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AFJAGS Podcast: Episode 58

Unconscious Bias with Colonel Jerime Reid - Part 1

Host: Captain Charlton Hedden **Guest:** Colonel Jerime Reid

We invited Colonel Jerime Reid to sit down with us and share his thoughts on why disparities exist and how we can take action and move forward and address these biases.

Background

Captain Charlton Hedden:

As many of our listeners know, The JAG School sits on Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. Host to schools like the Air Force Air War College and the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies. Maxwell is the birthplace of modern air power. But Montgomery, Alabama, is also the birthplace of one of the most important events in American history, the Civil Rights Movement. Not only did Martin Luther King Jr. preach here from a church in the heart of the city, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery city bus. And they both were represented by local attorney Fred Gray, who went on to represent the victims of the Tuskegee research projects.

It's hard not to think of these great historic leaders when we think about diversity, inclusion and equity, because despite the strides we've made since the fifties and sixties, a lot of the societal biases, though they may be unconscious, still exist today. Their work is still not done, and it's up to us as Airmen and as attorneys advising command clients to do what we can to help address these biases and move forward to a more inclusive and diverse service. As JAGs, one of the most important things we can do for our clients is to recognize the disparities and ensure as much equity in their decision-making process as we can.

One of the reasons the JAG Corps has taken such an interest in diversity and equity, is based on recent studies looking at the disparities in the military justice process. In December of 2020, the Air Force Inspector General released a study on racial disparity. It showed that from 2006 to 2019 young black Airmen were 74% more likely to receive an Article 15, 60% more likely to be court-martialed, and almost twice as likely to be involuntarily discharged from the Air Force based on misconduct. Lieutenant General Jeffrey Rockwell, The Judge Advocate General of the Air Force, addressed Congress on these discovered disparities:

Lieutenant General Jeffrey Rockwell:

Like many of our civilian counterparts, we collect data on race in the military justice process. Our data shows that black male Airmen below the rank of E-5 and with less than five years' time in service, are almost two times more likely to receive non-judicial punishment, an Article 15, or face courts-martial. While we review specific cases to ensure there is not disparate treatment based on protected class, we don't have clear answers or underlying reasons as to why the disparity exists.

Like all difficult issues the nation faces, solutions to address that disparity will require whole of government and societal approaches. We are committed to working with you to be part of that solution. Throughout our history, we have defended the nation, fought and won our wars because of four simple yet key components. First, the best people. Second, the best training. Third, the best equipment, and fourth, the most important element that binds us together—discipline.

Discipline lies at the heart of what the nation expects of its military in the execution of our national defense missions. Discipline must be developed from day one. Discipline must also be **earned**, by the military establishment by treating all of our members with dignity and respect, with equal opportunity to meet and exceed standards.

Capt Hedden:

Of course, saying that we want to move forward with inclusion and equity is easy, but just identifying the reasons behind the disparity has already proven challenging, especially as it often requires us all individually to perform some self-reflection and to think through our biases, both perceived and unconscious. To discuss the challenges of identifying and overcoming the disparity in the military justice system, we invited Colonel Jerime Reid to sit down with us and share his thoughts on why the disparities exist and how we can take action and move forward and address these biases.

So, thank you for joining us for episode 58, part one of our two-part interview with Colonel Reid. Enjoy.

[Music: Band playing a section of the Air Force Song]

Introduction

Colonel Jerime Reid:

All right. Well, I am Colonel Jerime Reid. I am a 38F, force support officer by trade. I have been in the Air Force for almost 25 years now. So, in March it will be 25 years of service in the United States Air Force, and I'm proud of that service. In my career I've been a squadron commander three times, two in the deployed environment. I have been a vice wing commander. I've also been executive officer for a two-star general at the Air Force Personnel Center. I have done some time in the embassy doing work with the Office of Security Cooperations in the embassy in Baghdad, Iraq, and also did a short stint at ROTC headquarters before taking on a job as the Vice Wing Commander there at the 42nd Air Base Wing at Maxwell Air Force Base. And now I am the Director of Manpower, Personnel and Services at Air Mobility Command, otherwise known as the AMC, A1. So that's where I am.

