

# One Tribe Requires Inclusion

The Commandant's Directive to talk creates an opportunity  
by Col Christopher Shaw

The highly publicized killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers and the resulting months of global protests compelled the Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC) to encourage all leaders to converse with their Marines and Sailors about “discrimination, racial inequity and prejudice.” In the Commandant's direction, he told us, “by listening, we learn; by learning, we change.” However, talking about racism and racial bias makes people uncomfortable—so they avoid it. This is particularly true in the Marines, where we call ourselves a brotherhood despite our female colleagues and consider our Corps a meritocracy even though promotion rates differ among different racial groups. Additionally, many leaders claim they do not see race, which blinds them in the fight against racism. Nevertheless, we must discuss race because being one tribe requires inclusion of all Marines.

Following CMC's encouragement, I engaged Marines of all ranks in conversations about race to garner a better understanding of whether racism and racial bias affect our Corps and to what extent. CMC's encouragement to talk gives every Marine permission to self-examine the Corps and ourselves to determine if racism and racial bias ail us too. Through my conversations, I learned racial inequities still exist in the Corps. Racism and racial bias in our Corps acts like friendly fire. The possibility of friendly fire remains ever present, and the entire team must stay vigilant and work together as a team to limit its occurrence while mitigating the effects when it happens. This

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article aims to highlight the existence of racial bias in the Corps in order to promote conversation and reflection with the hope that leaders take the time, now between high intensity conflicts, to attack this problem within our units and spheres of influence. This way our Corps will become a more unified team, better prepared for the fights ahead.

George Floyd's killing, on 26 May 2020, captured on 8 minutes, 46 seconds of cellphone video marked the latest in a cluster of four notable racial incidents that occurred in early 2020. On 23 February 2020, three white men, including a former police officer videotaped, pursued, and killed Ahmaud Arbery in Glynn County, GA. On 13 March 2020 in Louisville, KY, police killed Breonna Taylor while mistakenly serving a “no-knock” warrant on the wrong residence. On 25 May 2020, a white woman called in a false police report on Christian Cooper claiming he threatened her after he politely asked her to obey the law requiring her to leash her dog in New York City's Central park. In response to these incidents and the decades of discrimination, police violence, and injustice against racial minorities that they represent, protesters have demanded equal justice under the law for all Americans, an end to police brutality, and they have called

on our institutions to examine their role in systemic racism.

These incidents triggered varied reactions in Marines. Some Marines are unaware of these four incidents. Other Marines see these occurrences as four isolated acts conducted by individual bad actors. Another group of Marines see these four incidents as representative of state sponsored violence and threats of violence against black Americans, which indicates a pervasiveness of racism that also infects our Corps.

These disparate and often conflicting views possess parallels to questions about racism and racial bias in our Corps. Some Marines do not know it as an issue, others believe no racial bias exists, and others believe not only does racism and racial bias exist but it limits the effectiveness of the Corps. Often, these disparate views track along racial lines with many white Marines being unaware or believing race is not an issue, and most Marines of color believing race is a significant issue. When we see smoke, we should look for fire. Such strong conflicting views can indicate a lack of understanding among teammates and teams that do not understand each other may have difficulties trusting each other, leading to trust gaps. Gaps that Marine leaders must eliminate as they build one tribe for warfighting.

Throughout my career as an infantry officer and judge advocate, I maintained regular conversations with my colleagues about a range of professional topics. However, before CMC's direction, I never specifically asked Marines whether they experienced racism even though I am a black American. I never brought it up because I felt wary of talking about race. Further, I believed if someone had a problem with a racial issue, then it was safe and incumbent on that Marine to come to me about the issue rather than for me to inquire.

