



Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet
Honoring Americans of Asian and Pacific Islander Heritage
U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland
Admiral Harry B. Harris Jr.
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As delivered

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, and future warriors of the United States Navy and United States Marine Corps. Aloha and good evening. It's a special treat to be back in the Yard. And although many things have changed since I graduated in 1978, one thing I suspect hasn't changed is the attitude of Mids towards long-winded Admirals who are asked to give a speech – then offer instead an oral manifesto.

There are enough manifestos around this place, so I plan to be brief, then be seated. After all, one of history's greatest speeches was given by President Abraham Lincoln and it lasted just over 2 minutes. Julius Caesar gave what might have been the longest recorded speech and his best friends killed him. I get the message.

So let me jump right in by saying that “diversity” has become a buzzword of our times, a word that means many things to many people. When I said it just now, I'd like you to think about what idea popped into your mind. Was it a tangible thing, like race or age or gender? Was it a philosophy? Was it a political agenda? This evening, I'd like to spend a few moments talking about my perspective on diversity, what it means to me, and how I believe it positively impacts the Naval Academy and our military.

“The condition of being different.” That's the dictionary meaning of diversity. It's an irony, I suppose, that the military – known for establishing a culture of uniformity – is the same military that embraces our differences and leads in the struggle for diversity.

How can these two ideas go hand-in-hand? Well, I submit that our Navy and Marine Corps team understands that to be the best, you have to draw from the whole. I barely got through engineering here, but even I know that the best of any given group is better than the best of a sub-group of that group. If we only had 100 quotas for Naval Aviation this year and we picked them from only the First Regiment, ignoring all the qualified Mids in the Second Regiment, our future flying force would be less than it could or should be. This is more than simply a desire that we want to mirror the society we're sworn to protect – though there's goodness in that.

America's Navy and Marine Corps are teams where men and women of every race, religion, economic background, and sexual orientation proudly take the lead, bringing their different skills and talents to bear every day, creating an environment of excellence. But it hasn't always been that way. Go back in history to just as recently as 2011 when “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” was repealed – and as far back as the signing of our Constitution, and you can see the expansion of opportunities over the centuries to include those who didn't own property, weren't white or male or Christian.

As President Theodore Roosevelt once wrote, “Wide differences of opinion in matters of religious, political, and social belief must exist if conscience and intellect alike are not to be stunted.”

I believe that embracing diversity is vital to both our present and future. We cannot achieve healthy growth without it. One former CNO rightly said that as leaders, we must not be locked in time – we must anticipate and embrace the demographic changes of tomorrow to build a Navy that always reflects our country’s make up.

Right now in the Navy, minorities represent almost 50 percent of the enlisted workforce, but only 22 percent of the officer corps and about 13 percent of our Flags. Within the Flag ranks, 91 percent are male and only 9 percent female – 87 percent are white, with only 6 percent African American, 5 percent Asian Pacific American, and less than 2 percent Latino.

Though these numbers make it clear that we have work to do, they also point out how far we’ve come just in the span of my career. We want to welcome every Sailor and Marine into a family they will proudly call their own for the rest of their lives – a family that exists like no other on land, at sea or in the air.

Like mine, your Naval family bonds are beginning here in the Yard.

When I arrived at the Academy in 1974 as a Midshipman of Japanese American descent, I wasn’t sure what to expect or what kind of greeting I would receive.

Fortunately for me, others had already blazed a trail in Annapolis. One of those was class of ’59 graduate Vice Admiral Robert Kihune, who when he retired in 1994, was the highest ranking Asian American officer in Navy history.

Before Kihune went to the Academy, he thought he would encounter problems because he was half-Japanese and half-Hawaiian. But as he said once, and I quote, “when I arrived, the commanders and Midshipmen didn’t care what race I was. They saw me as another member of the greatest Navy in the world.”

I suspect the same is true at the Academy today. I know it’s true around the world. When one of our amphibious ships pulls in to a foreign port, not only do people see the power of our nation, they also see capable Sailors and Marines who are a reflection of our nation.

That said, it’s worth pointing out that the Academy was an all-male institution back when Midshipman Kihune arrived – as it was when I started back in 1974. Thankfully, we got that right starting in 1976 – before any of you were born.

