Volume 26, No. 6 July 1998

FOCUS

The monthly magazine of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

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Perspective

Continuing 50 Years of Military Progress

Reading Really Is Fundamental

A National Volunteer-Supported Literacy Program Is Empowering Millions of America's Young People Through Books

The Army and the Future of the Black Officer

While the Leadership of the Army Is Far Better Integrated Than Other Institutions, a Study Indicates Arrested Progress

The Health of Women of Color

A Recently Released Data Book Shows That Race, Culture, and Social and Economic Status Affect the Health of Minority Women

Trendletter

Political Report: *Saving Black Farms; Controversy Over Education Savings Accounts; Underground Railroad Legislation*

Economic Report: *Boosting Set-Asides for Women-Owned Minority Businesses; Homeless Population Grows*

ISSN 0740-0195 PRICE $1.50

Continuing 50 Years of Military Progress

Fifty years ago this month, President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981, formally mandating the integration of the armed forces. Truman's action put in motion a process that, over five decades, placed the military at the forefront of racial inclusion in our nation. Many believe this executive order began the transformation of our racially divided society. The Joint Center's most recent senior military fellow, Col. Carrie W. Kendrick, conducted a study in 1997 to examine our progress since that historic milestone. Her findings, which appear in our just-released report, *African American Officers' Role in the Future Army,* are summarized in this issue of *FOCUS*.

At the outset of World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was commander-in-chief of a military force that, like many other American institutions, had always been racially segregated. Military segregation was defended with long-held bigoted and irrational assertions that blacks would not be reliable in combat and that white soldiers should never have to take orders from blacks. Thus, in all wars up to President Truman's time, blacks often found themselves fighting on two fronts—against a foreign enemy and against the unfriendly fire of those espousing racial discrimination. In fact, African Americans even had to fight for the right to fight for their country. Generally shunted off into support units such as supply and transportation battalions, black soldiers' requests for combat duty were routinely denied.

The idiocy of fielding a divided force became obvious when blacks were permitted to participate in the prosecution of the final push against Germany. American commanders who drew the color line between their men found that it was impossible to maintain racially separate infantry units and at the same time succeed on the battlefield. In the fog of war, black troops frequently found themselves fighting alongside their white comrades as their distinct assigned areas of combat blurred with the ebb and flow of the fray. After all, in the thick of battle few soldiers would refuse the aid of another in the same uniform but of a different race.

Truman's executive order sought to eliminate the possibility that American forces would be divided in the face of a common enemy. It also had the effect of dealing with discrimination in the off-duty lives of our soldiers. But it took decades to achieve those goals. The last all-black unit wasn't eliminated until the early 1950s. The services had to find desegregated schools for military dependents and worked to end discrimination in off-base rental housing. The Pentagon's program for the recruitment and promotion of non-whites in the officer corps became a model of how affirmative action should work if instituted with good will and intelligence. Progress was slow, but by the early 1980s the military, especially the army, led most other institutions in this society in the equal treatment of Americans of color.

In recent years, however, it seems the military has relaxed these efforts. The promotion of black officers is declining, as Col. Kendrick indicates in her study. And black servicemen have been the targets of racially motivated harassment and violence at military installations.

African Americans have shed their blood on countless battlefields for this nation since its founding. Five thousand black troops served under General George Washington in the Revolutionary War. More than 1.2 million served in World War II, and 104,000 were among the forces that liberated Kuwait during the 1991 Gulf War. Surely, the black men and women who have defended our country deserve the respect and fair treatment of a grateful nation. ■



PRESIDENT

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Reading Really Is Fundamental

A National Volunteer-Supported Literacy Program Is Empowering Millions of America's Young People Through Books

by Anne R. Rouse

Juwan Howard, star forward for the Washington Wizards, knows the difference that the Reading Fundamental (RIF) program can make in the life of a child. An alumnus himself of the RIF program, Howard learned to value education so highly that even after being drafted by the National Basketball Association while still in college, he nevertheless returned to the University of Michigan to complete his degree. Speaking of his many successes in life, Howard insists, "Some would look at my childhood and say, 'That child doesn't stand a chance.' I was poor and wasn't raised by two loving parents." He credits his grandmother for instilling in him the values he cherishes today. He mentions teachers and coaches who challenged him. And he recalls librarians "who brought me to a Reading Is Fundamental program so that the love of reading became second nature."

RIF is America's leading children's literacy program. For more than 30 years, it has been encouraging in children a love of reading and books with the aim of developing lifelong reading habits. In 1997, more than 200,000 volunteers brought RIF to some 3.8 million children at over 18,000 locations across the nation. Many of those youngsters, like Howard, are from disadvantaged backgrounds. Last year alone, children in the program took home more than 11 million books to cherish and read. The programs are carried out in every imaginable setting, from schools and libraries to homeless shelters, migrant worker camps, prisons, hospitals, parks, playgrounds—anyplace that one might find a child.

