



How the Next U.S. National Security Strategy Should Include Diversity

Frank T. Goertner, Policy Advisor

Marguerite Rivard Benson, Policy Advisor

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BY FRANK GOERTNER, POLICY ADVISOR AND
MARGUERITE RIVARD BENSON, POLICY ADVISOR

Following Presidential election season in America, Washington's defense establishment starts another ritual: development of a new U.S. national security strategy. Typically released within an administration's inaugural year, it dictates how the government interprets both "national" and "security." It sets priorities for federal departments

directing [more than 4.3 million public servants](#) under contract or oath. The [last national security strategy](#), published late 2017, focused on preparing for great power competition. The next should be about winning it by including diversity. Here's how.



Admit U.S. national security has a diversity problem.

Events of 2020 offer a reminder that equal rights and demographic inclusion in America are more than simply of civil or judicial concern. Since January, the activity of U.S. armed forces, federal agents, and uniformed public health officials within state borders have been as consequential and controversial for national security as any operation abroad. The events have also laid bare that U.S. national security leaders fail to reflect the diversity of the nation they seek to secure, and that is a problem.

It is a visible problem. Despite gradual gains in cross racial and cross gender opportunity, the majority of government national security executives are sourced from a demographic group comprising just [38 percent](#) of the U.S. populace: White males.

At the top is the [National Security Council](#). Chaired by the President and supported by four statutory members, it is the most [codified](#) nexus of national security decision makers in the U.S. government. Today they are all White males.

Beyond the NSC, the Department of Defense (DoD) prides itself on a legacy of representing and guarding America's varied interests, so much



so that its website of official biographies is labeled “[Our Story](#).” Yet [as of September](#) every one of the top eight civilian DoD appointees was White and only one female. On the uniformed side, the demographics flip with all seven members of the military’s Joint Staff and eleven commanders of [U.S. Combatant Commands](#) male and only one visibly of color.

[Statistics](#) improve one step down the military hierarchy, where non-White representation hits 12.5 percent of military generals and admirals and female representation registers 8 percent. But that is still a wide representative distance from the American citizenry, in which 24 percent of adults register as non-White and 51 percent female. It also lags their own [subordinate military ranks](#), whose professional ranks are a close demographic match to their civilian contemporaries.

However, even junior military leaders lag the future their promotions will ask them to secure. By 2044, the U.S. will be a [plurality nation](#). When officers commissioned in 2020 become Colonels or Captains, non-Whites and females will each be roughly 51 percent of their citizenry. Military commissioning sources, such as West Point, are chasing this trend, but the representational gap is projected for years to come.

This should be no surprise. The 2017 [National Security Strategy](#) never once mentions diversity. The closest it gets is to warn of “diverse” actors projecting global influence and to decry “diverse” businesses, universities and colleges threatening the defense technology base. The only use of “inclusion” is a similarly derogatory reference to the risk of past policies including rival nations in international institutions. Compare this to its [predecessor](#) which, though 40% shorter, cites diversity and inclusion nine times as contributory strategic assets to broader objectives.

The next national security strategy should rewrite this script. It can start by citing diversity in U.S. national security as a problem worthy of its own section. Imperatives should include goals and results beyond anything [currently in place](#) or [tried in the past](#). They should also demand speed. Gradually leveling the field through equal opportunity career advancement alone will ensure leaders remain a generation behind their representational mandate. Consideration should be given to alternative career paths and decisional practices that generate executive diversity next year, not next decade.



Acknowledge inclusion is U.S. national security.

In addition to attacking today's diversity problem, the next national security strategy needs to inhibit America's leaders from ignoring it ever again. It should acknowledge for the record that even amidst great power competition, diversity initiatives are not distractions and inclusion is not discretionary in U.S. national security. Inclusion is U.S. national security.

Diversity and inclusion impacts not just the direction of collective decision making, but also [the quality](#). [McKinsey & Company](#) finds diverse executive teams are more likely to be profitable and create value than homogeneous teams. [National security](#) and [scientific](#) authorities have affirmed the value of diverse representation in their organizations. Even the Central Intelligence Agency has weighed in through its [2020-2023 Diversity and Inclusion Strategy](#). Regardless of sector, great decisions demand more than just great minds. They demand inclusive mindsets.

