

The US Army as a Learning Organization: A Review of Manpower Policies for the Utilization
of African-American Soldiers after World War II

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TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World*, states that “[t]o mitigate strategic surprise, the Army must continue to emphasize adaptability in leaders, units, and institutions that can learn and innovate while fighting.”¹ In his study of military adaptation, historian Williamson Murray notes that learning from the past has been one of the elements that directly links peacetime innovation with wartime adaptation.² The US Army exhibited several of the practices of a learning organization during the process of determining how to utilize African-American soldiers in the post-World War II force. This organizational learning resulted in important changes in how the Army utilized African-Americans that would prove critical during the Korean War.

Army Doctrinal Reference Publications (ADRP) 1, *The Army Profession*, 6-22, *Army Leadership*, and 7-0, *Training Units and Developing Leader* reference learning organizations in the Army. However, none of these references provides much of a definition or description of what constitutes a learning organization. Even a cursory survey of the literature about organizational learning reveals that there are as many descriptions of what constitutes a learning organization as there are proponents of organizational learning theory. An examination of definitions proposed by prominent organizational learning theorists Peter Senge from MIT’s Sloan School of Management, Chris Argyris and David Garvin from Harvard Business School and Stephen Gerras of the US Army War College reveals some similarities.³ From these definitions, one could propose that learning organizations generate knowledge and new ways of thinking by explicitly identifying underlying assumptions and mental models that influence the receipt of information and decision-making, challenging and changing organizational mental models when required, and utilizing collaboration to extend learning throughout the

organization. These three practices provide a framework with which to assess the Army as a learning organization as it began its transition after World War II.

At the end of World War II, the United States Army faced the daunting task of demobilizing a force of nearly eight million soldiers and eighty-nine divisions and transitioning to a post-war force while facing significant operational requirements and reduced military appropriations based upon the Truman administration's post-war budgetary practices.⁴ The question of determining African-American participation in the post-war Army took on greater urgency. During World War II, the number of African-Americans in the active-duty Army increased from less than five thousand in 1939 to reaching a peak strength of just over 700,000 in September 1944.⁵ Truman K. Gibson, Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War, noted to Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy a growing belief among some Army leaders that wartime policies had failed to make the most efficient use of the nation's African-American population and that such failure in the future could jeopardize military success.⁶

Study of four efforts by the Army to examine the performance of African-American soldiers during World War II and apply lessons learned to future utilization provides an opportunity to evaluate if the Army demonstrated the use of these learning practices. First, in March 1945, the US 6th and 12th Army Groups received fifty-three platoons of African-American infantrymen who voluntarily left service units and participated in several months of training in France to help mitigate a shortfall of infantry replacements.⁷ Following the end of the war with Germany, the Headquarters, European Theater of Operations surveyed more than five hundred soldiers that served in divisions that received African-American infantry platoons and fifteen hundred other soldiers from across the European Theater's combat forces. The survey asked what these soldiers thought of "the combat performance of Negro rifle platoons, which

were attached to their companies in March and April and fought side by side with white platoons through VE day.”⁸

Second, in 1945 War Department directed the headquarters of the Army Ground Forces, Army Services Forces, and Army Air Forces to submit reports that provided considerations and recommendations for the employment of African-Americans in the post-war military.⁹ The commands provided their assessments of the performance of African-American soldiers during World War II, their capabilities for service in the Army, and the causes of racial conflict within the Army. These reports also provided recommendations for training and employing African-American soldiers in the future.

The third effort resulted from the establishment of the Gillem Board. In late 1945, the War Department also appointed a board of general officers under Lieutenant General Alvan Gillem, Jr. to “prepare a broad policy for the utilization of Negro manpower in the military establishment.”¹⁰ The Gillem Board formulated two questions to guide its work. These questions were “how shall Negro personnel be utilized in the Army in the event of another national emergency?” and “what basis of Negro personnel is necessary in the post-war Army in order to provide for rapid expansion in time of war?”¹¹

Finally, in 1946, several field grade officers proposed answers to these questions as well. The leadership of the Army Command and General Staff College selected a small number of lieutenant colonels and colonels to participate in an experimental professional military education program called the Command Course. Part of this course involved analysis of recent combat operations and study of current and future military problems.¹² One iteration of the Command Course produced two analytical studies of the utilization of African-American soldiers.