Armed with CMC's directive, I queried my mentees, peers, and superiors about intolerance, racism, and prejudice in our Corps. What I discovered disappointed me. My conversations with white Marines, "proved" they were not racist, the Marine Corps was fair, and that all lives mattered. My conversations with black Marines taught me about white officers using the n-word, white superiors stating they would not rank a black Marine over a white Marine, and that black Marines felt they needed to defend their status as Marines. Further, black Marines felt it violated a clear unwritten rule to share issues of race with their non-black peers or seniors, similar to my hesitance to discuss these issues with them.

These discussions also highlighted that we do not all commonly understand and agree upon terms of reference. So, as a start, I developed the following definitions from multiple sources to aid our discussion:

**Racism:** Action taken in support of the belief or doctrine that inherent differences among the various human racial groups determine cultural or individual achievement, usually involving the idea that one's own race is superior and has the right to dominate others or that a particular racial group is inferior to the others.

**Prejudice:** Preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.

**Racial Prejudice:** Prejudice against or hostility toward people of a particular race, color, or culture.

**Racial Bias:** Preconceived or unreasoned inclination, feeling, or opinion about one racial group compared with another.

**Racial Micro-Aggression:** Comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group (such as a racial minority).

**Systemic Racism:** Systems in place that create and maintain racial inequality in nearly every facet of life for people of color including discrimination in criminal justice, employment, housing, health care, political power, and education. These systems may appear neutral or have been created with neutral intent, but in application are manipulated through acts of omissions to have biased and discriminatory results.

**Diverse Organization:** Organization made up of individuals of different backgrounds, cultures, and gender. Diverse organizations are not necessarily inclusive organizations.

**Inclusive Organization:** Organization where due to a climate of demonstrated understanding **everyone feels a sense of belonging**, feels respected, and feels valued. They also feel a level of supportive energy and commitment from leaders and peers.

**Military Cohesion:** The forming and bonding together of service members into a united whole in such a way as to sustain their will and commitment to each other, the unit and mission accomplishment despite combat or operational stresses. (Based on GEN E. C. Meyer, U.S. Army.)

What follows are real life incidents of Systemic Racism and Racial Micro-Aggression experienced by black Marines. I have categorized each incident using definitions from above. The quoted information is a description of the event and the italicized portion is what the Marine thought about the incident.

- Systemic Racism: "I was driving on the highway with my eleven-year-old daughter and was stopped by police. The police officer had his hand on his gun, said he stopped me because he smelled weed, and asked if I was transporting drugs." *As a Marine, who served all over the globe, I found it sadly ironic that while home in America a police officer accused me of transporting drugs and threatened me and my*

*child's life by placing his hand on his gun.* Manpower Officer lieutenant colonel, 2020.

- Racial Micro Aggression: "At TBS, during our first meeting with our SPC, he went on a tangent about how the Civil War wasn't about slavery, but about states' rights." *As the only black lieutenant in the platoon, I did not know if I should confront the captain to tell him the states' right in question was the right to allow slavery. I immediately felt alone and uncomfortable in my platoon, knowing that both my leadership and peers felt fine publicly expressing and agreeing with that point of view.* Basic School 2nd lieutenant, 2015.

- Racial Micro Aggression: "At IOC, one of my peers said I was there because 'they can't drop all of the black guys.'" *I thought he believed I earned a "quota" spot despite fighting for my MOS by graduating in the top 5% of my TBS class and being an Ivy League graduate.* Basic School 2nd lieutenant, 2019.

- Systemic Racism: "I finished Naval Justice School as the honor graduate. However, I had to fight to have my merit accurately reflected because several times my earned grade was recorded as a lower grade." *I thought the instructors deliberately tried to obscure my grades so a Black woman would not become the honor graduate.* Judge Advocate 1st lieutenant, 2019.

- Racial Micro Aggression: "Even though I was an infantry officer, many white officers asked if I was the adjutant or Motor T Officer." *I thought they were saying I could not be a good infantry officer, and I did not belong on the team.* Infantry Officer colonel, 2020.