The program succeeds, most of all, by creating an early and indelible connection in children's minds between books and enjoyment, discovery, and fun. The need for the program is clear from the statistics. Only 50 percent of parents of young children report reading to their toddlers. Forty percent of the nation's fourth graders are reading below even the most basic reading level. As these youngsters get older, their unwillingness or inability to read creates grave problems. Study after study links poor reading skills to school drop-out rates, adolescent pregnancy, unemployment, poverty, homelessness, and crime—all problems that disproportionately affect African Americans.

Empowering Young People

Dr. William E. Trueheart, the president of Reading Is Fundamental, is committed to reaching these children and giving them the early reading experiences that can have such a powerful and long-lasting effect in their lives. The first African American to head a four-year private college in New England, Bryant College in Rhode Island, Trueheart notes, "In the days of slavery, it was illegal to teach a slave to read. Consider the effects of that denial. At this moment in our history, African Americans have spent more years in this country in slavery than we have as a free people. I believe there is still much to be done to remedy the effects of this truth."

After serving as president of Bryant College for 10 years, Trueheart came to RIF in 1997. Having held a number of prestigious positions in higher education, he had had little exposure to the effects of illiteracy until he became involved in a program for low-literate teen parents and their children. As a tutor in the program, he became close to many of the young families and saw first-hand the consequences of growing up with inadequate reading skills. He also witnessed the empowering impact a literacy program can have on young people—in this case, on two generations at once. He began to take a special interest in literacy issues and programs.

A sabbatical in South Africa turned Trueheart's interest in literacy into a passion. There he witnessed the profound effects of forced illiteracy on an entire population. He decided to make a radical change in his life. Mindful of the growing gap between our nation's "haves" and "have nots," he came to RIF to focus his efforts on winning what some might consider one of our nation's unfinished battles. "*Becoming A Nation of Readers*, the landmark study of our nation's literacy attitudes and practices, noted that if a foreign power tried to deny our children a literate future, as we are doing, we would consider it an act of war," he points out.

The Special Genius of Flexibility

The RIF program puts into action four simple principles. First, give children frequent opportunities to choose books to take home, read, and keep. Second, involve children in activities that build on and extend the pleasure of choosing and owning books. Third, and perhaps most important, get everyone in a child's life involved. And finally, give these people—parents, teachers, and local volunteers of every kind—complete ownership of the RIF program. RIF honors the wisdom of local volunteers who know best how to reach the children in their own communities.

The special genius of RIF is its flexibility. The program is easily adapted to the needs of children in diverse settings. While no two RIF programs are alike, the core RIF program remains the same: there are always books, there are always reading-related activities, and there are always volunteers. Trueheart emphasizes this last element: "The influence of RIF's corps of volunteers cannot be overestimated. These people reach out to parents, teachers and other

Ms. Rouse is a writer based in Huntsville, Alabama, and a development officer with the Community Ballet of Huntsville.

Continued on page 4

RIF

Continued from page 3

community members with the strongest possible message—that reading with children fills a need as basic and as important as feeding, clothing, and sheltering them."

Making a Mark

One of those volunteers, Antwan Allen, is a former RIF kid and now a freshman at the University of Pennsylvania. He has found time to work as an RIF volunteer counselor and tutor at the St. Aloysius Education Center in Harlem. "RIF gives us a chance to balance our roles as tutors," Allen says. "Choosing books is pure joy for these children. Through RIF we have the chance to relate to the kids—it's fun." Allen, who was once a participant in the Gifted and Talented program at St. Aloysius, adds, "I remember reading *Super Fudge* by Judy Blume when I was younger. The book still has such an effect on me. I want for other kids to have that experience, to get joy out of reading."

The RIF program at St. Aloysius plays an especially important role in the lives of children whose families are unable to buy books. The community has an excellent library, and once children get RIF books they often start asking to be taken there. The volunteers take them to the library and sign them up for library cards. "They get really excited and they let their families know they want to go back," Allen says. "Parents tell us they have started going to the library… and they thank us."

Another volunteer, Naomi Swei, is a junior at Red Mountain High School in Mesa, Arizona. Naomi is an active member of Club RIF, a student-run club that brings the program to local elementary school students, to children in nearby homeless shelters, and to children at a Native American reservation. Naomi did not have books herself as a youngster. One of six children growing up in a single-parent household, she says she really did not even like to read. But she was exposed to Club RIF as a youngster—her older sister Katherine was one of the club's founders—and she was determined to join when she could. "It is wonderful to be able to give kids what I never had. RIF gives me a chance to make a difference, to make a mark," Swei says. As a tutor of elementary school students she notices that RIF gives youngsters a "new look at books. Getting to choose books they like makes an impression on them."

According to Dustin Flahart, a senior at Red Mountain High School, the volunteers benefit from the program as much as the children. "The program has taught me to be patient and reliable," he says. Because of his work with RIF, Flahart is now considering becoming a teacher.

RIF's Plans for the Future

As he and RIF look to a new century, Trueheart plans to concentrate the organization's focus on three important areas. First, it will work to strengthen the kinds of activities that accompany each book event. "RIF's future lies in enhancing the book-related activities that are a key part of each RIF program. These activities not only strengthen the connection between reading and discovery, they are also a means to create relationships with caring adults."