African-American. Grew up in San Antonio, Texas. Kind of a military brat. But my dad was in the Air Force active duty. And then, after about eight years of service, converted over to being a civilian and served for the Department of the Air Force roughly 39 years and eight months. So, I have grown up in, around the Air Force and am proud of our service and what we've done. Over here.

Capt Hedden:

Wow. Thanks. That's a lot of, that's a lot of time for you and for your dad there. Thank you for your service, and we appreciate his too. That's pretty cool. My, my dad was Army and my grandpa was 30 some odd years as Air Force enlisted too. So, it's pretty cool to carry that on.

Col Reid:

Yes. And, and it's good stuff. So very proud, like I said of that service and being a part of this social endeavor, because that's what our service is. I mean, oftentimes we lead the way for American society when it comes to change, when it comes to getting after some of the difficult things when we talk about, civil rights, social justice. The Air Force and the Armed Forces were the first institution in this country to desegregate. And so following along in that rich tradition of leaving not just the Air Force in the military better than what we found it, but leading the way for our society as a whole.

Capt Hedden:

Absolutely. It's really cool. You've got to spend some time here at Maxwell, too. So, it's really cool to look around this, this area and see some of the monuments and the other ways that we pay homage to our history as an Air Force and those first black pilots and the Tuskegee Airmen around here, and as well as all the other civil rights activity that took place that we get to celebrate right around where we are.

Rosa Parks

Col Reid:

Right, and the connection. So once again, we're talking about leading the way. There at Maxwell, you have the Rosa Parks Memorial over there across from what used to be known as the—I want to get it right—I think it's the, it was the old lodging to make it short, but Rosa Parks, that monument is there for a reason and it's located there

for a reason, because she worked in the building across the street from where the monument is or the memorial is. And she worked on at the time, which was Maxwell Field. And in that experience she had an opportunity to see that people of color, people in the majority could work and live together. And that inspired her to make the social protest that she did, and activity that she was involved in understanding that it could occur and seeing it with her own eyes and being inspired by what the Armed Forces were doing. And when she would leave that gate, she would have to go back into a segregated society where when she was working on Maxwell, she was in an integrated environment.

So back to that history and legacy of leading the way, that's what we, we aim to do here. And part of this discussion is about how do we lead the way, how do we, how do we coalesce around ideas to make not just our service better, but be the, be essentially the testbed for our best and brightest ideas and actions as we go forward, when we talk about disparity and race, and how do we get after that?

Involvement

Capt Hedden:

Absolutely. And, and this is a great time to ask you kind of how given, you know, your background, it doesn't look like any of your assignments were particularly aimed at developing this kind of policy or outreach. But I'd love to know how you kind of got involved, how this cause or issue caught your attention, and how you started kind of using your talents to help this, help us as an Air Force move further and further toward where we, where we hope to be.

Col Reid:

So, I'm, I'll correct you to 100 a little bit. I think we all play a part in this, right? And we should be aware of it. And for me, early in my career as a young officer, you know, based on my background as being African-American and having parents that were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. My grandparents were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. And kind of being aware

of or somewhat aware of my environment, I guess, and observing the disparity of discipline when it was administered to my peers and subordinates.

And you know in my career field we lead early, especially we went before we merged and I was a services officer. In the services career field, my first job, I led an organization that had 70 people in it: military, APF employees and NAF civilian employees that were on that team, enlisted and no officers on that team, but 70 people that I led as a second lieutenant.

And so when it came to discipline, it came to good order and discipline, I was involved in those conversations and I saw the disparity at times when we were talking about discipline and how it was administered. And I saw it across with my peers, friends of mine, folks senior to me, and the subordinates that worked. So as I, you know, progressed in and matured in my Air Force career, I continued to see some of these same themes.

So, part of my makeup is to, is to try to make things better and at least dress up my own part of the foxhole to make sure that I'm doing my part. And that's kind of where my interest comes from because, you know, if you see it, for me, you know, as Dr. King would say, "If you see a good fight, get in it." And so, I think this is a good fight and I want to be a part of it.

The JAG School

Capt Hedden:

Awesome, awesome. Well, we're glad to get to be part of that with you as this project. But one of the reasons that we, that we know who you are, we at The JAG School is because of the work that you've done with us. So, I kind of wanted to just let you describe how you got involved with helping us teach some of this stuff to our JAGs when they come through school here. Can you talk a little bit about how that started and what your experience has been there?