- Racial Micro Aggression: "As an infantry officer from captain to colonel, fellow Marines questioned: 'How did you get here?'" *This comment implies I am not supposed to be here. Twenty-six years ago, these comments were unacceptable and not asked of my white peers, it is frustrating that these comments are still made in the year 2020.* Infantry Officer colonel, 1996–2020.

- Racial Micro Aggression: "Throughout my career, and most recently in discussing George Floyd's killing, I've been told 'oh, you're different, you're

not like those blacks who [insert false stereotype here].” *In response, I explained that I was not an exception. In viewing me as an exception, you completely marginalize black people and projected biases against them. Biases that are often demonstrated against black Marines when not in uniform.* Logistics Officer captain, 2020.

- Racial Micro Aggression: “Having just checked in to my first unit in the fleet, my battalion commander said the “n” word several times in a joke about black men and being lazy during a staff meeting. No one flinched.” *As the only black Marine in the room, I instantly knew I’d never truly be a part of his team.* Supply Officer 2nd lieutenant, 2015.

- Racial Micro Aggression: “During a class at the Infantry Officer Course, the instructor said the “n” word multiple times while addressing 80 of my fellow lieutenants.” *Being in a space where a leader could say this with no consequences concerned me about what was said or thought behind closed doors when I was being discussed or evaluated. This experience undermined my faith that Marines are held to a higher standard.* Basic School 2nd lieutenant, 2013.

- Systemic Racism: “Each year I review the officer promotion selection rates for captain to colonel and notice the selection rate for black officers is lower at each rank than the rate for white officers.” *I wonder why this happens. Are black officers not as good as white officers? Is the Corps failing black officers? Does my race make it harder to get promoted?* Colonel, 2020.

We should not accept the incidents and environments described above. The incidents inflicted on Marines by Marines violate Marine Corps core values, diminish our ability to become a team, and jeopardize the cohesion essential for effective military operations—including combat. Marine officers who harbor ill sentiments against different racial groups that manifest in using the “n” word should be removed from the Marine Corps. Such officers abandoned their honor and commitment to leading the diverse team of men and women who raised their hand to serve our Nation.

The Marine Corps must function as a team to be effective. Teams fundamentally operate interpersonally and high performing teams require mutual respect and value amongst team members. Racism and racial bias basically exhibit a lack of respect and value of people due to their race. In the context of team building, determining whether racism or racial bias exist does not need to be proven in a trial-like fashion. This would force an accuser to bear the burden of proving beyond a reasonable doubt that a person or act is racist. Instead, a leader must demonstrate they build teams where all team members feel valued and respected. Although this standard may seem nebulous, the military consistently recognizes the importance of morale and *esprit de corps* despite their intangible nature. The leader cannot simply determine there is no problem, just like the leader cannot simply declare trust is high and morale is great. Leaders must earn trust and cultivate morale. An inability to maintain trust or morale reflects a failure of leadership.

The responses above also show us that if leaders do not specifically ask about or address racial bias, our Marines may never tell us about the racial injustices they endure. By not seeking information and actively addressing these issues, they may remain hidden from us, perpetuating racism and racial bias within our Corps. This erodes trust, hindering our ability to retain talent and limits our ability to fight and win as one tribe. Furthermore, because of the competitiveness within the Marine Corps, one racially biased “velvet daggered” fitness report or comment in a promotion board can be the difference between selection and non-selection to the next rank. This impacts retention and separation from the Marine Corps. Today’s racism and racial bias in the Corps became covert, but it originates from a historical foundation when Marine Corps racism was unapologetically overt.