Second, it will devote more time and effort to working with other groups that serve young children. "RIF has always had great relationships with Head Start, Even Start, and other organizations that focus on young children. We plan to use our knowledge and expertise to help these groups focus as never before on the literacy needs of young children."

Finally, in the wake of mounting evidence that children's early experiences do much to shape their lives, RIF will focus new initiatives on children from birth through age five. "Americans are not making the connection between what they read and know about brain research, about how the brain develops, and how important it is to read to children," says Trueheart. "We are simply failing to get our children ready to learn. We will pay a terrible price if we do not make that connection, if we continue to deny the importance of books and reading in a child's life."

Research documenting the benefits to children of frequent, early experiences with books and reading is plentiful and widely recognized. In a nation as prosperous as ours, it is dismaying that so many children are growing up without access to books. Recent studies tell us unequivocally that children's brain development depends on being talked to and read to, being engaged by attentive caregivers. In our busy society, far too many youngsters begin school with no memory of snuggling up with a book and a loved one.

To give more children the tools to make our world anew, Reading Is Fundamental has pledged to reach an additional 1.5 million children by the year 2000. It is an ambitious but important undertaking. As Antwan Allen comments: "Only exposure to books and reading can give children the motivation to read. And empowerment? That is a part of curing all problems. People must have the tools to make a better life for themselves." Says Juwan Howard: "RIF understands that the life and future of each child born in this great country is vitally important to all of us. We must honor each child, cherish each child, encourage and support and love each child." ■

To get involved in Reading Is Fundamental…

RIF headquarters has information about RIF programs in your area, as well as what you can do to launch your own RIF program, including recruiting and working with volunteers. You can call them at (202) 287-3220, visit their website at www.si.edu/rif, or write to them at

Reading Is Fundamental Inc.
600 Maryland Ave., SW, Suite 600
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The Army and the Future of the Black Officer

While the Leadership of the Army Is Far Better Integrated Than Other Institutions, a Study Indicates Arrested Progress

by Marc DeFrancis

Viewed as a whole, the U.S. Army today is perhaps the most thoroughly integrated entity in American society. More than a quarter of the Army is African American. While the officer corps is much less black, at 11 percent its level of integration is far greater than what is found in most of civilian society. Indeed, less than 6 percent of the nation's managers and professionals, a category whose supervisory authority parallels that of military officers, are African Americans. And certainly, General Colin Powell's chairmanship of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Gulf War crisis put to rest any lingering doubts Americans may have harbored about a racial "glass ceiling" in U.S. military leadership.

Yet all is not well in Army race matters. Recent statistics show that the entry rate for African American Army officers dropped to 10.1 percent of all officers coming into the ranks in fiscal 1995 and in 1997 to 9.3 percent. As if to underscore this trend, just last month the Army announced that in this year's annual Colonel Board selections, while the overall selection rate for new colonels (the rank just below general) was 39 percent of the candidates, only 19 percent of the eligible African American candidates were selected, an enormous drop from recent years (36 percent were selected in 1996 and 39 percent in 1995). The question must be asked, why are black officers a diminishing presence in today's Army?

In an attempt to answer this and related questions, Joint Center military fellow Col. Carrie W. Kendrick undertook a study in 1997 to capture the views and experiences of today's Army officers, both black and white. Employing two detailed focus groups, a survey of 200 officers, and numerous informal interviews, the report of her nine-month investigation, *African American Officers' Role in the Future Army*, is a portrait of race relations that offers insights into the Army's remaining racial divide.

Having to Prove Your Worth

Whether their progression through the ranks is comparable with that of their white counterparts has been questioned by black Army officers in recent years, according to Kendrick. They are especially concerned about competing for key jobs at the brigade, division, and corps levels. Many of the black officers Kendrick surveyed commented that even when blacks secure high-level jobs, they often feel inadequately supported and believe that latent racism is to blame.

Kendrick found that the black officer's sense of a need to prove him or herself magnifies with each advance in rank. Errors in judgment or other mistakes made by African Americans are often blown out of proportion relative to those made by their white counterparts, according to the officers interviewed, and such errors appear to be dealt with more harshly than when white officers make them.

Are African American officers treated differently? It is very difficult to track the kind of records that might document such discrimination, and indeed the Army culture by its nature discourages the open examination of such sensitive issues. But promotions that depend on personal nominations, Kendrick suggests, do show traces of disparate treatment. She cites a report in *The Washington Post* on the appointment of generals' aides. Like the generals they serve, all but one of the aides identified by the *Post* were white, and that one black aide worked for a black general. This pattern—of superior officers appointing lower officers of the same race—recurs throughout the Army, according to Kendrick's report.

Four Unequal Playing Fields

Army promotions depend on many factors besides a good performance record and personal recommendations. Kendrick's examination of the four basic stages in officer development—early training, learning Army culture, the mentoring experience, and initial job assignment—revealed that the playing field is often not level.