Two practices that learning organizations engage in are identifying and challenging underlying assumptions and mental models that influence the receipt of information and decision-making. The Army closely examined many of its underlying assumptions and mental models regarding African-Americans soldiers. The assessment provided by the Army's major commands illustrate several of these prevailing assumptions and beliefs. The major commands' reports on the performance of African-American soldiers during World War II were overwhelmingly negative. The Army Service Forces stated that African-Americans performed at sixty to seventy-five percent of what white soldiers were capable of and rated the overall efficiency and leadership ability of black soldiers well below that of white soldiers.¹³ The Army Ground Forces added that African-American soldiers did not display any sense of responsibility, showed a tendency to excessive malingering, and were undependable. Officers and non-commissioned officers lacked any sense of responsibility, initiative, and self-confidence due to a natural deficit of leadership ability.¹⁴ The major commands concluded that only a small percentage of the African-American population possessed the mental characteristics necessary for combat soldiers.¹⁵ The AGF report stated "the Negro...[c]ompared to the white man, he is admittedly of inferior mentality. He is inherently weaker in character."¹⁶ These conclusions are identical to conclusions reached by some commanders in the Army Expeditionary Force following World War I.

The survey of soldiers in the European Theater cast a more critical eye upon these assumptions and beliefs. One assumption that the survey examined was that close contact between African-American and white soldiers would result in increased racial conflict. The survey also examined institutional Army beliefs that African-Americans lacked the necessary intelligence required for Army training and their inherent lack of courage to stand and fight in

the face of enemy fire or exercise leadership made them unsuitable for utilization as combat soldiers.¹⁷ The responses of the soldiers surveyed challenged these assumptions and beliefs. Overall, the survey showed a dramatic improvement in the attitudes of white soldiers towards serving in the same unit as African-Americans. More than seventy-seven percent of the respondents that served with an African-American infantry platoon reported that their feelings on serving in a mixed-race unit had become more favorable while none of the respondents stated that his experience serving with African-Americans made him less willing to serve in a mixed unit in the future. More than eighty percent of those surveyed responded that African-Americans performed very well in combat while the remainder stated that they performed fairly well. None of the officers and only one percent of the noncommissioned officers surveyed felt that African-Americans performed poorly in combat. In fact, the company grade officers cited aggressiveness, use of fire and maneuver and teamwork as the strengths of the African-American infantry soldiers while identifying a tendency to take overly aggressive action as their main weakness. Sixty nine percent of officers and eighty-three percent of noncommissioned officers felt that African-Americans would perform just as well as whites as infantrymen given the same training and experience.¹⁸

The War Department's premise that it could not intermingle white and African-American soldiers within units also came under scrutiny in the European Theater survey. Sixty-two percent of officers and eighty-nine percent of noncommissioned officers felt that the most effective way of employing African-Americans as infantrymen in the future would be to assign platoons of African-Americans within white infantry companies. A very small minority advocated integration down to the soldier level, while the remaining respondents felt that organizing African-American infantrymen at the company or battalion level was most effective.¹⁹ A

comparison of the survey responses revealed that those soldiers who served in some proximity to the African-American infantry platoons viewed future service in mixed-race unit much more favorably than those soldiers who served outside of the divisions who received African-American infantry replacements.²⁰

The Gillem Board examined several of the same underlying beliefs and assumptions. Rather than accept genetic inferiority as the root cause for the lack of leadership qualities in African-American soldiers reported by the Army commands, the Board examined alternative explanations. Using the work of sociologists, such as Gunnar Myrdal, who published his seminal examination of race relations in America, *An America Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, in 1944, the members of the Board concluded that environmental factors and lack of opportunity were more likely causes of this shortfall than any inherent inferiority.²¹ The Gillem board also examined the belief that African-Americans lacked the intelligence to master the training required of combat soldiers. After conducting a demographic analysis of African-Americans in the United States, the Board concluded that vastly improved education levels and job opportunities would lead to “continued mental and physical improvement of all citizens,”²² including African-Americans.