Col Reid:

So, at the time I believe, I don't know if Colonel DiDomenico is still on the team there. I know she was due to maybe move soon or not, but, Colonel DiDomenico was our Staff JA when I was the Vice Wing Commander over at the Wing there, the 42nd Air Base Wing, and it was shortly after the George Floyd incident. We engaged in one of those crucial conversations, and I just spoke from my heart and she approached me and said, "Sir, what you have to offer, is what we need to hear."

And when she moved on from our JA position, she moved over as the, as the Deputy or Vice Commandant over at The JAG School there with you all, and she invited me to come over and talk about racial disparity and also the commander's perspective. And I have volunteered and been happy to do that ever since. And it's been enriching to me and my career to get opportunity to speak to all these sharp legal minds that are coming in the Air Force and really, moreover, influence them as much as possible and get them to, at least critically, think about some of these issues.

Investigation Takeaways

Capt Hedden:

Great, and we're yeah, we're very, we're grateful. And we're, we're fortunate that that connection was made. And you were able and willing to come talk to our classes about that kind of stuff. So that's why some of the questions that we ask aren't going to be terribly new to you, because we did talk to Colonel DiDomenico, you know, obviously to prepare for this, to hopefully get the most out of it.

But, I kind of want to start here with one of the big overarching big questions, because a lot of the catalyst for the recent conversation has been this series of investigations, internal and external, within the Department of Defense, Department of the Air Force about the racial disparity. And they're the newest the newest reports go way beyond just racial disparity.

We're going to we're going to focus mostly on the racial disparity today. While acknowledging that this goes beyond just race stuff, and we realize now we have even bigger and wider questions to answer and issues to address. But could you kind of give us what you see as the biggest takeaways from those investigations that have been done, starting with, you know, going all the way back to Protect Our Defenders report from 2017 and then you know all the way through just last month, late 2021 reports from Department of the Air Force?

Col Reid:

Yeah. So, I'll start with this. I believe we still have a lot of work to do. I think that's what these reports have highlighted, is that as far as we've come in talking about, and let's just be honest here, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation discussions even handicap and physically challenged, mentally challenged individuals who are in society, we're not as evolved as we would like to be, at least from my perspective and I think there's still a lot of work to do, and that's what these reports highlight to me, that the work isn't done.

We are still on a path to try to not just heal, but thrive as we go through this process of looking at disparity, looking at a lot of the things we see out in society. And I look at the Air Force as a, as a microcosm of society. And so, we reflect what's outside our gates in many ways and some of the attitudes and beliefs are brought along with people—and that's dealing with their upbringing and how they were raised. And we all have some sort of bias. And so, I don't just say that those in the majority have bias. We all have some sort of bias and we all have to work through it and that and that's part of it. So, it starts with education, right? So, we have to educate the force. We have to educate our officers and our civilians and enlisted across all the echelons and, on unconscious bias and then also challenging the status quo.

And most importantly, getting after the actual whys. Why are we, why do we believe or feel the way we do? Why do we think that one punishment is fair for one,

and somewhat maybe more than adequate or too far for others? How do we come up with those summations? And so, we have to actually have to get after the whys, what are the actual whys? And ask ourselves—challenge ourselves internally to talk to, why am I making those, why do I feel that way? What's driving my belief system that make me maybe feel a certain way or have a bias?

And sometimes we're unconscious of those bias. And then that's another conversation. How do I identify those biases? How do I look internally and reflect and understand where I'm coming from? And then, once I understand that bias or that I have a bias, what do I do actively to understand problem sets, not just from a discipline issue or anything else, promotions to giving people opportunities. Why do, why am I holding these individuals back based on my belief system? So, we have to challenge ourselves continuously to get better.

Unconscious Bias

Capt Hedden:

Absolutely. My colleague here with me, Captain Erin Davis, she and I were recently kind of discussing that how difficult it can be to talk about unconscious bias just by the very nature of the fact that you're trying to get at things that you don't consciously think.

Col Reid:

Right.

