

Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Barack Obama, and the U.S. Military

Timothy Hsia

On Martin Luther King Jr. day many federal employees including military personnel not deployed will enjoy a federal holiday. This year's Martin Luther King Jr. day will be of greater significance given that Barack Obama will be sworn in as the first African-American President and Commander in Chief the following day. In 2007, Barack Obama [hailed the Tuskegee Airmen](#) as trailblazers for racial equality, and in a fitting tribute, he has invited the surviving soldiers of this unit to his inauguration.

The Tuskegee Airmen indeed paved the way for African-Americans but it would be a historical oversight to overlook the accomplishments of the many other African-American Soldiers who have distinguished themselves in America's history. From the heroic deeds of the Massachusetts 54th Regiment which captured Fort Wagner from the Confederates and is recalled in the movie *Glory*, to the Buffalo Soldiers who settled the Western Frontiers.

The Army continues to honor the tradition of the Buffalo Soldiers and the accomplishments of African Americans in the military by ensuring the lineage, history, and tradition of those units live on. For example, the 24th Infantry Regiment which was activated in 1869 specifically for black soldiers continues to serve the nation as an active army unit. The black soldiers of 24th Infantry served with great distinction in numerous wars: Spanish-American War, the Pacific in World War II, and the Korean War. I am especially fond of 1-24 Infantry aka "Deuce-Four" because it was my first unit and the one which I am regimentally affiliated with.

The U.S. military, despite its stereotype as a bastion of conservatism, has been a progressive force in the nation's movement towards racial equality. It was General William T. Sherman who in 1877, first sought to end segregation in the U.S. Army. But it was not until President Truman, a former Army artillery officer, who defying public opinion and his own party platform at the time, issued the bold Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948:

It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.

President Truman's executive order did not completely eliminate racial tension in the military. And black soldiers serving in the Korean and Vietnam War often found that they were better treated overseas than at home in the states. Nonetheless, today's military celebrates its diversity and proudly boasts as one of the most colorblind institutions in the world. In U.S. military

communities worldwide and in deployed areas, soldiers of all color and rank live, work, pray, and play together on a daily basis.

Soldiers will begin saluting President Obama, the new Commander in Chief, on January 20th, the day after Martin Luther King Jr. day. This will be a historic day, but in truth, today's soldiers find this act commonplace as they regularly salute men and woman of color in today's racially integrated service.

When President Obama assumes the oath of office, he will be standing at the intersection of America's awkward if not bitter racial past and its hope and grand ambitions for the future. Many black servicemen and women have made this day possible. President elect Barack Obama is wise to honor the many black servicemen who helped make this day possible by fostering racial equality. From the first black West Point graduate in 1877, Henry Ossian Flipper, to the flying daredevils of the Tuskegee Airmen.

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