The Gillem Board also examined and challenged the Army’s premise that race should play a determining factor in the utilization of manpower. The Board advocated for a transition towards providing equal opportunity for all qualified personnel by establishing an Army objective of attaining “the effective use of all manpower made available to the military establishment in the event of a major mobilization at some unknown date against an undetermined aggressor. The manpower to be utilized, in the event of another major war, in the Army without regard to antecedents or race.”²³ The Board also recommended immediately

providing all officers, regardless of race, with equal opportunities for promotion and professional development and assigning African-Americans with specialized skill sets to overhead units as individuals. Lastly, the Board challenged the belief that forcing close contact between African-Americans and white soldiers would inevitably lead to racial conflict by recommending the use of education and experience to resolve friction points.²⁴

This scrutiny of the Army's prevailing assumptions and beliefs about African-American soldiers carried over to the work of officers attending the Command Course at Fort Leavenworth. Colonel Stephen Mack, a fighter group commander in Europe during World War II, authored a study of the utilization of African-American soldiers. While Colonel Mack's analysis did not break new ground in concluding that African-Americans soldiers did not perform as well as white soldiers during World War II, his conclusions and recommendations demonstrated the willingness to examine and challenge the Army's assumptions and mental models. Mack cited the roles of repression and environment rather than any lack of inherent ability as the cause of the poor performance of African-American soldiers.²⁵ He recommended integration of black and white soldiers at the lowest level, preferably at the individual soldier level.²⁶ He theorized that closer associations between African-American and white soldiers would improve the performance of African-Americans as they attempted to imitate the actions of whites.²⁷ Colonel Mack also concluded that white officers must change their thinking and take responsibility for the development of African-American soldiers.²⁸

Even the major commands recommended changes in the utilization of African-American soldiers. The Army Ground Forces (AGF) recommended future attachment of African-American units to white units for training and operations.²⁹ The AGF also advocated for establishing equal standards for all soldiers and providing African-American soldiers the opportunity to

demonstrate their competency for combat duty and assigning them to duties commensurate with their potential and capabilities.³⁰ The Army Service Forces recommended execution of literacy training to improve the capabilities of African-American soldiers.³¹

The Army also demonstrated a third practice of learning organizations, utilizing collaboration in order to extend learning beyond the individual level. This collaboration began with the willingness of the Army leadership to temper their use of directive leadership. On several occasions during the war, Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall defended segregation as a necessary personnel policy for the Army due to prevailing social conditions in the United States and the lower level of intelligence and occupational skills generally found in African-Americans.³² In correspondence to the Secretary of War, Marshall wrote that any attempt by the Army to address the social conflict represented by racial segregation would jeopardize discipline and morale.³³ When briefed on the results of the European Theater survey, Marshall felt that the circumstances of the selection, training, and employment of the African-American infantry platoons did not support broad application across the force. Despite this view, Marshall authorized additional study of integrating African-American units into white units.³⁴

Other aspects of collaborative learning practiced by the Army include examining and changing learning frameworks and the use of multiple views to develop a deeper understanding of a complex issue.³⁵ In the past, the Army based its assessments of African-American soldiers primarily on the reports of commanders. While the reports of the Army's major commands did have significant impact on the assessment of the performance of African-American soldiers during the war, other instruments such as soldier surveys, demographic analysis, and sociological theory provided a deeper understanding of contributing factors. The various studies utilized

provided views from multiple echelons to provide a more complete view of African-American performance and race relations.

Ultimately, the ability to learn is valuable only if an organization can translate those lessons into effective action. A brief examination of the Army decisions and actions shows some steps towards capitalizing on what the Army learned. On 27 April 1946, the War Department issued Circular 124, “Utilization of Negro Manpower in the Postwar Army Policy.” This document defined the War Department’s policy as:

Negro manpower in the postwar Army will be utilized on a broader professional scale than has obtained heretofore. The development of leaders and specialists based on individual merit and ability, to meet effectively the requirement of an expanded war Army will be accomplished through the medium of installations and organizations. Groupings of Negro units with white units in composite organizations will be accepted policy.³⁶