The historical racist and segregationist exclusionary policies of the U.S. Government and individual states from their inception through the Civil War and Emancipation until the Civil Rights

Act of 1964 were created in order to and maintain “white power” over black Americans. These policies established and maintained slavery, Separate but Equal policies, and Jim Crow laws also produced Marine Corps racial exclusionary policies. In 1798, “the Secretary of War declared that no Negro, Mulatto or Indian” could enlist in the Navy or Marines. This prohibition on black Americans enlisting in the Marine Corps survived 144 years, through the Civil War, World War I, and numerous other conflicts. In the midst of the Second World War, President Roosevelt lifted the ban. At that time, CMC MajGen Holcomb stated: “If it were a question of having a Marine Corps of 5,000 whites or 250,000 Negroes, I would rather have the whites.” With the prohibition lifted, the Marine Corps segregated black Marines from white Marines for training and placed black Marines in all black units led by white officers. During World War II, black Marines were often used as laborers supporting all-white combat units despite being trained for combat. After World War II, leadership told black Marines they could only re-enlist if they became stewards.

In July 1948, President Truman desegregated the U.S. Military with Executive Order 9981. It took over a year for the Marines to execute the President’s order and Marine Recruit Training racially integrated in September 1949. The historical presence of racial bias in the Marine Corps is clear. Determining when or if racial bias ended, and how to make that determination, is less clear. In my conversations, I discovered that some Marines think that racism ends when it is possible for Marines of color to succeed. Others think it simply needs to be probable that Marines of color can succeed. Still, others believe you can only declare racism extinct when Marines of color succeed on par with white Marines who share a similar track record.

So, 71 years after desegregation, where are we today? In the enlisted ranks, Marines of color attained the highest ranks. Yet, in the officer ranks, no person of color has obtained the rank of four-star general in the Ma-

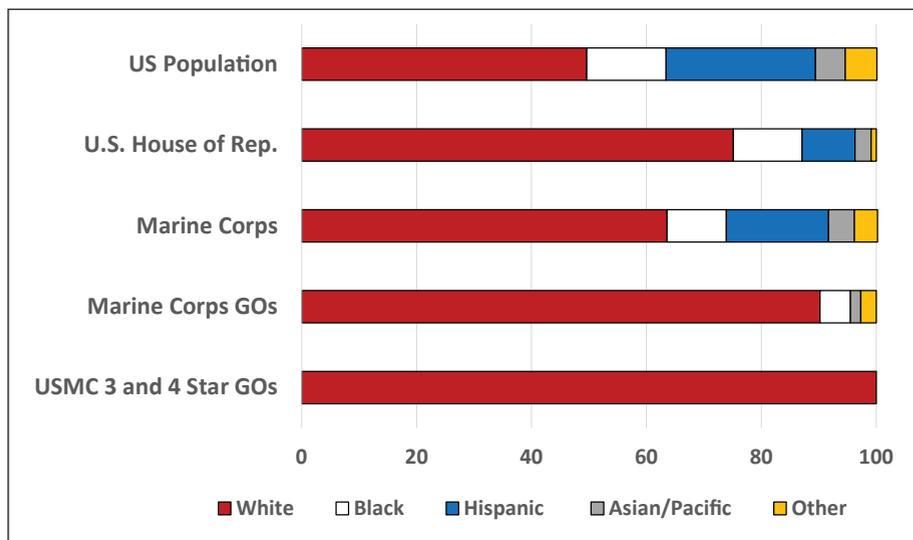


Figure 1. (Figure by author.)

Marines. Only five African-American Marine officers have held the rank of lieutenant general, and currently, there are no black Marine three-star generals on active duty. For the purposes of this article, the term senior leaders refer to three- and four-star general officers because these Presidential designated positions of importance and responsibility maintain the most influence over the Marine Corps. These general officers serve as the CMC, Assistant Commandant, Deputy Commandants, and Commanders of Marine Forces and Marine Expeditionary Forces. White Marines serve in all the senior leadership positions in the Corps, which indicates challenges of inclusivity remain.