Moreover, U.S. national security is an exceptional sector in an exceptional nation. That exceptionalism has [many interpretations](#), but one widely accepted attribute is represented in the phrase adorning every U.S. passport and monetary note worldwide: E Pluribus Unum.



“Out of many, one” reflects the nation’s identity as a multi-cultural republic and is testament to the extraordinary responsibilities U.S. national security leaders have to mobilize, focus, and represent the diverse citizenry around them. It explains why the representative quality of the nation’s security leadership has evolved with its greatest security challenges. The Civil War generated America’s first Black [military leaders](#), World War I the [first female soldiers](#), World War II the [first Black general](#), Vietnam the [first female general](#), and the Cold War the first [female](#) and [Black](#) ambassadors. It takes whole-of-nation policies to compete as a great power, and Americans tend to demand representation in return.

Third, there is evidence that the solidarity and uniformity that is an historic hallmark of U.S. national security experience is also of waning value as new American voices redefine national security in their own terms. [Rand surveys](#) find Millennials, the largest generation in the U.S., to be more focused on domestic and financial security, less concerned

about foreign and military policy, and more ambivalent toward immigration control and democratic governance than their elders. [Pew polling](#) indicates most younger Americans see greater racial diversity and inclusion of women in leadership as needed for a nation that two-thirds believe is heading in the wrong direction. A socio-ideological shift is underway in national security which will take an inclusive team of U.S. leaders to fully comprehend.

The next national security strategy should acknowledge this. If great power competition demands U.S. national security leaders coach the nation to win, then diversity and inclusion among them are more than cultural niceties, they are competitive necessities. Each merits investment and oversight as future force requirements on par with technologies and weapons that typically dominate budgets. And defense leaders should be reminded the platforms of U.S. security rely on the diverse Americans who fund them as much as the appropriations that authorize them.



Celebrate unity as victory.

U.S. defense planners think a lot about victory in the next great war. They assess threats, build scenarios, phase response options, game outcomes, and distill what they learn into operational plans. These “O-Plans” are highly complex, comprehensive, and classified. Every one of them is also highly contingent on a tacit assumption — that a united America, once prodded, will answer the next federal call to arms.

Most U.S. national security professionals know this assumption is an uncertain variable, but they also know they are not employed to question or address it. Unfortunately, their rivals in other great powers are.

[Russia](#) is exploiting and stoking racial division in America for its own global gains. [China](#) likewise sees opportunity in domestic division and demographic discord. Even [Iran](#) has joined the fray for posture without power projection. Strategists in each of these nations know that the center of gravity of any great nation is civic cohesion. Without it, no military can be mobilized, no struggle sustained, and no victory vied.

Discreetly but boldly, some sectors of the U.S. defense establishment

are declaring this. The U.S. Marine Corps’ latest recruiting campaign, “[Battle to Belong](#),” offers it subtle salute. The diversity portrayed in the Army’s “[What’s Your Warrior](#)” campaign showcases similar cognizance. The Navy’s naming of its next aircraft carrier for [Doris Miller](#), an African American enlisted sailor, rather than for the customary President or Admiral is telling as well. And Pentagon leaders’ rare public break with the White House over [removing Confederate names](#) from military bases and [employing troops](#) in civil protests shows understanding runs high.

As welcome as these moves are, there is impotence in their independence. The next national security strategy should bring them together. It can signal at home and abroad that the citizenry and military of America stand united. It must forcefully and clearly articulate how, together, they will defend their claim to great power. And it must celebrate that unity is victory for every member of the executive branch it directs.

In 2021, a diverse nation can remember not just what, but also who, is included in its security. The next national security strategy offers a way to start.



Frank T. Goertner

Frank T. Goertner, a retired Navy Commander, is Director for Military and Veteran Affairs at the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business where he also chairs their Initiative for Veteran Lifelong Leadership.

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Marguerite Rivard Benson

Marguerite Rivard Benson is founder of Sticky Wicket Advising. She has 15+ years of service at CIA, DoD, and USAID and as a management consultant at McKinsey & Company.



Rainey Center

317 A Street SE
Washington, DC 20003
(202) 350-1689
info@raineycenter.org
raineycenter.org