Early training. There is a common perception in the Army that most black officers were educated at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and that lower academic standards at these schools explain lower achievement among black officers relative to others. In fact, Kendrick points out, only a minority of black officers come from HBCU backgrounds. For example, just 25 percent of the black second lieutenants today are graduates of such schools.

Kendrick notes, however, that there may be a problem with the quality of the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) education at HBCU institutions and, indeed, at all colleges. She concludes that this puts minority candidates, who are much less likely to have attended the service academies, at a disadvantage.

At the outset, it is clear that the military faculty teaching ROTC do not compare well in experience and education with those assigned to the service academies. Senior officers chosen to teach at West Point, for example, are given full Army scholarships to first obtain masters degrees if they lack them. This is not done for ROTC faculty. Moreover, at the 21 HBCUs with ROTC programs, the military instructors are not racially diverse; white officers are instructors at only six

Continued on page 6

Mr. DeFrancis is the senior editor at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies and a contributing editor to FOCUS.

Army

Continued from page 5

of these campuses. Kendrick implies that by following such "same-race" assignment practices, the Army fails to treat HBCUs and, indeed, black officer candidates with the serious professionalism that is their due.

Learning the Army Culture. "The culture of the army," Kendrick writes, "is one where unit cohesion and teamwork within a given unit are felt to have a stronger link than outside associations. These links and ties are necessary, since the army is about team building." To succeed in the Army, a soldier or officer must fully grasp and ultimately embrace its special culture, one that is radically different in mores and styles from civilian society. Given this situation, introduction to the culture at an early stage is vital. Yet here too Kendrick finds a disparity between the experiences of blacks and whites. Speaking at one of the study's focus group sessions, one black officer recalled his experiences in officer basic training:

> Officer basic had been a struggle. I found . . . people to be extremely cautious when dealing with many of the African brothers and sisters. In fact, to approach a group, in an attempt to assimilate (I'd been told I needed to do this), I found that the conversation became extremely forced. Prior to my approach, there was laughter and discussion, and I only wanted to be a part of that and really be accepted. I found the conversation would turn to inquisition . . . 'Where did you go to school?' 'Are your parents professionals?' 'How did you get this branch?'
>
> I was absolutely mystified. I quickly found that the answers to these and many other probing questions would determine my worth in the group. I also found they were not interested in my assimilation; they were friendly, but we were not going to move much farther than that. The same interaction was prevalent among the staff and faculty at the school. I never quite felt I belonged. I spoke with my other buddies and they relayed similar information.

Other black officers in Kendrick's focus groups echoed much the same sentiment. They spoke of a "great divide."

That these officers could not easily identify with, and did not feel embraced by, Army culture was reflected in comments that emerged during these focus groups, to the effect that the culture of the Army "is white-male and so is its policy setting agenda." The perceived "whiteness" of the Army culture seems confirmed by frequent instances in which white officers, usually privately, raised questions about the appropriateness of certain cultural traditions among their black peers, such as lifelong association with black fraternities and sororities. In short, the Army culture does not seem to accept or absorb black social traditions the way it accepts others.

The mentoring experience. The transition from civilian culture to Army life is hard for any officer, but it is smoothest for those who have attended military academies, which white officers are statistically more likely to have done. For the rest, some introduction to military culture is necessary. In Kendrick's survey, fully one-third of black male officers reported that *no one* had ever talked to them about this topic when they were starting out as lieutenants.

In the absence of an official, across-the-board policy on mentoring by the Army, Kendrick found serious disparities in the way mentoring takes place. West Point boasts a formalized mentoring program, but candidates in ROTC training do not always receive any such guidance. More than 45 percent of the African American officers surveyed by Kendrick said they had never been assigned a mentor.

Equally revealing is the nature of the mentoring that the other 55 percent of black officers did receive. Many of them stated that when their mentors were white, the encounters felt strained by the matter of race, and that these officer-counselors usually spoke to them in general, impersonal terms, rarely in a guiding or coaching style. "When their counseling was compared with that of their [white] peers," Kendrick reports, "they were often astonished at the differences."

Worsening the problem is the fact that black officers are normally assigned black mentors. In the case of captains, only 12 percent of those mentored reported that they had been assigned to white counselors. This de-facto two-track racial system is further entrenched by the long-accepted practice of assigning mentorships through "by-name" requests from mentors. Assignment officers informed Kendrick that by-name requests for black counselees make up less than one percent of all such assignments.

Initial job assignment. Black officers are found in significant proportions in each of the four major Army commands that Kendrick examined: Europe, Korea, the Forces command, and the Training and Doctrine command. It is well understood, however, that assignment to some commands is more desirable than to others because of the leverage they yield for future high-level promotion. In this regard, black officers find themselves overrepresented in the least desirable assignment, the Training and Doctrine command (where they are 16.7 percent of the officers) and underrepresented in the more desirable assignments, such as with the European command (8.4 percent).

