I just noticed how I ended up being more unique in that environment. I was significantly surrounded by more white men in that capacity. So I think it was just a matter of, it opened my eyes to the fact that maybe there is a concern or a challenge in the aspect of minority and gender relations within the officer community that I did not perceive prior to attaining my Commission while I was enlisted. I just never felt as if I was the minority when I was in the enlisted ranks. I definitely felt I was in the minority when I went and transitioned into the commissioned ranks.

RG: I can imagine. Just out of curiosity, did you do your initial basic course in your training at Parris Island?

AD: So my enlisted entry level was at Parris Island, but the officer entry level training is in Quantico, Virginia at Officer Candidate School.

RG: And how do you feel about now being one of the people in charge of dealing with enlisted folks at Parris Island?

AD: So, interestingly enough, as a captain and as a major, I was stationed down at Parris Island, so I've had that opportunity. I think what makes this so much more special now is the fact that I'm going to be the battalion commander of a unit that I came into the Marine Corps for in 1994

and now get to physically take command of. I think that is the surreal portion of this opportunity and I'm very humbled by it and it feels great because it's an accomplishment.

RG: Absolutely. It's great for the Marine Corps too. That's fantastic all the way around. Well thanks. Rebecca, this then gets me back to you. Something we talked about in the pre-recording discussion, we talked about differential treatment within army or military justice. The problems of racial disparities, but also I'm curious, if we build on what Aixa told us about how in some ways, the enlisted ranks are more diverse than the officer corps—this may not be as true in the army as in the marine corps, but it is still partially true at least, do you see a connection between the differential treatment between ethnic minority groups within the military and potential differential treatment between officers and enlisted people in military justice?

RC: That's an interesting question about the connection because in the research that I did, whether it was for my SRP, my strategy research project or this speech or the reading that we do throughout the year, there were a lot of connections people were trying to make whether they were law enforcement individuals, whether they were judicial individuals, whether they were congressional individuals trying to make a connection of what is causing the disparities. That's the problem, and similar to what Adisa was saying is that we have to find out what the root causes were. So to answer your question, no, there is not necessarily an obvious connection between the enlisted ranks and the disparity in military justice. What the research was finding is that all the services—Navy, Air Force, Army, Marine Corps—no one could identify the root causes of the disparities in the military justice system, whether they were from unlawful discrimination or whether they were an actual representation of the criminality that was occurring in this service. So in the end, what that report was advocating for to the services was that they needed to go back, the services needed to go back and really look into what is causing the disparities. What are the root causes? That's what I found to be most interesting in the research.

RG: Sure. Well this is good because it allows us then to bring in Adisa here. If we talk about what are the real questions? What are the root causes we should get at? I embrace the idea that we have to make sure that we're asking the right questions. So if you say we've been chasing down a lot of the wrong problems, what's the real problem?

AK: What I look at is a lot of the leadership. I'll break it down in three parts. Leadership, they get it. When I say leadership, our senior leaders because of what Congress requires us to do and plus, the incentive, our values of having a diverse army, a diverse force that represents the United States and the United States is very diverse and this is why that is important. A lot of the older senior leaders understand that. We get it. What happens as it goes down into that day-to-day action, the second, not so much. Because you have to understand society, what's going on in society, what's going on in certain neighborhoods. And then of course, when you get into the

military what goes on in that culture. And then you look at what goes on in different schools and campuses. It is very, very different and is very dynamic because one example is, I went to the University of Alabama, Birmingham and we went to their ROTC program. And when I look at the facilities, when I look at what's going on, I look at the school again, it's a historical black college, and I was like wow, this is not what I saw when I was at West Point. The next day we went the University of Louisville and the facilities are top notch. Again, the environment was different, but again, based off the school or where the University of Louisville was, the money that comes in, the way that people are involved, it is very different. Now that's just a small part of it. That doesn't mean the kids are, the young people are, one is better than the other, but some of the facilities and the disparities, it was a big deal. The third part is this. What we really haven't dove into, I believe, is not only the community outside, institutionally how we are looking at and how we are viewing that when people come up again. Some of the old knowledge of hey, this happened back in Vietnam that a lot of the black communities don't really trust the government. Well, guess what? I met an officer yesterday, one of my mentors who was a recruiter in 1976 in the urban areas, in the ghettos. Okay. He was in there and he said, that whole attitude of not trusting the government, at least from his perspective, it was not there. It was not there. They saw the Army as something hey, even though it was going to an all-volunteer army, they saw the military as an opportunity. That was a very different narrative than what we hear today. So those are some of the things I looked at as far as the dynamics of what's going on, figuring out, hey, how can we do this in a comprehensive way? And unfortunately, what happens is we start an initiative, we start doing it, people get disappointed, we don't see a change and say hey, we need to do this next thing and it just keeps going over and over again.