**Leadership Principles Remain Constant, But New Contexts Warrant Modifying Application**

Our mission to fight and prepare for war requires us to dedicate time, resources, and intellect to examine if we are building optimal teams. This facet of our mission requires us to examine our Corps for racism, racial bias, and lack of inclusivity. For those who have doubts, we need to ask if it is possible that our Corps is still infected with the racism and racial biases that plague American society? Does our Corps currently have blind spots regarding racial issues, and do those blind spots hold open vulnerabilities that adversaries can exploit? Are there

racially based obstacles that limit our ability to recruit, retain, and unleash the Marine Corps’ full potential? Do we forget that some of our most lethal developments, such as the atomic bomb, the ballistic missile, the computer, the breaking of the Enigma code, and the Navajo code talkers were driven by leaders with diverse ethnicities, religions, genders, and sexual orientations? The evidence supports an answer of “yes” to each of these questions. More importantly, our warrior culture requires an inquiry of whether racism is present in our Corps and the extent of racism in the Corps and how it hampers our lethality. Anything that unnecessarily reduces our lethality requires a mitigation plan.

Where racism and racial bias exist there also exists a deficit of trust. *Warfighting* teaches us that human factors exert a greater influence than the physical factors on the outcome of war. For Marines and Marine leaders, the critical human factor is trust. Trust that your leadership is competent and cares for your well-being. Trust that Marines down the chain of command will do their job. Trust that the Marine on your left and on your right has your back. Trust is part of “the special sauce,” that distinguishes Marines from others and allows once ordinary American citizens to transform into committed Marines that execute extraordinary acts on battlefields.

As Gen Berger stated, “The trust Marines place in one another on a daily basis ... demand[s] a unified force, free from discrimination, racial inequality, and prejudice.” Marines trust leaders who treat them inclusively and leaders trust Marines they see as inclusive members of their team. Inclusive leadership builds and maintains trust in our units and remains the cornerstone of our Corps’ 245 years of success. Treating Marines inclusively follows CMC Lejeune’s 1920 direction that called for each officer to “endeavor by all means in his power to develop within himself those qualities of leadership including industry, self-control, unselfishness, honor and courage.” Leaders who are industrious find ways to get the most out of all of their Marines. Those with selflessness do not advance their own racial group unfairly over another racial group. Honorable leaders adhere to what is right including the universal social contract to treat others as they wish to be treated. Courageous Marines do not run away from tough conversations. For these reasons, harboring bias and letting it influence how we treat, evaluate and lead Marines violates CMC Lejeune’s directive. Although promulgated 100 years ago, this directive proves relevant today.

We must remain mindful that Marines of the 1920s consisted of white males and high technology communication consisted of short-wave radio, the telegraph, and the newly available telephone. Now, 100 years later in the age of information with the increasingly diverse demographics of the Marine Corps, creating inclusive units that engender trust among all our Marines requires modernizing our approaches to leadership. Today, 61 percent white Americans, 20 percent Hispanic Americans, 9 percent black Americans, 3 percent Asian Americans, and 9 percent women comprise our Corps. Yet all of the senior leaders are the same race as they were 100 years ago, and all but one is the same gender. Today’s technology includes the ubiquitous smart phones that allow us to watch videos of police brutality over and over again and receive commentary about those acts from around the World—including from our adversaries. A wider

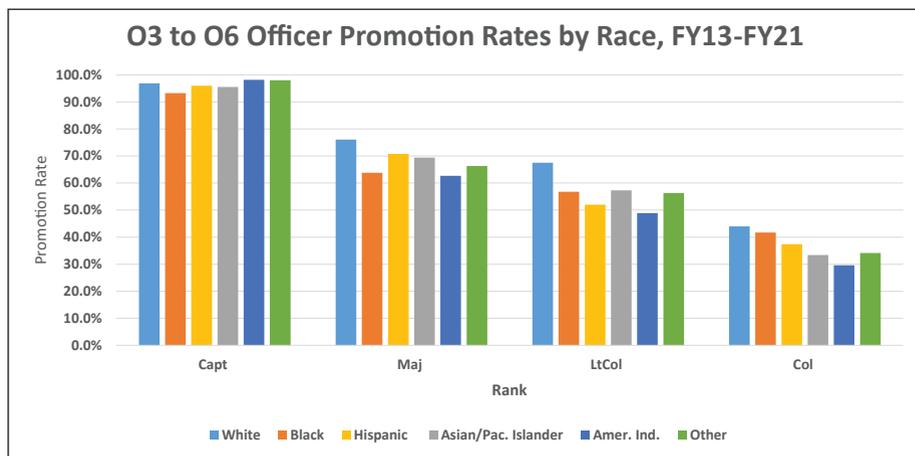


Figure 2. (Figure by author.)