While Circular 124 listed thirteen implementing steps, the Army focused its initial efforts in education and forming composite units. Education took on two forms: indoctrination of the force and improving the education level of African-American soldiers. Indoctrination of the force focused on using films and unit-based discussions to promote understanding and support for the new policy.³⁷ In April 1947, the Army published *Army Talk*, issue 170 for use in unit discussions between company-level leaders and their soldiers. *Army Talk 170* focused specifically on Circular 124.³⁸ It described the Army’s position on race as “basic equality of opportunity of all soldiers, irrespective of race, is essential to highest military effectiveness.”³⁹ *Army Talk 170* defined cooperation as an important component of an effective Army force. In this context, it defined cooperation as “I’m willing to work with you if you’ve got the stuff.”⁴⁰ The discussion notes instructed commanders to stress the fact that the Army sought only to regulate soldier behavior not dictate their beliefs. The notes also pointed out that the unique

nature of military life meant that soldiers did not have the luxury of choosing their leaders, subordinates, or co-workers.⁴¹

There were several initiatives in the Army to improve the educational level of African-American soldiers. Spurred by the personal interest of Lieutenant General Clarence Huebner, the European Command established a comprehensive education program in 1947. This program sought to improve the performance of African-American soldiers using “a system of rigid basic training with carefully controlled conditions which insure, insofar as possible, the development of pride in self and organization.”⁴²

In the two years following the issuance of Circular 124, the Army formed four composite combat units beginning in February 1947 with the assignment of the African-American 24th Infantry Regiment to the 25th Infantry Division in Japan.⁴³ In December 1947, the Army redesignated the African-American 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion as 3rd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Battalion and assigned it to the 82nd Airborne Division along with the 503rd Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion and the 758th Tank Battalion.⁴⁴ In January 1948, the Army assigned an African-American infantry battalion to the 2nd Infantry Division’s 9th Infantry Regiment and in March 1948, the 508th Armored Field Artillery Battalion joined the 2nd Armored Division.⁴⁵

In the preface to the Army Operating Concept, 2020-2040, General David Perkins states that Army professionals’ vision of armed conflict in the future “must drive change to ensure that Army forces are prepared.”⁴⁶ In 1945, the US Army faced requirement to decide how to shape the post-World War II force for the future while facing the double-barreled pressures of increasing operational requirements and decreasing monetary resources. In considering the question of how to utilize African-American soldiers, the Army exhibited key behaviors of a

learning organization, including examining and challenging underlying assumptions and mental models, and engaging in collaboration. The Army translated some of what it learned into policy and action but like many large bureaucracies, preferred to engage in small course corrections. The Army's vigorous fight to retain the use of segregated units after President Truman issues Executive Order 9981 to integrate the Armed Forces in 1948 is one example of the institutional inertia present. However, the measures put in place following World War II set conditions for rapid adaptation in policies and practices for the use of African-American soldiers during the initial year of the Korean War. In 2015, the US Army faces similar conditions and seeks to divine force structure requirements and changes. The same organizational learning practices may help drive the innovation required now to set conditions for successful adaptation in the next armed conflict.

¹ TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept 2020-2040: Win in a Complex World*, (Joint Base Eustis-Langley, 2014), 43.

² Williamson Murray, *Military Adaptation in War* (Alexandria: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2009), 1-4, www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA509781 (accessed 1 May 2015).

³ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1990); Chris Argyris, "Double Loop Learning in Organizations," *Harvard Business Review* (September/October 1977): accessed 29 April 2015, <https://hbr.org/1977/09/double-loop-learning-in-organizations>; David A. Garvin, "Building a Learning Organization," *Harvard Business Review* (July/August 1993): accessed 29 April 2015, <https://hbr.org/1993/07/building-a-learning-organization>; Stephen J. Gerras, "The Army as a Learning Organization," (Strategy Research Project, US Army War College, 2002), <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA404754> (accessed 15 April 2015).

⁴ Richard Stewart, ed., *The United States Army in a Global Era, 1917-2003*, Vol 2 of *American Military History* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2005), 201-205, 211.

⁵ Richard M. Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1969), 44; Ulysees Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1966), 416.

⁶ Truman K. Gibson to John J. McCloy, Washington, DC, 8 August 1945, in *Planning for the Postwar Employment of Black Personnel*, vol. 7 of *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*, ed. Morris J. MacGregor and Bernard Nalty (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1977), 16 and 18.

⁷ Bryan D. Booker, *African Americans in the United States Army in World War II* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2008), 278.

⁸ Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, “Opinions about Negro Infantry Platoons in White Companies of 7 Divisions”, 3 July 1945, Desegregation of the Armed Forces collection, Harry S. Truman Library, http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/desegregation/large/documents/pdf/10-11.pdf#zoom=100 (accessed 14 November 2010), 1.

