
Defense Report

AUSA



Too Many Blacks in the Army? The Reverend Jesse Jackson Thinks So

When U.S. Army combat troops were first committed to action in Vietnam in 1965 the units involved were largely elite airborne battalions. These were primarily manned with volunteers, rather than draftees, and their ranks contained a much higher percentage of black soldiers than many other combat units. This imbalance was due to the fact that the airborne units, eligible for extra incentive pay and adorned with distinctive uniforms, held a special attraction for the black soldiers.

The airborne units acquitted themselves very well in combat but they did take substantial numbers of casualties and, because the black soldiers were in the thick of the fighting, they took their share. It did not take long before civil rights leaders, opponents of the war and members of the press began to comment unfavorably on the seemingly disproportionate number of dead and wounded black soldiers. At that time the number of blacks in the Army was representative of the overall U.S. population.

As the Army made the transition from its predominantly draftee makeup to a volunteer force, the number of black soldiers has grown steadily in every kind of unit. Young blacks have seen military service as a way to escape unemployment lines and as an honorable path toward higher education and social betterment. They are good soldiers and along with an increase of blacks in the lower ranks there have been substantial gains for blacks in the noncommissioned officer, commissioned officer and in the general officer ranks. Today, the Army is almost 38 percent black.

The Nation is not on the brink of war and there is no expectation that casualty reports will start coming in from some distant battlefield but there is concern about potential public reaction to the unavoidable high number of blacks whose names would appear on those lists if we went into combat. The Reverend Jesse Jackson, who stands foursquare behind self-betterment and social advancement for blacks, recently commented that our Army is 45 percent black and therefore blacks would bear the brunt of any future fighting. His percentage was wrong (although some Army combat units are over the 50 percent mark in black soldiers) but his perception of a potential imbalance in casualties is certainly correct.

The only way to eliminate that imbalance is to reduce the number of blacks in the ranks. This could not be done without denying them one of the few wide open employment and educational opportunities available. Certainly another channel of opportunity would have to be opened if the military path were restricted.

If there is genuine, widespread concern over this disparity, those who voice the concern should look for that alternate channel and seek to open it as soon as possible.