Capt Hedden:

So, what kind of education or initiatives or even just conversation have you seen or been part of that you feel have, I guess, the most value in helping people come at this and recognize, you know, maybe I do have some unconscious bias? And, and then beyond that, what can I do about it? What can I look at? Who can I talk to? What sorts of, I guess, behavior modifications can we as leaders in the Air Force, kind of work through ourselves to do what we can to eliminate any kind of harmful biases that we do carry with us?

Col Reid:

So, I'll kind of hit on a point that I typically talk about when I come talk to you all in person. And I'll just use, and I always use myself, right? First, back to your, I want to make sure I cover the first part of that question. I think the Air Force has a lot of tools that we're pushing across the force when it comes to unconscious bias.

There's some phenomenal unconscious bias training down with our DE&I coordinators that are, should be being developed at wings. We have that position here at the major command and we're pushing out to our helping agencies to include EO, violence prevention, that those folks and then the DE&I folks at the installations to get after those, some of that unconscious bias. I know there's a number of videos out there that the Air Force has either endorsed or produced. I think even over at Air University there was an unconscious bias video that was pushed out.

Another thing we're working on here at AMC is virtual reality training using Oculus goggles and doing some unconscious bias training through that platform also, to kind of bring us into this century techno from a technological perspective. And then just the quality of the training itself, because there's actual, there are actual people who are in the Air Force that are in the actual—I don't know the right word to say this—I guess the actual scripts. I mean, we have our Command Chief, we have Command Chief, Master Sergeant of the Air Force actually in the actual training video that we use in the Oculus videos. Then it's based on your behavior and how do you respond, because it's one thing to say or think about how you would respond, but when somebody asks you a question and then there's a follow-on question after that, and then after that. So, we're working on that also.

So, I want to say that the Air Force is working hard or getting that kind of unconscious bias training out there in ways that is palatable for individuals and also make sure that it's realistic and it's not the same old death by PowerPoint, and this is what you should and shouldn't do or look at or look for.

So, I want to say that first, but back to me, as is how I look at even my unconscious bias, right? So, it's as simple as this. And it seems, I hope it's not trivial, but, so I went to this small research university in Austin Texas, which is known as the University of Texas, which has roughly 56,000 students that are undergrads there, at least when I was there, going to school, right? And so going to that school, growing up in Texas, I have affinity for football. I have an affinity for hunting and fishing. I have an affinity for baseball and basketball, a number of things, right? And sometimes as a leader, you build relationships with folks that you lead—enlisted, officer or whatever, civilian—you build relationships based on what your interests are and what their interests are. And if they align, you typically build a strong relationship with those individuals.

But when it comes to time to evaluate their performance, right? I have to think, am I bumping them up based on my bias because they have an affinity for the same things I have an affinity for, or am I assessing them fairly? But more importantly, is it fair to everyone else who's in their pool of peers that I'm assessing also?

And when it's officers and enlisted folks, there's stratifications, there's pushes for promotion, and all those things. And I have to, I have to on purpose say, "Okay, Jeremy, take all of that stuff out of it. What was their performance?" And sometimes I may not, I may not hit it off with somebody that's in my organization, because we don't have the affinity for the same thing, but they might be killing it. They might be executing everything I've asked them to do and getting after the mission. So, I have to take "me" out of it, and try to be as objective as possible. Doesn't mean that I'm successful every time, but I make a conscious effort to have those thoughts when I'm going through that process of evaluating folks, right?

But my unconscious bias is, if I may have an affinity for, you know, John or Tom, or whatnot, and there might be a young lady or young man that's from, you know, inner city Chicago that's not into hunting. That's not into fishing. That's not into football. That's not into basketball.

So, I have to also, in that aspect, expand my horizons and open my aperture to be able to have a conversation with those folks to try to build that rapport. So, I know more about those Airmen. So, it's more than just the discipline piece or the evaluation piece. It's also incumbent upon us as leaders to really open up our aperture and, and know everybody in our organization as best as possible. So we can make true assessments.

The other thing is that sometimes, because that person doesn't feel comfortable with the conversations that you may be having with others, they will tend to shy away or they may not assert themselves in those particular conversations. So, part of my job is to bring them in and what are your interests and talk to them about their interests and let them know that I'm open to building relationships with everyone. So, I can't let my bias, because of the things that I have an affinity for, drive my decisions.