RG: I want to come back to that but I also see that Aixa has her hand up and would like to make a comment and jump in on this. Go right ahead, Aixa.

AD: If I understand your question, it is what's the root cause of this disparity in general when it comes to the minority and gender gaps or whatever is encompassed within the DEI, and I would tell you that for me, my response would immediately be that first, we tend to focus, and by we, I'm talking about leadership in general. When I think about my particular topic, I think of DACOWITS. Sometimes people are more focused on quantity vs. opportunity. And I think what's first and foremost important is that we need to focus on opportunity. Does the opportunity exist? And as of 2013, when it comes to the gender side of the house, opportunity exists for women no matter what. Nothing is closed to women now. And same on the minority racial side of the house. Nothing should be closed to anyone, so the opportunity exists. So what we need to do now is invest in that opportunity and I think that goes to Adisa's point. If you have a great program and you've gotten answers within this great program, why are we not then investing in these solutions that we've come up with? Why do we continue a cycle of what can we do better? What can we do better? Let's invest and we will grow the quantity based on the investment, but

don't just focus on the number because then you're losing sight of the opportunity and the quality of what we put in.

RG: For sure. That's good. So when you mentioned DACOWITS, to what were you referring so that our readers can follow up on that?

AD: So it is the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Service.

RG: Yes. And I think is an important thing, to create the opportunities and then to see how they are used. And this is something I see. Rebecca, you have your hand up. I'd love to hear what you have to say about this. Go right ahead.

RC: Well, I really enjoyed how I Aixa put that when she was talking about quantity versus opportunity because I believe that's exactly what we're talking about when we're talking about diversity and inclusion. So the opportunity would be the inclusion piece. It's not just enough to be on the team if you're sitting on the bench. It's to be put in the game when it counts, thanks to Chuck Allen, my great professor and faculty advisor.

RG: Shout out to Chuck Allen.

RC: He gave us that. But that's what inclusion is, and I think that's what Aixa was exactly talking about is the opportunity that builds that inclusive culture. So thank you for that, Aixa.

RG: I think that is an important aspect here is that the armed forces can offer a model for the rest of society in that they offer opportunities to all, and then it's a question of who's going to seize those opportunities and how they're going to work in them. And so Adisa, that's why I want to get back to you and precisely this question of recruiters or people who are encouraging people to imagine the armed forces as an opportunity, an opportunity to grow, an opportunity for perhaps training that they would not get elsewhere in society. I wonder and I'm trying to think about how to phrase this question, so I hope you don't mind me asking you this question, Adisa, do the U.S. armed forces make a different pitch to different communities in the United States when it comes to encouraging them to join? Are there some communities where they hit the training skills development side harder than the service to your country side? Or is the message the same to everybody?

AK: I'm not sure. Just be frank. I am not sure, but what I would tell you, one of the things that I know we speak about is our values. Here's what we value within the military, especially when it comes to the army. If you are part of that value, then hey, we want you on the team. As a matter of fact, we have a diverse opportunity for you on this team. And that's what I love. General Beagle who's at one of the training centers down in South Carolina, when we bring you in and

even the infantry, when you come in, it's like okay, we're going to break you down. These are our values. This is what we're about and this is where you begin to see that young people begin to own up to hey, this is what I can do and here's what I can bring. It doesn't matter if you're black, white, Hispanic, I don't care. What can you bring to the team? And that's what I think the values… when we make those pitches. And now there's tweaks in there too. There are a lot of tweaks because in certain societies, certain communities, they value this opportunity. So I think recruiters look at how they communicate that. Also, sometimes there are people who can carry the message and some will resonate more with others. Whether you may be black, maybe you are female, maybe you are white, maybe you are whatever and that's the dynamic that I think goes into hey, how do we recruit more people of diversity and quality that can come in and contribute?

RG: Adisa, do you remember the moment you decided you wanted to join the Army?