During her briefing to the All-Flag conference in D.C. earlier this month, Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, talked about how success and likability are often positively correlated for men and negatively correlated for women. When a man is successful, he is liked by both men and women. When a woman is successful, people of both genders like her less.

Sandberg backed up this point by citing a case study about a real-life entrepreneur named Heidi Roizen, describing how she became a very successful venture capitalist.

Professors gave the study to Harvard Business School students to rate on several factors. Half the students got the study with Heidi's name, and the other half got the exact same study with the name "Howard" in place of "Heidi." While the students rated Howard and Heidi equally in terms of competence, they rated Howard as a more appealing colleague – while Heidi was seen as, quote, "... not the type of person you would want to hire or work for."

I bring this up to challenge all of you about perceptions. When you graduate and become junior officers, you will have a lot of perceptions about your Sailors, your Marines and your leaders – and they will have perceptions about you. And those perceptions could be formed in seconds.

What will your perceptions be? How will you use them to make the Navy and Marine Corps a better fighting force?

Our Navy and Marine Corps team has been, and still is, making great strides to create a strong, culturally diverse workforce. Not an end in itself, but as a means to the end state of a more capable, more lethal fighting force.

Marines and Sailors come from cities, towns and farms ... from every economic walk of life and every corner of our nation and, indeed, the world ... with different faiths, sexual orientation and backgrounds ... and yet we all share a common goal ... to serve our country ... to protect American interests around the globe ... to defend our very way of life.

Former Naval officer and President John F. Kennedy, once said, "If we cannot now end our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity." That's a powerful statement.

Diversity is America's great strength, and it's also a strength here at the Academy.

Now, there are some critics who question the return on investment of recruiting and admitting a diverse student body here at the Academy. Having developed a questioning attitude at this very institution when I was a Mid, I've really thought about this criticism. So I say without hesitation, that the American taxpayers are absolutely getting their money's worth. I've been there, done that, and have seen the power that a diverse officer and enlisted corps brings to the Navy.

The Midshipmen I've spoken with here tonight remind me of high quality officers like class of '85 E.O.D. operator Rear Admiral Bette Bolivar, who is leading our naval forces in Guam. Or Rear Admiral Pete Gumataotao, class of '81, who commands all East Coast surface ships. Or my predecessor in this job, and my classmate, Admiral Cecil Haney, who now commands our nation's nuclear forces at U.S. Strategic Command. There is no doubt that the Academy continues to produce officers of the utmost intellect and character. But the critics need not take my word for it, as the 2015 U.S. News and World Report college rankings listed the Naval Academy as the Number 1 public liberal arts university in America.

Diversity is not just another word for equal opportunity, though that's important. Diversity is about the power of choosing the best of the big group – and not selecting the top of a sub-group.

It's about new and different ideas that spring naturally from the attributes our people bring with them from their various walks of life.

Our officer corps also benefits from a diversity of graduates from outstanding universities across the country – like Vanderbilt graduate Vice Admiral Nora Tyson, who was the first woman to command a Carrier Strike Group and soon to be the first to command an operational Fleet. And the Commandant of the Marine Corps General Joe Dunford, a graduate of St. Michael's College. Or Admiral Bill "Shortney" Gortney, who attended Elon College. When you get out to the Fleet, I ask that you remember that Annapolis graduates do not hold a monopoly on leadership and teamwork

In my world, collaboration is one of the keys to mission success. Inclusion is at the heart of effective collaboration, be it with our shipmates at sea or in working with our allies and partners around the world.

The globally interconnected world we live in is becoming more complicated every day, with complex maritime challenges. Echo chambers will not solve these challenges. That's why diversity can't be seen as a "nice to do" or an "add-on" to business as usual. The Navy-Marine Corps team must have the best available people to solve tomorrow's problems.

Developing critical thinkers has always been one of the great success stories of the Naval Academy, which also has a rich tradition of producing exceptional officers with Asian Pacific heritage – a fact I'm reminded of at my Hawaii headquarters when I see the destroyer USS Chung-Hoon docked at Pearl Harbor.

Class of '34 graduate Gordon Chung-Hoon, a Hawaiian-born American of Chinese heritage, was the first officer of Asian Pacific descent to command a Navy warship, USS Sigsbee. In 1945, when a kamikaze suicide plane caused explosions and flooding on board his destroyer, Chung-Hoon's leadership enabled the crew to save the ship. Awarded the Navy Cross for his actions, he was later promoted to rear admiral, the first officer of Asian Pacific heritage to make Flag rank.