Discrimination

All of the above findings suggest that racial prejudice may still affect the way decisions are made in the Army. Kendrick posed the question directly to the officers she surveyed. Not only did 57 percent of the African American officers report that they had been subjected to some form of racial discrimination, but an amazing 83 percent of white officers rejected the statement that "There is no racism in the Army."

It is very telling that *none* of the black officers who mentioned being discriminated against had ever filed equal opportunity or discrimination complaints. They told Kendrick that they felt they would suffer some form of reprisal if they had raised any complaints. "The officer who makes a report," Kendrick writes, "is criticized as a non-team player, and labeled as disloyal to the commander or the unit."

Continued on last page

The Health of Women of Color

A Recently Released Data Book Shows That Race, Culture, and Social and Economic Status Affect the Health of Minority Women

by Carolyn M. Brown

After many decades of viewing the nation's health in isolation from other aspects of society, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has begun to pay attention to the particular health status and treatment needs of minorities and women. Race, gender, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic background, and geographic location are now recognized as playing important roles in determining health status. In cooperation with the Joint Center, NIH's Office of Research on Women's Health has produced *Women of Color Health Data Book: Adolescents to Seniors*, which looks at how social and economic factors and other quality-of-life measures affect the health of minority women of all ages.

According to the *Data Book*, over half (nearly 52 percent) of the more than 265 million U.S. residents are women, and more than one fourth of these women (36 million) are women of color. Of these 36 million women, 46 percent are black, 38 percent Hispanic, 13 percent Asian and Pacific Islander, and 3 percent American Indian/Alaska Native. A common thread among them is their low utilization of health care services, including preventive tests such as Pap smears and mammograms.

Many women of color and their children fail to get necessary health care services for two major reasons: lack of insurance coverage and poverty. While they are only one-fourth of the women in this country, women of color represent close to half (46 percent) of the 19 million uninsured women. Unemployment and low-paying jobs with few benefits are the main contributors to their inability to access health care and to their poverty in general. While more than half of the black work force is female (52 percent), nearly a third of all black women live in poverty.

Poverty directly affects these women's health status in many ways. The stress of constantly struggling to make ends meet often leads to depression and behavioral and emotional problems. Life circumstances, racism, and sexism contribute to low self-esteem among all women of color, especially black and Hispanic women. Suicide attempts are more common among young Hispanic females than among any other group of young women.

Eating and weight disorders are especially common problems for women of color, increasing their already high risks of diabetes and hypertension. Diabetes is two to five times more common among Mexican Americans than among any other racial/ethnic group. Among Native American and black women, the high incidence of diabetes is exacerbated by obesity. Among Asian populations, tuberculosis is of special concern. Due to the lack of regular screenings, tuberculosis occurs among Asians at a rate nearly four times that of the general population.

The major killers of women of color are heart disease and cancer. Cancer is the leading cause of death for Asian American and Pacific Islander women. Even though black women have a lower incidence of breast cancer than other women, their death rates from this disease exceed those for all other women of color. HIV infection and AIDS are increasing in importance as a cause of both morbidity and mortality among black and Hispanic women.

Of the 31.1 million elderly women (age 65 and older) in the United States, 13 percent are ethnic/racial minorities, and these women are more likely than other elderly persons to experience psychological distress. This is especially true for those with low incomes, minimal education, limited coping resources, or who live in substandard housing. Limited access to health care eventually takes its toll over the years on women of color, increasing their need for nursing homes and home health care as they become older.

For American women of color who are able to access the health care system, diagnosis and treatment are often complicated by cultural and linguistic barriers between them and their health providers. These women tend to be more reluctant than others to offer information about themselves and medical histories or to report treatments that were unsatisfactory.

The *Data Book* concludes that improving the health of these women will require more adequate collection of data on their health status and needs. Such information could generate more refined research and lead to treatments that are tailored to their circumstances. Greater support for hospitals and medical facilities that cater to women of color of all ages is critical, as is the need for more multicultural and multilingual physicians and health care providers. Once health programs are designed to respect cultural norms and values and to acknowledge structural problems—such as limited employment opportunities, lack of transportation, and physical/emotional distress—they ultimately will enhance the overall health of these women and their children. ■

The ***Women of Color Health Data Book: Adolescents to Seniors*** *was prepared by Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies senior research associate Dr. Wilhelmina A. Leigh and research assistant Malinda A. Lindquist. Requests for copies of the* Data Book *may be made by fax to 301-402-1798 or by writing the Office of Research on Women's Health, NIH, Building 1, Room 201, Bethesda, MD 20892.*

Ms. Brown is a contributor to *Black Enterprise* and *Hispanic Business* magazines.

Army

Continued from page 6

Kendrick's findings in this area are corroborated by those of Army War College scholar Craig Johnson. In Johnson's 1997 study, 85 percent of the black Army officers surveyed indicated they had experienced military-related discrimination. These respondents further stated that the work environment in the Army was not supportive, specifically that subordinates showed less respect to minority officers than to white officers.