demographic of Americans serve in our Corps and obtain information about the World, our Nation, and our Corps from the Internet. In the past, Marines obtained information from the gunny, the commanding officer, or CMC. While the reality of racial inequities remain, the internal and external contextualization of the current reality is evolving in ways that impact what is required for trust and inclusiveness.

The previous all white male Marines led by all white male leadership could view the Marine Corps as one white male tribe. Despite this past homogeneity, country of origin, sexual orientation, linguistic accent, or religion provided traits that could have been used to discriminate. However, those traits are not visible like race or gender. For that reason, the past transformation process of making Marines toward a normative white male could obscure individual traits and theoretically eliminate them from bias consideration, making inclusiveness easier. A Marine who is prejudiced against people from a certain country will nevertheless treat Marines from that country without bias if he is unaware of their country of origin. Today's transformation does not obscure the race or gender of the modern-day diverse recruit. This current reality makes it possible for the white male hierarchy of the Marine Corps to use immutable characteristics held by some Marines to exclude them from full participation in the Marine Corps.

Systemic racism, racial bias, and micro racial aggressions can be ex-

erted against those that do not fit the normative white male example. As the Marine Corps became more diverse, Marine leaders have not always lived up to the tenants promulgated by CMC Lejeune. Further, the grip that systemic racism holds over institutions of power in America not only allowed a police officer to indifferently kneel on the neck of his fellow American citizen until his death while civilians voiced paralyzed concern. It also makes the Corps a place where Marines of color do not thrive at levels afforded to white male Marines. Over the years, this has been shown where promotion boards do not select Marine officers of color at the same rate as their white peers.

For the Marine Corps to truly become one tribe, Marine leaders need to acknowledge and care that racist practices exist in our Corps and hinder the inclusiveness of our units. The level of care required is the level that treats these issues as if Marines of color are our brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters. Closing the say/do gap requires us to see all Marines as family. To that end, the over-watch extended to Marines that

fit a normative white male model needs to extend to all our Marines.

Over-watch is the principle of receiving feedback and providing the benefit of the doubt, protection, and opportunity. When I provide over-watch, I may see a Marine's mistake as an oversight, and if I deny over-watch, I may see the same mistake by another Marine as a character flaw. The ability to extend over-watch is often controlled by those Marines who hold power—typically, a white male—and is granted only to those Marines he deems worthy. Regardless of those inclinations, all those that earn the title Marine title deserve over-watch from Marine leaders.

By denying over-watch to some Marines, the Marine Corps, while a diverse organization, is not an inclusive organization. By extending over-watch to all Marines, we protect our Marines and our Corps from the biases inherent in all men and women that are destructive to our Corps. Ensuring that each Marine receive judgment on the merits of their performance rather than on race is morally right and consistent with our core values. More importantly, extending over-watch to all Marines minimizes the effects of racial bias in our ranks and will elevate the trust among all our Marines—thereby increasing our lethality on the battlefield.

### Mitigating Racial Bias In The Corps

Individual Marines maintain various biases that prove difficult to strip away. We often formulate our biases from the family that rears us and the society that surrounds us. However, as a Corps, we can incentivize and train Marines to modify their biases and emplace policies and procedures to provide over-watch for each Marine in order to minimize and mitigate the effects of individual

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asia/Pac. Islander	Amer. Ind.	Other
Capt	96.9%	93.3%	96.0%	95.5%	98.2%	98.0%
Maj	76.1%	63.8%	70.8%	69.4%	62.7%	66.3%
LtCol	67.5%	56.8%	52.0%	57.3%	48.9%	56.3%
Col	44.0%	41.7%	37.4%	33.4%	29.6%	34.1%

Table 1.