So, when we talk about unconscious bias, we often just put it in the box of race, gender, all those things. But it's much more than that. It could just be regional. It could be, you know, (a), "I'm from the South. I only like people from the South. Those Yankees up north, they don't know about what it is to live in God's country." You know, you hear all those words and those and those attitudes, right? And folks don't even know they're doing it—but it's a bias, because you're choosing one over the other based on what, just your affinity or your attraction to an area or region or whatnot.

So, when we talk about that, you really have to try to understand what are your personal motivations. So, when I talk to other officers about this, I say, "Hey, what are your, what do you think your unconscious bias are?" And they typically say, "I don't think I have any." That's usually the answer because that's the easy short answer, because you want to get off the dime, right? You want to get off the spot.

But at the end of the day, if you really think introspectively, we all have some type of bias. You could be the, you

know, you can be a Christian or you could be a Muslim that doesn't really have an affinity for Christians. It could be anything. You could just not like people with blond hair or brown hair. It could be anything—irregardless of race, gender, creed—it could just be that. But we have to, we have to understand ourselves to really, to really dive into why are we making the decisions that we make.

Capt Hedden:

I don't know Colonel Reid, it sounds like what you're describing might take a good bit of intentional effort on our part to actually act that way.

Col Reid:

Well, so that's the that's the ironic part, right? I often scoff at the pushback we get when we talk about this, right? Because when you join the Air Force, right? There are things about your life that you, you change. You have to have a certain haircut [laughter]. That's intentional. You have to carry yourself a certain way. That's intentional. You can't just walk around in the public and cuss and fuss. That's intentional behavior modification. So why is it so hard in this area? We do it to wear this uniform. We do it to, to ensure that we keep good order and discipline and set an example. So why can't we set an example in this area? Why is it so hard to get to "Hey, I don't want to modify, I don't want to make a conscious effort to do certain things."

When it comes to your performance as an officer in the Air Force, you make a conscious effort to be successful. Whatever, whatever definition that we put on success is—you make a conscious effort to do that. We're asking you to make a conscious effort here to try to be successful in that and be a better leader because this is all about leadership. This is all about being a better leader. And we in the Air Force, we look to everybody from the lowest ranking airmen to, to the highest ranking general and Secretary of the Air Force we look for them all to be leaders. So, this is about leadership. This isn't just about forcing you to do something outside your comfort zone, because that's what leaders do.

We talk about servant leadership all the time, sacrificial leadership all the time. So sometimes you're going to have to sacrifice a little bit of yourself to ensure that you're leading the force in a way that is, is strong and also inclusive.

Capt Hedden:

Yeah. Wow. It's also sounds a lot like you're talking about one of our core values in there. I heard "service before self" and almost everything that you've kind of brought up. And it really, you asked a pretty cool question there and I'd love to get your take on what you think might be the answer is. Why do you think this seems to be getting more pushback or harder for us to wrap our minds around and really jump into than some of the other ways we ask people to sacrifice?

We ask people to fly to the other side of the world and get shot at and they're willing to do it. And then, but then maybe when we ask that same group of people, you know, examine your own mind and soul and try to overcome your unconscious biases. And we have a harder time getting a good response to that. Why do you think that is, sir?

Col Reid:

I think it's a hard subject because people are embarrassed. That's just my, my personal thought. And if you admit that you have a, it's almost like, it's like being an alcoholic or admitting your flaws, right? It's easy for us to pump up and, you know, push out our chests when it's positive stuff, right? But when somebody asks you to, to do some self-reflection, it's embarrassing and it's also uncomfortable.

It's uncomfortable for the individual, right? Because now you got to face, you. That's the toughest thing. I mean, in life, period. I've learned that over my life. You know, I'm divorced and remarried. If I look back on, and I'm just being transparent here, if I look back on my first marriage, a lot of the issues in my first marriage had to do with me. And I have to own that, and I have to take responsibility for that. But how many people are willing to do that?

See, when we change modification to go fight and give our lives at the end of the day, that's viewed as positive, right? Because you served your country and you laid down your life for your fellow man, this that and the other. But when you have been in an environment where you've been taught certain things, and that's deep and core to your belief system, just as much as mom, apple pie and the flag. That's hard to break, because it's looked at as a negative. And then, hey, why are you judging me? No one likes to be critiqued.

