

AIRIP Monthly Webinar Series: Diversity of Thought in Intelligence

Articles on Diversity in Intelligence from Carmen Medina and Jorhena Thomas

- 1) Here is a [link](#) to Carmen's discussion on Diversity of Thought for a Swedish audience
- 2) From [Carmen's Blog](#) – Recovering Fed: **Why the CIA Struggles with Diversity**
- 3) Two [articles](#) from Jorhena Thomas on Diversity in Intelligence from her Medium.com Blog.

Why the CIA Struggles with Diversity

The Central Intelligence Agency has a problem recruiting minorities and advancing them into senior leadership positions, CIA Director John Brennan admitted last month. “There have been impediments,” Brennan [told reporters](#), “to minority officers being able to rise in the organization.”

As a Puerto Rican woman who spent 32 years at CIA and nine of those years as a member of the Senior Intelligence Service, you might think my experience revealed a few secrets for advancing as a minority at the Agency. But during my career, I was struck much more by the subtle (and not-so-subtle) barriers to entry and advancement that the Agency presented to people who did not come from a Western European background. Not all of the affected were members of officially recognized minority groups—you can be a different thinker regardless of your heritage or experiences. But the information CIA released on minority representation suggests ethnic and racial minorities have had the most difficulty adapting to existing cultural norms, both when they seek Agency employment and when they attempt to advance in the bureaucracy.

My hunch is that any effort to increase both minority presence and influence at CIA will falter as long as the subtle and not-so-subtle cultural barriers to entry and advancement exist. As the recently published [Diversity Leadership Study](#) concluded, the CIA does not consistently promote an inclusive culture. In my view, constructing a more inclusive culture requires the Agency to reset some of its cultural precepts, including some long-held, treasured beliefs.

One cultural precept at CIA I think harms diversity efforts is an American/northern European-centric view of the world. This perspective expressed itself in many ways, most of them quite subtle. For example, I often heard the phrase “American Exceptionalism” at CIA. Senior leaders would use it frequently, never imagining, I would think, how that might come across as patronizing to a sizeable percentage of the workforce. Even now, I feel compelled to add—lest my patriotism be challenged—that I am a proud American who believes the United States contributes in a positive way to the planet.

But I think that’s generally true of all cultures—they make positive and negative contributions to the world. It is perhaps inescapable that an American intelligence agency would default to the West as its model and icon of goodness. But Agency leadership could usefully audit their common phrases and mental shortcuts to remove ones that are egregiously Euro-centric. Another example is a phrase I heard with some regularity from CIA officers that went something like this: “Everything in country X has fallen apart since the [pick your colonial power] left.” Although I shared my discomfort with friends, I’m ashamed to say I never pointed out directly to a colleague how such a remark might come across to members of a minority group – especially one from that particular nation.

It’s probably not obvious how such under- and overtones might relate to the lack of minority representation among CIA leaders. What I think happens is many officers struggle with being true to their own beliefs and cultural heritage even as they seek career success at the Agency. I know I did. The Diversity Leadership Study acknowledges the subtle ways in which this culture can impede the advancement of people who are different:

The Agency does not recognize the value of diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, nor consistently promote an inclusive, “speak-up” culture where all opinions are heard, valued, and taken into account. Some officers disengage because when they share their thoughts and perspectives on mission or workforce issues they are not considered. [emphasis mine]

Articles from Jorhena Thomas:

Intel Community, Our Turn is Coming

Today, it is law enforcement, but our turn is coming.

It is no secret that the intelligence profession in the US is woefully under-representative of people of color. It is also no secret that the same mistrust that many people of color in the US (understandably) have of law enforcement also extends to the more secretive world of intelligence. People of color have been [wrongfully surveilled](#) in the name of intelligence gathering and national security during the height of the civil rights movement and have been labelled as [“black identity extremists”](#) and [terrorists](#) in recent years, merely for promoting civil rights.

I have been in the intelligence world for almost twenty years. Yet, I can count on one hand the number of intelligence colleagues I have in the US that are people of color. It shocked me to realize it, and I hope it shocks you too. I absolutely love my colleagues of all stripes, but it is hard to accept that only a few look like me or can relate to some of my most basic experiences of being a person of color in the US.

Just as systemic racism can be insidious, invisible, and imperceptible, so can poor tactical and strategic decisions based on intelligence developed by a homogenous group that hasn't taken the full picture into account — not necessarily because it chose not to, but rather because it was not equipped to.

Unlike bias in law enforcement, which often exposes itself directly to its victims, **bias in the intelligence profession shows up subtly through faulty analytical conclusions, targeted investigative strategies, or ill-informed policy recommendations.** In a country where racism, colorism, classism, and other-ness biases permeate the culture, those who are structurally understood to be at the bottom ranking will generally be those who get hurt by a lack of diversity.

We have enough experience as a country to recognize that those who don't have a seat at the table are most definitely on the menu. As protestors around the country continue to demand reforms in our law enforcement services, and as [major organizations](#) call attention to the dearth of diversity in the national security realm, it is only a matter of time before people start to think about how representative other elements of our society that are meant to protect us are— the intelligence community being one of them.