I need to look no further than my own staff to see how Admiral Chung-Hoon's legacy lives on today – where retired Captain Dave Yoshihara, former Commander of Destroyer Squadron 9, serves as the warfighting and innovation guru at PacFleet. Dave's father, retired Captain Takeshi Yoshihara, lived in a Japanese American internment camp during World War II as a teenager. Despite this injustice, Takeshi still retained his patriotism – so much so, that he was accepted to the Naval Academy in 1949 and became the first American of Japanese descent to graduate in 1953.

Then there's class of '81 grad Rear Admiral Alma Grocki, who is the first Hawaiian-born female to ever attend the Academy. As the N43 at PacFleet, Rear Admiral Grocki leads the Fleet Maintenance program for nearly 60 percent of the entire Navy. I am also convinced she is most popular woman in Hawaii based on the important public outreach she conducts with a number of local organizations.

And that legacy continues in the person of her son, Midshipman Dan Grocki, here in the audience tonight.

It's important for Dan and every Midshipman here to know that you navigate in the waters of those who sailed before you – officers of consequence who made a difference for our Navy-Marine Corps team, and for our nation. And now it's your turn to carry on.

But don't think that the Navy-Marine Corps team is perfect. For example, Vice Admiral Walter Davis was the last African American fighter pilot in the Navy to make Flag rank – way back in 1988.

When Dr. Benjamin Mays delivered the eulogy at Dr. Martin Luther King's funeral, he said that Dr. King's unfinished work on earth must truly be our own.

Ladies and Gentleman, that work falls on each of us here today. Each of us must continue to support an open, diverse America – our nation, our business, our industry, and our military depend on it.

Americans of Asian Pacific descent hold no monopoly on dreams and aspirations. We simply want to be successful on our merits and not held back by our genetics. Let me be frank here. Our nation has not always dealt immigrants and minorities a fair shake – even those who are American citizens. That said, the many cultures resident in the immigrant experience share a common underpinning of honor, pride, and perseverance that has added immeasurably to our strength as a nation and our strength as a Navy-Marine Corps team.

So I am thrilled to be standing before you, as an Asian Pacific American, celebrating our heritage with all Americans in this new age, where diversity is embraced by a larger percentage of our society than ever before. Again, we are not where we need to be yet, but I believe we are on the right track.

Ladies and gentlemen, rarely can I remember what speakers said during my time in the Yard. OK, I can't remember a thing that any speaker said!

So I don't expect that many of you will remember much from my remarks tonight. But if you only remember one thing, let it be this.

There is no doubt in my mind that a Mid in this audience tonight will become a Flag or General officer. But whether you spend 4 years or 40 years in service, move forward with the confidence of knowing that our uniformity and our diversity are a powerful combination. Embrace this belief and be the leaders we need in the Fleet in the years ahead.

Before stepping up here, Lieutenant (Stephen) McCartney reminded me that I'm supposed to say something pithy and impart some wisdom to the crowd.

So here's something pithy: "Fate rarely calls upon us at a moment of our choosing." Think about that. "Fate rarely calls upon us at a moment of our choosing." Pretty cool words.

Now here's the wisdom: That's a line from the movie Transformers 3. Now you can tell your friends that a salty hundred-year old Admiral was stealing lines from Optimus Prime.

By now, I'm sure my manifesto is leading to daydreams of going over the wall and heading to Acme. So let me conclude by saying how important all of you are to the American people and to our nation's future.

Today, our Navy-Marine Corps team is in high demand, literally everywhere. Since the time I stood here in the Yard 40 years ago, our operating tempo is as high as I've ever seen. But our mission – to protect America, and defend the interests of our nation, our allies and partners – is juice worth the squeeze.

As Midshipman (Zenas) Yun mentioned in the introduction, I'm proud to be the Navy's first 4-star Admiral of Asian Pacific heritage. But more than that, I'm proud to be an American on the Navy-Marine Corps team – amongst the outstanding men and women, from diverse backgrounds, who are critical thinking Sailors and Marines that serve with honor, courage and commitment.

Future warriors, thank you for your attention tonight. I'm honored to be with you and I'm proud to be part of our Naval Academy family.

Thank you very much.