Capt Hedden:

Yeah, I think you might be on to something there, because one of the possible answers we could find ourselves staring at is we do have some kind of unconscious bias against people of a certain race or gender or ethnicity or sexual orientation or religion. And then we've got to figure out what to do with that.

Col Reid:

Right. And now I got to do the work, right? And that's the that's the other part of it. It's not easy work. It's hard work—to break through those paradigms, right? And, and be pragmatic. Dogmatic thought is a lot easier because I prescribe to this, and I'll always prescribe to this, and I'll continue to prescribe to this. That's easy. That is the easy.

Being a pragmatist say, "Hey, I may change my mind based on information." I think you kind of see it playing out in our country. On many other areas, right? So, it's hard and you see the vitriol that comes with it or the or the just unwillingness to change on, or viewpoints or political beliefs become more important then, you know, and the word freedom gets thrown around and all those things.

What does that mean—right? Now, what does all that mean? And so, we have to dig deep inside and say, "Hey, I'm going to do some, some real self-reflection here and think about what does all this mean, and where is my place, and how can I make it better"—if I want to make it better. And there are folks that don't want to make it

better and that's fine—as long as you identify yourself and I know who you are, and I know you're not running in the same direction I am. I'm good with that. I'd rather that.

Capt Hedden:

Yeah, that's a good point. But we've talked a good bit about kind of some problems and solutions, or at least we've kind of assumed that some of these are problems and we are all working together. Lots of us are working to try to find solutions. Kind of to, to put a bow on this higher-level stuff before we move to the more granular, I don't want to, kind of want to get your, get your answer to what should be a basic question here. And that is, why is diversity and inclusion even important for us as a military?

Why Important to the Military

Col Reid:

It's a readiness issue in my mind, right? And when we talk readiness, we talk about our ability to bear weight on challenges and problem sets that are placed before us as a United States Air Force and a Department of Defense in whole. We talk total force. We talk joint force. We talk all those things. But what you realize is, is diversity, inclusion, is important because—from a readiness perspective, it only makes us better.

And I should have pulled it up before I talk to you all, but I built a briefing on this issue about two years ago. And in that research, I found in the *Harvard Business Review*, it talked about, the barriers to diversity and inclusion, But all the stats, every study we've done, RAND study in the Air Force. The Harvard Business Review did a study and said that **diverse groups** are more creative. They come up with more valid and applicable solutions. And more importantly, are just overall more effective than those that are homogeneous or one, whether it it's all female, whether it's all male, all white male, all black female, whatever. Groups that were diverse were more effective.

So, when I go to war or when I go, for instance, to figure out how do we get 100,000 Afghan evacuees out of

Kabul, out of one contested airfield in three weeks, I want some people that can doggone think, and I want the most effective team possible. And studies have shown that diverse groups that feel included, are more effective in all problem solving and challenge confrontations.

So, do I want a substandard, a substandard airplane that can barely fly? Will we go for that as an Air Force? Do I want a substandard IT system? Do I want a substandard logistic system? No! I want the best, right? That's what we always strive to do, is be the best. And even when we don't have the resources, make the best of what we have. But when it comes to diversity, we are like the studies have shown, the data's there, that you're more effective, and we say, "Ah, it's not that important", or we're saying it's important, but those inside the organization haven't bought in yet. But I think diversity, inclusion and equity is a readiness issue. We field our best force when it's diverse and reflects America and its ideas and everyone who makes up that mosaic.

Capt Hedden:

That concludes part one of this interview. Please stay tuned for part two coming out in our next episode. Until next time.

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[Music: Band playing ending of the Air Force Song]

Websites

- AFJAGS Podcast
- Air Force Diversity & Inclusion
- Civil Rights Trail

Glossary

- AFJAGS: Air Force Judge Advocate General's School
- **AMC:** Air Mobility Command
- APF: appropriated funds
- **DE&I:** diversity, equity, and inclusion
- **EO:** equal opportunity
- **JA:** Judge Advocate
- **JAG:** judge advocate general
- NAF: nonappropriated funds
- **ROTC:** Reserve Officer Training Corps