⁹Gibson to McCloy, 20.

¹⁰ War Department, “Circular No. 124 Utilization of Negro Manpower in the Postwar Army Policy,” 27 April 1946, Desegregation of the Armed Forces collection, Harry S. Truman Library, http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/desegregation/large/documents/pdf/10-4.pdf#zoom=100 (accessed 14 November 2010), 2.

¹¹Ibid., 2.

¹²Michael Stewart, “Raising a Pragmatic Army: Officer Education at the US Army Command and General Staff College, 1946-1986,” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2010), 15.

¹³Army Service Forces, “Participation of Negro Troops in the Postwar Military Establishment,” Washington, DC, 27 September 1945, in *Planning for the Postwar Employment of Black Personnel*, vol. 7 of *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*, 32.

¹⁴Army Ground Forces, “Participation of Negro Troops in the Postwar Military Establishment,” Washington, DC, 28 November 1945, in *Planning for the Postwar Employment of Black Personnel*, vol. 7 of *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*, 102-103.

¹⁵Ibid., 101 and 108-111.

¹⁶Army Ground Forces, “Participation of Negro Troops in the Postwar Military Establishment,” 118.

¹⁷ L. D. Reddick, “The Negro Policy of the United States Army 1775-1945,” *Journal of Negro History* 34, no.1 (January 1949): 24; Sherie Mershon and Steven Schlossman, *Foxholes and Color Lines* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 15-16; Ulysees Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1966), 17.

¹⁸ “Opinions about Negro Infantry Platoons in White Companies of 7 Divisions,” 2-3.

¹⁹Ibid., 4-5.

²⁰ Ibid, 6-7.

²¹ War Department, “Circular No. 124 Utilization of Negro Manpower in the Postwar Army Policy,” 27 April 1946, Desegregation of the Armed Forces collection, Harry S. Truman Library, http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/desegregation/large/documents/pdf/10-4.pdf#zoom=100 (accessed 14 November 2010), 4.

²² Ibid, 4-5.

²³ Ibid., 12.

²⁴ Ibid., 9-11. Overhead and installation units referred to organizations that managed the running of a post, installation or institution such as a training center or school.

²⁵ Stephen B. Mack, “Policy for Utilization of Negro Troops in the Armed Forces,” (study, US Army Command and General Staff College, 1946) in Combined Arms Research Library Digital Library, http://cgsc.cdmhost/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/p124201coll2&CISOPTR=433&CISOBOX=1&REC=7 (accessed 14 November 2010), Tab A-1.

²⁶ Mack, 2.

²⁷ Mack, Tab A-1.

²⁸ Mack, Tab A-2.

²⁹ Army Ground Forces, “Participation of Negro Troops in the Postwar Military Establishment,” 95.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

³¹ Army Service Forces, “Participation of Negro Troops in the Postwar Military Establishment,” 59.

³² Donaldson, 112.

³³ Booker, 49.

³⁴ US Army Center of Military History, “African American Volunteer Infantry Replacements,” <http://www.history.army.mil/html/topics/afam/aa-volinfreps.html> (accessed 24 June 2015).

³⁵ Soren Eilertsen and Kellan London, “Modes of Organizational Learning,” 2005, 4; Stephen J. Gerras, “The Army as a Learning Organization,” (study, US Army War College, 2002), 9.

³⁶ War Department, “Circular 124: Utilization of Negro Manpower in the Postwar Army Policy,” 1.

³⁷ Robert Patterson to President’s Committee on Civil Rights, “War Department Policies and Practices Related to Civil Rights,” 15 May 1947, Desegregation of the Armed Forces collection, Harry S. Truman Library, http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/desegregation/large/documents/pdf/15-2.pdf#zoom=100 (accessed 14 November 2010), 6.

³⁸ War Department, “Army Talk 170,” in *Segregation Under Siege*, vol. 8 of *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*, ed. Morris J. MacGregor and Bernard Nalty (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1977), 81.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴³ James C. Evans, “The Negro in the Army: Policy and Practice,” in *Segregation Under Siege*, vol. 8 of *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*, 727.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 713.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 728.

⁴⁶ *The Army Operating Concept 2020-2040: Win in a Complex World*, iii.