Marine biases. In stripping away expressed bias, we will build a more inclusive Force with increase trust and unit cohesion that will produce greater combat effectiveness. The following are initiatives to support creating a more inclusive Marine Corps.

### *Corps-Wide:*

1. Create a Marine Corps Diversity and Inclusion Campaign Plan. Issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation and inclusion permeate the Corps. An enduring campaign plan is necessary to identify issues, the effects and mitigation methods that can be used to protect and increase the strength of the Corps despite the inherent biases held by individual Marines. An effective plan would include measures of effectiveness, analytical research, command incentives, and professional military education. Additionally, a hard review of recruiting, transformation, assignments, military justice, evaluations, and promotions should be undertaken to determine if previous policies baked in systemic racism and sexism into Marine Corps Systems.

2. Define Diversity and Inclusion by including the following concepts. Effective teams need both diversity and inclusiveness to be successful. The Corps is diverse because it is made up of people with numerous backgrounds, cultures, and points of view. Inclusiveness allows the Corps to leverage the diverse talents found within the Marine Corps. An inclusive Corps requires leaders and peers to actively create environments where all Marines feel welcomed, respected, and valued. This way Marines feel inspired to commit their talent, intellect, and labor toward the goals of the unit.

3. Embed racial justice awareness and bias mitigation training throughout

Marine Corps professional military education.

4. Incorporate a 360-degree evaluation concept into fitness reports and or pre-command screenings. Our current evaluation system primarily rates Marines from a top down perspective. The Marine Corps can obtain a more holistic evaluation of performance by also accepting inputs from peers and subordinates. The added benefit of more holistic evaluation tools provides another touch point to check against bias.

5. Encourage command responses, when Marines alleged off base racial discrimination by local authorities. If a Marine alleges to their command that they experienced racial harassment or discrimination from police or state authorities, the Marine's chain of command or base leadership should make local authorities aware of the allegation and, where appropriate, request an investigation or resolution of the allegation. We show support of our Marines, become aware of issue that may be affecting an individual or group of Marines and may influence the positive resolution of the issue, by assisting our Marines in resolving these types of allegations.

### *Individual Leaders:*

1. Purposely seek mentees of all races and genders; and seek feedback from them regarding racial and gender issues.

2. Examine yourself honestly, determine what biases you have and whether you have biases that favor or disfavor particular races, gender, or sexual orientation. Emplace personal SOPs to minimize the effects of your biases. Read books about bias to assist you in your self-assessment and mitigation methods.

3. If a Marine identifies issues of race, you should not summarily dismiss the issue. Instead, accept the message, respect the perspective, and consider the perspective in your decision making. This does not mean you have to agree with the perspective.

LtGen "Brute" Krulak warned, in 1957, "The United States does not need a Marine Corps. However, for good reasons which completely transcend cold logic, the United States wants a Marine Corps." This desire hinges on the American people's trust for us to "make Marines and win battles." As the American people and Congress become increasingly diverse, I argue the Marine Corps must and will become more diverse, inclusive, and less biased—thereby preserving trust between the American people and the Marine Corps. Should a trust gap between the American people and the Marine Corps ever develop, our lethality would be compromised because our ability to recruit the next generation of Marines and garner appropriate funding would be at risk.

Despite the uncertain future, I trust in our Corps. Marines learn, adapt, and consistently evolve into an ever more formidable force. Today's historic reflection point calls for action to ensure fairness and justice for all who earn our title. Marines respond with courage when called to action. Our courage to fight in every clime and place extends to fighting for the inclusiveness required to create one tribe.