Kendrick found as well that while white and black officers agree that racism remains a problem, their views on fairness in promotions often diverge. As mentioned above, black officers generally feel that assignments are not equitably allocated and that the leadership does not regard the inequitable treatment of black officers as a priority concern. Overall, they feel the playing field is far from level, and that they not only start out but often continue at a disadvantage. This outlook was most pronounced among the younger black officers.

The differences between white and black officers are most pronounced on the issue of affirmative action. Roughly two-thirds of white officers (62 percent) believe less qualified African Americans are being promoted ahead of more qualified white officers, even though only one-fifth said they had been personally affected by such promotions. And while 83 percent of these white officers believe racism is still alive in the Army, only 44 percent consider racism to be a problem at the officer level. In short, many of them believe the problem is limited to the enlisted ranks.

As Kendrick acknowledges in her report, the kind of data she was able to obtain and the limits of her study prevented her from reaching detailed conclusions about the extent of racism in the Army or the precise places where institutional discrimination is most harmful to officers' opportunities. What she does provide in this document is indisputable evidence that something is wrong and must be repaired if the nation's fighting forces are to succeed in the diverse and challenging world of the coming century. ■

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TRENDLETTER

POLITICAL REPORT

Saving Black Farms

America's black farmers celebrated a major victory on Capitol Hill on June 24 when the House Agriculture Appropriations bill passed with language permitting the government to address a backlog of 18,000 discrimination complaints against the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). "This is just one step forward in dealing with four decades of a good ole boy system designed to exclude black farmers and maintain a plantation mentality," says black Democratic Congresswomen Eva Clayton from North Carolina.

For years, black farmers, like their white counterparts, applied for farm loans and assistance from the USDA. However, unlike the white farmers, black farmers were discriminated against on the basis of their race and were disproportionately denied loans.

Many black farmers filed discrimination claims with the USDA, but it was recently learned that for 15 years the agency was actively misleading them, saying their claims were being processed when in fact they were being ignored. In 1983, the administration of President Ronald Reagan had secretly dismantled the civil rights division that was responsible for handling these complaints, and the Bush administration continued the same policy.

"The black farmers had played by the rules, but were lied to by the agency that was supposed to help them," says Congressional Black Caucus Chair Maxine Waters (D–Cal.). Even Congress was unaware of the problem. The Caucus exposed the USDA's duplicity at a hearing held last year.

The land loss and decline among black farmers is staggering. In 1960, there were 100,000 black farmers in the rural south, working six million acres of land. Today, there are only 18,000 left on less than one million acres of land, which is just one percent of America's farm land. Each day African American farmers lose another one thousand acres. By the year 2000, it is projected that all African American farms may have vanished.

The Caucus found that USDA's discriminatory practices and the lack of access to capital are key reasons for the loss of black farms. Black farmers testified that they tried to get loans and assistance from the USDA so that they could hold on to their land, but often to no avail. The Caucus heard the accounts of families who had lost everything because the USDA would not help them.

Even after the extent of its discrimination was made public, the USDA refused to redress the claims. The agency stated that the two-year statute of limitations provided for in the Equal Credit Opportunity Act had expired. The Justice Department concurred. Under their interpretation, the government has no obligation to pay the vast majority of black farmers for admitted discrimination.

Legislation was the only recourse. Working with the House leadership and with White House support, the Black Caucus succeeded in incorporating language into the Agriculture Appropriations bill that would waive the statute of limitations, permitting the Department to begin to address the 18,000-case backlog. Now the measure must be taken up by the Senate. But while members of the Caucus are optimistic that Congress will enact the waiver, most fear that for many black farmers, this long overdue remedy will be too little too late.

Controversy Over Education Savings Accounts

Congress is close to passing the Education Savings Act for Public and Private Schools, a bill that would allow families, charitable groups, and private donors to contribute a total of $2,000 a year to savings accounts to be used to pay for education costs, including tuition for private schooling. Although the deposited money would come from after-tax dollars, the interest on the accounts would be tax-free so long as both interest and capital were used for approved purposes. Individuals making less than $110,000 and couples making

up to $160,000 annually would qualify to open the accounts.

The bill would allow any money from these accounts not spent on elementary or secondary education to be used for college tuition. On June 18, after different versions of the bill had already passed each house of Congress, a Senate-House conference committee crafted a compromise measure. The compromise passed in the House by a vote of 225 to 197, although this is not enough to override a presidential veto.

In an attempt to soften Democratic opposition, Republicans in the conference committee agreed to drop provisions that would have prevented the Clinton administration from going forward with their plans for voluntary national math and reading tests. Conferees also removed provisions that would have converted half of the U.S. Department of Education's elementary and secondary school programs into block grants.

The GOP concessions to Clinton on this bill are not as generous as they look, however. Rather than completely eliminating the ban on Clinton's tests, Republican leaders have announced that they plan to move these prohibitions to the 1999 spending bill for the U.S. Departments of Labor and of Health and Human Services. The now defunct block grant proposal sponsored by Senator Slade Gorton (R-Wash.) also is likely to be resurrected in the same appropriations bill.

