



COMMENTARY: This is our moment to lead reconstruction of the force

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TINKER AIR FORCE BASE, Okla. -- As the Chief of Staff of the Air Force Gen. Charles Q. Brown leads the Air Force in addressing racial disparity issues, I am reminded of the challenges our forefathers faced during the reconstruction of our nation in the years following the Civil War.

The 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution was adopted in 1868 as one of the Reconstruction Amendments. Section 1 of that amendment says, "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subjected to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law; nor deny to the person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."

In 1868, Ohio Congressman John Bingham led the government efforts to fight for equality for every man, woman and child, no matter their race. He stood for justice and said no U.S. citizen would be denied liberty and would be allotted equal protection.

Leaders in our government felt so strongly about the reconstruction of the nation that our forefathers addressed by putting it in writing in the United States Constitution. I think they wanted to ensure that after their departure from office, all Americans would still be afforded these rights.

The reconstruction of the nation was a plan to undo the injustice of slavery and acknowledge former slaves as U.S. citizens. However, the strength of the 14th Amendment was dependent upon the mindsets, biases and racial opinions of those who were empowered to uphold its guidance.

After the amendment was established, I believe the Supreme Court failed to hold it to the true nature of its intent, making judgements based on interpretations and opinions of the amendment at the time. An example of this is the Civil Rights Cases (1883), which stated the amendment was limited to "state action" and, therefore, did not authorize Congress to outlaw racial discrimination by private individuals or organizations.

The abridgment or denial of those civil rights by private persons is not explicitly addressed in the 14th Amendment.

The Equal Protection Clause, which took effect in 1868 and is part of the first section of the 14th Amendment, responds to the lack of protection provided by law in southern states when it pertained to the Black Codes. Under the Black Codes, Blacks could not sue, give evidence or be a witness in court. They also were punished more harshly than whites.

The Equal Protection Clause mandated everyone be treated and protected equally by federal and state law.

I feel the Air Force is currently making great efforts to address racial disparity, and, like the 14th Amendment, I believe the Air Force is committed to the reconstruction of the force. Also, like the 14th Amendment, the reconstruction will take time.

The strength of any policies and regulation created will depend upon the mindsets, biases and racial opinions of those who are empowered to uphold them. Words, statistics and numbers on paper are not enough to change a person's mindset or biases. But, I believe history has taught us that empathy is the way to change how a person views a situation in which another person is affected.

The Air Force has initiated a plan for the reconstruction of the force, but I feel the ultimate success of the plan rests with squadron-, group- and wing-level leadership. It is at these levels that the guidance will be most important to enforce.

Some leaders may have biases and blind spots that will influence their decisions. Some may believe there is no racial disparity because they have not witnessed it or have not been affected by it.

There may be others who believe that, as an Air Force, we cannot change people's mindsets.

While there may be a few who will be beyond our reach, the vast majority of us will play a critical role in the successful reconstruction of the force.

As leaders in the U.S. Air Force, this is our moment to do the right thing and make the necessary changes to eliminate racial disparity in the force.

John F. Kennedy once said, "The rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened."

As leaders, I feel we must all be empathic and address our own biases and blind spots. As empathic leaders, we must go beyond understanding the reports, statistics and numbers, and reach out and connect emotionally with the Airmen under our care and responsibility. We may not get it right the first time, but we will keep trying until we do. And when we do, we will all be better, stronger, more resilient Airmen and proud members of the world's greatest Air Force.

(Editor's Note: The views expressed in this commentary are those of the writer and do not represent those of the U.S. Air Force or Department of Defense.)

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