AK: Of course, without a doubt. First of all, we played army all the time being from Mississippi, We went out into the woods. My brother, he was Rambro, we were the ones always chasing him. Again, it was in the country, it was that hard work, we did it. But the key part…a couple things: he had opportunities to go to SEC schools to play football but he decided he wanted to go to West Point, West Point plus play football. More importantly, to be able to contribute and serve because that's what our family was about. I saw that, but then he came back. Here's what tipped the scale for me. I'm a sophomore in high school. He's finishing up his first year at the preparatory school of West Point. He comes back, he has money in his pocket. He has brand new clothes and he's talking about getting academics. He's playing football and doing military stuff and more importantly, I had to say yes sir and yes ma'am to my mom and daddy always anyway. So I'm like, I could do that. Because again, education is number one. I had a chance to do something that I love—play football—and then I had the opportunity to serve in some kind of form of fashion. I was like hey, I like the woods anyway. I'm good with that, physical activity, those things. That's why I was like, I'm good.

RG: So did you and your brother both graduate from the Academy then?

AK: He did not graduate, but I went and then my youngest sister, Marguerite King, she went to the Academy as well. She played basketball.

RG: That's impressive. So Aixa, over to you, the question of when did you know you wanted to be a marine?

AD: Wow. I do not have a fascinating story like Mr. Adisa did. Mine is so underwhelming I can't even tell you how underwhelming it is. It makes me slightly embarrassed. So I honestly only went to the military and to the Marine Corps specifically for two reasons. First and foremost,

money for college. Secondly, because it was the toughest service, and honestly that is about as black and white as it gets. But the beautiful part of the story where it does become a little bit more interesting is that I fell in love with the institution. I came in to just do my time, get money for college and carry on because that's what my mom wanted me to do and that's what I better have done, but I fell in love with it. No kidding. So that's my love story. And to this day, almost 27 years later, I'm still married to the Marine Corps. But I would like to add, if at all possible, you asked the question: does the Armed Services market to a particular minority group? I was a recruiting station commander for three years, so I know specifically from the Marine Corps side, I had had some conversations and discussions with the other services. As a whole we do not market specifically in the sense of what we offer, the benefits of what we offer is common to all. Where the marketing becomes specific is in the visual. You're talking about posters, videos, commercials, the visual marketing becomes very specific to minorities because if you don't see opportunity as a minority, if all the posters and all the commercials and all the videos that you see of the Armed Services only have one type of person and we'll use the white community, then as a minority person or as a woman, then I'm not going to go want to join that organization. But that's where you will mostly see a targeted type of marketing. But when it comes to benefits and opportunities, that's the same for everybody.

RG: That's great. And Rebecca, to you this question, pursuing a legal career within the Army, how have you felt navigating your particular role as a woman, army officer, lawyer? How has the army shaped your experience?

RC: Yes, very interesting. When I first joined the Army, I'm a direct commissionee joining straight from law school. After graduating from law school, passing the bar, joining, I found myself sitting in all of these meetings as a lawyer having to be a lawyer to advise on certain aspects specifically in a deployed setting, and I found myself sitting in all the meetings with just all males all the time. And it struck me at first, I was proud to be there and there were not many that looked like me. But then it started to bother me. It should have bothered me earlier, but maybe in my junior years I was just so excited to be in the Army and loved to serve that I was just appreciative of all the opportunities that I had. So that was unique about my experience, not just as a lawyer, but as a lawyer in the Army in a very male dominated field and force. But the JAG Corps, we're still working on our diversity and our inclusion aspects, but it is a very good representation of what's in the civilian sector as well in the legal field.

RG: Right. Unfortunately, we're just about out of time here, but I would say that for each of you, your experiences in the Army and in the armed forces, your experiences in both the Army and the Marine Corps have been an example of the possibilities that are open to people of talent, to people of ability, to people of ambition, and I hope that your examples and your success can lead others to see the possibilities for diversity, equity and inclusion in the armed forces. I'm afraid

we're going to have to end it there, but thank you, Adisa King, Rebecca Connally and Aixa Dones for joining us today on A Better Peace.

AD: Thank you, Ron, for the opportunity.

AK: Thanks.

RC: Thank you for having us.

RG: You bet, and thanks to all of you for listening in. Please send us your comments on this program and all the programs and send us your suggestions for future programs. We're always interested in hearing from you. Please subscribe to A Better Peace if you have not already. And of course, you should. And after you subscribe to A Better Peace, please rate and review this podcast on the podcatcher of your choice because that is how other people can find us as well. We're always interested in expanding this community for these conversations. We look forward to welcoming you all to future conversations. But until next time, from the War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.