The administration, whose own education agenda focuses on reducing class size and renovating school facilities, opposes the bill on the grounds that it would divert badly needed money from public schools and give a special tax break to the middle class. The National Education Association and other opponents believe that the savings accounts are just another way of financing private and religious education with public money. A Congressional Joint Committee on Taxation report indicated that over half of the bill's benefits would go to families with children already in private schools.

The bill represents an attempt by Republicans to find a means other than school vouchers to fund tuition payments to private and parochial schools and to come up with a popular education initiative that will appeal to the middle class. Among the interest groups supporting the bill are the conservative Christian Coalition and the Family Research Council.

Underground Railroad Legislation

For more than half a century, ending with the Civil War, the Underground Railroad offered southern slaves hope for freedom, safety, and human dignity. A clandestine network of individuals worked together to direct slaves along several routes—all long and dangerous—to northern states, Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, and other areas where they could live freely. Because it was largely illegal, even in northern states, much of what is known about the Underground Railroad has come to us through oral histories and traditions.

But the American public may soon know more about this important episode in American history. On June 9, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act by a nearly unanimous vote. Sponsored by two Ohio congressman, Democrat Louis Stokes and Republican Rob Portman, the bill specifies that the National Park Service will identify and preserve historic sites and routes related to the railroad, develop educational materials, and provide technical assistance to museums and other institutions to help them find ways to tell the story of this early civil rights movement.

Stokes explained his motivation: "When we introduced the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom act, we did so in memory of the contributions made by our ancestors, black and Caucasian, Quaker and Protestant, Native American and many others who played key roles in the quest of American slaves for freedom." Stokes also suggested that there were important lessons for today's discussion of race in the way that the Underground Railroad brought together Americans across the divisions of race, religion, nationality, and region.

Congressman Portman represents Cincinnati, where plans are under way to open in 2003 the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, a museum that will focus on the network of escape routes and the courageous "conductors" who often risked their lives.

According to Dr. Charles L. Blockson, curator of the Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection at Temple University, the number of existing sites on the Underground Railroad is estimated to be between 500 and 700. In addition to his interest as a scholar and as an African American, Blockson has a more personal connection to the subject. Some of his own ancestors died while helping others on the Underground Railroad escape to freedom.

The National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act has gone to the Senate, where it should pass quickly. Senate sponsors are Mike DeWine (R–Ohio) and Carol Moseley Braun (D–Ill.). ■

ECONOMIC REPORT

By Cecilia Conrad and Malinda Lindquist

Boosting Set-Asides for Women-Owned Minority Businesses

According to a recent report from the National Foundation of Women Business Owners (NFWBO), business ownership in this country among women of color is growing three times faster than business ownership overall. The study is based on projections from the 1992 Survey of Minority Owned Business Enterprises (SMOBE) (the most recent data available) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. According to SMOBE, minority women owned 388,309 firms in 1987 and 717,435 firms in 1992. The NFWBO study estimates that 1,067,000 firms were owned by minority women in 1996. If the NFWBO estimates are accurate, nearly one in eight of the nearly eight million women-owned businesses in the United States is owned by a woman of color, and nearly four in ten of all minority-owned firms are owned by women.

Much of this growth has been due to government minority set-aside programs, many of which have since been eliminated by recently enacted laws and court decisions. However, new Clinton administration initiatives may expand business opportunities for minority women entrepreneurs.

Most of the firms owned by minority women (50 to 60 percent, according to SMOBE 1992 data) are concentrated in the service sector, which includes businesses ranging from beauty parlors to temporary employment agencies. The next highest concentrations of firms among these owners (16 to 23 percent of them) were in retail trade, which includes general merchandise and food stores, automotive dealerships, and eating and drinking establishments.

The big news to emerge from the NFWBO study was that minority women have expanded ownership in sectors where women are traditionally underrepresented. In 1987, women owned just 5.4 percent (5,859) of all minority-owned construction firms; by 1992, they owned 10 percent (16,251). The number of their businesses also increased dramatically in wholesale trade (growing by 87 percent) and transportation (by 83 percent).

This expansion reflects the success of government set-aside programs. Under minority set-aside programs, federal agencies, states, and local governments establish targets for minority and disadvantaged participation in government contracting. Most government contracts are awarded for construction projects, followed by procurement of supplies, professional services, and transportation.

However, recent court decisions and legislative initiatives, such as Proposition 209 in California, have already eliminated these programs in some jurisdictions and have placed set-aside policies elsewhere in jeopardy. Although a referendum to end minority set-asides in city government contracts failed in Houston last fall, support for such race- and gender-based programs is eroding. Minority-owned firms in any case will have to expand their share of private-sector contracts to make up for the decline in public-sector contracts. It is unrealistic to expect the recent pattern of growth in these sectors to continue.

These attacks on set-aside programs also have a negative impact on employment in minority communities. Several studies, including the Joint Center's 1993 survey of businesses, have documented that firms owned by minority-owned entrepreneurs are more likely than other firms to hire minority workers and often provide the critical first job experience for minority youth.