In the intelligence world, we use what we call “indications and warning” techniques to look ahead and forecast what might be coming down the pike, while there is enough time to address it. We should use this current situation (outspoken anger against law enforcement abuse and the wider issue of systemic racism that fuels it) as a glaring indicator that large swaths of the population are not content with the status quo. People want to know that those whose job it is to ensure their safety and security won't abuse or misuse their power, and that even if some do abuse or misuse their power, that there are enough diverse voices around to be a check on the biases that undergird their actions.

What can we as intelligence professionals do at this moment in time?

Three Reasons HBCUs Should Establish Intelligence Programs Now

The demand for intelligence professionals who can provide critical thought and creative perspectives to the US national security and intelligence field continues to grow. Agencies are looking to hire candidates with strong skill sets tailored for this crucial work, such as intelligence analysis, geographic expertise, and critical language ability. In addition to recruiting candidates with these skills, agencies are simultaneously looking to increase the diversity of their ranks, which for many agencies is severely lacking, particularly in regard to African-American intelligence professionals and senior leaders.

While historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are exceptional places for educating young African-American students in supportive and confidence-building environments, most do not offer a distinct track for students to learn about and develop skills to enter the national security and intelligence field. There are several reasons that HBCUs might want to consider investing in programs that expose and prepare students for a meaningful, in-demand career field that is in dire need of diverse perspectives and experiences. Here are three reasons that rise to the top.

1. It will increase the talent pool for the US Intelligence Community.

Last October, President Obama issued the [“Presidential Memorandum -- Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in the National Security Workforce”](#), which provided direction on tracking and promoting efforts to prioritize diversity within agencies involved in national security. According to the memorandum, “our greatest asset in protecting the homeland and advancing our interests abroad is the talent and diversity of our national security workforce...As the United States becomes more diverse and the challenges we face more complex, we must continue to invest in policies to recruit, retain, and develop the best and brightest from all segments of our population.”

Before we can recruit, develop, and promote qualified diverse candidates within the Intelligence Community and other national security-related agencies, there must first be a deep pool of talent to pull from. That talent will come in large part from our institutions of higher education, some of them HBCUs. Establishing dedicated programs to develop this talent at the undergraduate level is necessary. Of the 104 HBCUs, only a handful currently offer this type of program. HBCU students must be given the same opportunities to learn about, develop skills for, and have access to national security and intelligence work as their counterparts at other institutions. We can't expect to increase diversity in the national security and intelligence space when (most of) the country's institutions of higher education that cater to students of color don't offer them the means to be introduced to the career path.

2) The next generation deserves it.

We owe it to the next generation of HBCU students to expose them to the wide range of potential careers that studying national security and intelligence opens to them. One of the reasons for the dearth of African-Americans in the field is simply lack of exposure during undergraduate education. Another reason is that some students have negative preconceived ideas about the field, which prevent them from exploring it. (The recently exposed and misguided FBI intelligence assessment about [“Black Identity Extremists”](#) demonstrates what can happen when there is a lack of diverse perspective in the room.) Moreover, some may simply conclude that it is not a field for them because they don’t know, or haven’t seen, anyone of color who has worked in the field. The impact of role models, or lack thereof, cannot be underestimated here.

HBCUs should feel a responsibility to expose their students to as wide a range of career options as possible, particularly careers that are growing and expanding in terms of popularity and demand. Students can certainly obtain the education and skills needed to excel in the field through other programs, but there is a compelling argument for committing resources to the development of a program dedicated to preparing the next generations of diverse intelligence professionals. HBCUs offer a lot of benefits to their students; staying at the cutting edge of academic offerings, providing career preparation that reflects current demand, and supporting national efforts to increase diversity in critical fields should be among them.

3) There is funding available to do it.

Generally, the first objection that schools make as to why they don’t invest in certain programs is a lack of funding to do so. However, in the case of establishing a fully-functioning intelligence program, this is not the case. The Defense Intelligence Agency offers a generous amount of funding to schools that are serious about developing a robust intelligence and security program. The funding comes through the [Intelligence Community Centers for Academic Excellence program](#), which has been in existence since 2005. The mission of the program is to “provide grants to competitively chosen universities and colleges to enhance the recruitment and retention of an ethnically and culturally diverse Intelligence Community workforce with capabilities critical to the national security interest of the United States”.

A small number of HBCUs have participated to some degree in the past, but some of the programs have not taken root as initially intended, for a variety of reasons. Nonetheless, the funding opportunity remains, and can make all the difference in providing resources, support, access, and opportunity to fledgling programs and students open to expanding their horizons. Not only does the funding cover the core expenditures like faculty and curriculum development, but it also covers international travel, conference participation, and foreign language acquisition,

among other related activities that will prepare students to be well-rounded, competitive candidates for national security and intelligence careers upon graduation.

In sum, the national security and intelligence field needs a continual flow of qualified, diverse candidates in order to operate most effectively. HBCUs are uniquely positioned to contribute to this talent pool, and can do so by establishing dedicated programs that will expose students to the field and equip them with the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to enter and excel as national security and intelligence professionals.