Policy Prescriptions

The federal Small Business Administration (SBA) has undertaken several initiatives to encourage the use of minority suppliers and contractors. In the public sector, the SBA has attempted to streamline its 8(a) program, which helps small socially and economically disadvantaged businesses compete for federal contracts. Participating in the program are more than 6,000 disadvantaged firms, employing nearly 179,000 workers. On May 6, SBA Administrator Aida Alvarez signed "delegation of authority" agreements with 25 federal agencies. These agreements permit the agencies to contract directly with the firms participating in the 8(a) program instead of first going through the SBA as had been the practice in the past. This eliminates the middle man and cuts down on unnecessary red tape.

In the private sector, the SBA has initiated a major lending assistance and marketing campaign directed toward African Americans interested in starting or expanding their small businesses. This past February, Alvarez and Vice President Al Gore announced a program to double SBA loan guarantees provided to African American entrepreneurs over the next three years. These guarantees will help small firms obtain start-up capital as well as the capital needed to expand their businesses.

In addition, in February, the Clinton Administration reached an agreement with the Big Three U.S. automakers (General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler) committing them to increase purchases of parts and supplies from minority con-

tractors. Currently, minority contractors receive 4.2 percent of the total annual procurement by the Big Three (approximately $5.9 billion). Under the agreement, the automakers would increase this percentage to 5 percent.

Women-owned minority firms have benefitted from racial and gender based set-aside programs. How they will continue to be affected by these programs will depend, in large part, on the political climate. The importance of these business establishments cannot be overstated. Continued growth in entrepreneurship and self-employment among minority women will not only bolster the economic prospects of their employees, but will also provide more minority women with a powerful employment alternative.

Homeless Population Grows

Homelessness may be less visible today than in the trough of the last recession, but the problem persists and continues to worsen. Indeed, robust economic growth and rising inequality can combine to make homelessness especially intractable. Cities are relying on a combination of city government funds, state grants, and federal block grants to address the problem, but these resources are often inadequate to meet the needs.

In 29 cities surveyed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the number of emergency shelter beds decreased by an average of 3 percent over the past year. Moreover, 22 cities reported turning away families requesting emergency shelter, and 17 cities reported turning away persons requesting emergency food assistance. Requests for food assistance increased an average of 16 percent over the past year. Seven of the urban centers with the largest black populations—Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Philadelphia—reported increases in requests for emergency shelter. Of these cities, only Cleveland and Philadelphia reported an increase in shelter beds, while the remaining cities had the same number or fewer beds than in previous years and were, therefore, unable to meet the demand. Moreover, not all shelters are able to admit every member of a homeless family since some may only admit individuals of a certain age or sex. As a result, eight major cities, as a matter of policy, break up homeless families that are forced to enter these shelters.

In the past, persons without permanent shelter sometimes found housing in single room occupancy hotels (SROs), colloquially known as flop houses. However, since the 1960s, the number of SROs has shrunk in most major U.S. cities. The disappearance of these residences and the growth in homelessness can largely be explained by the forces of supply and demand in the housing market, whose analysis has yielded some surprising conclusions.

For example, the rate of homelessness in a city is not strongly correlated with the city's poverty rate. Cities where a large proportion of the population is poor tend to have fairly large stocks of low-quality housing and relatively low housing costs. Slowdowns in economic growth also do not tend to increase homelessness. In the U.S. Conference of Mayors survey, city officials reported that the strength of their local economies appeared to have no effect on either hunger or homelessness. Although many persons have gotten jobs, the jobs tend to be low paying.

Indeed, robust economic growth could help exacerbate the problem of homelessness. In a 1992 study published by the Urban Institute, Martha Burt found that homeless rates were often highest in cities experiencing economic growth that were also characterized by extreme income inequality. She found that because economic booms increase the incomes of those with good jobs and attract new people to the city, they result in greater demand and higher prices for housing, which in turn prices the most vulnerable populations out of the housing market.

In the urban areas surveyed, African Americans make up 58 percent of the homeless population; whites, 29 percent; Hispanics, 10 percent; Native Americans, 2 percent; and Asians, 1 percent. One-fourth of the homeless population is under the age of 18. As might be expected, substance abusers and the mentally ill are overrepresented among the homeless. According to the U.S. Conference of Mayors survey, an average of 27 percent of homeless people in cities are mentally ill, and 43 percent are substance abusers.

Despite the high percentage of the homeless who are substance abusers or mentally ill, these problems don't explain their homelessness. As Brandon O'Flaherty of Columbia University points out in his recent book, *Making Room: The Economics of Homelessness*, "Being mentally ill or a drug user or an alcoholic doesn't mean you have to live on the street or in a shelter." Mental illness and substance abuse combine with low income to force individuals to seek the cheapest available housing. The relevant question, according to O'Flaherty, is why the only housing available in these cases is bus stations, park benches, and emergency shelters. Without a national effort to confront and heal this epidemic, the streets are likely to remain the only shelter available to the growing number of homeless men, women, and children. ■