

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Ownership, Reflection, and Accountability

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Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: Thank you for the opportunity to reengage our conversation regarding current events. The last time we spoke, we were in the midst of COVID planning and response. Now, as a nation, are dealing with issues around racism, bias, and discrimination. Could you share some initial reactions to current events?

Silveria: The pace of things right now because of the race riots and reactions to George Floyd, has been very similar to COVID. COVID exposed things. Anytime you stress a system, it exposes things. The same thing is true with respect to the events around the George Floyd killing. The stress of that situation and subsequent reaction exposed things. I'm reminded of a metaphor in sports where they say, when you are on the field, don't be a spectator. Initially, I found myself being a spectator to a remarkable, "Wow" situation. For example, statues have become a discussion point. The stress exposed that and how they matter. As a result, statues are coming down, and it was, "Wow, that hasn't happened before." Then, NASCAR banned the confederate flag. Again, that hasn't been the case even though some have asked for that for a while. Things like that are 'Wow' moments. They were brought on by exposure.

Here's a specific example. I was talking to West Point Superintendent and Annapolis Superintendent and I realized that some of it had completely gone past me. The Superintendent at West Point, for example, has approximately 18 statues of confederate generals on his campus. His staff came to him initially and told him that he had 18 statues, and several building with names of confederate generals. Initially, he thought that was bad, but it was manageable. They could develop a process to work through those. They would talk to the Army and figure out how they would proceed. Then, they realized that there are also things like an auditorium inside a building or a room inside a building that had a confederate general's name on it and realized it was a much larger situation.

The same thing is happening at Annapolis. As I was talking to the Superintendent, he was standing in the Buchanan House, which is the home of the Superintendent. He told me it was named after the first Superintendent of the Naval Academy, Admiral Franklin Buchanan. He said Admiral Buchanan, after he was the Superintendent, was an Admiral in the Confederate Navy. He told me that, "I'm literally standing in the entranceway and there is an 8 foot portrait of Buchanan right here in the entrance."

I realized quickly that this is not just happening around us. It is the concept of, if it is happening outside of our walls, then it is happening inside our walls. Right? There are members of our organization that feel disenfranchised, and even if there aren't any direct actions taking place in our walls, it is going on in society. So, after some reflection, I realized that there has to be three concepts that we have to embrace as an institution. The first of these is ownership. We have to step up and take ownership and say, the issues outside the walls are issues inside the walls. Which means if there is racism and bigotry outside, then there is racism and bigotry inside, and we need to own that.

The second thing is that we have to be reflective. We have to be honestly reflective and review where there is bias and/or artifacts of that bias. Unless I am missing something, I don't think we have any confederate statues on USAFA. My first reaction was, we don't have that problem. But, now I'm convinced that we need to make sure we look around and think about the

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names of things. Can you imagine being in the state of Mississippi right now where the confederate flag is part of their state flag? For Alabama and Florida, the red cross is from the confederate army. Those are visible artifacts. So, there may be something here regarding artifacts and we need to be diligent in looking for. That reflective part is important.

We had a Conversation Event recently and from that Event I have decided to assemble a group to include Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), Way of Life Committee Alumni, cadets, and other groups to examine this. It is like in the military where we have a

Command Directed Investigation. As an independent body, I want them to help us look at all policies and any instances of systemic bias. Where does it exist? Where are there artifacts? Then, they will submit back to me their recommendations. That is the third concept that we need to embrace, accountability. This will go along with what the Chief of Staff is doing. He announced that he sent the Inspector General out to do a reflective look across the Air Force to look for where there is bias. After I got myself out of the spectator phase, I quickly got into this understanding of ownership, reflection, and accountability. When used together, they can be a powerful driver of change.

Lindsay: That is an important process to undertake. We have seen episodic movement in the past, due to certain events, but the current environment feels a bit different. The initial spectator situation is an interesting one because of the historical significance of events that are occurring. It is an opportunity to move forward. I was talking to my kids last night and they brought up how Band-Aid is going to start putting out products that represent different skin tones. They were wondering why that hadn't happened before. While certainly a small example, the idea of broadening what is meant by a flesh toned band aid is

one of those indicators to watch in terms of seeing if things are starting to change, at least from an awareness standpoint. That goes back to your point about needing to reflect.

Silveria: It does. I had another "Aha" moment this morning. I was drinking my coffee after a run and I was watching the local news. They reported that the City Council was going to have a special session to establish civilian oversight of the police department. My "Aha" moment was, "You mean we haven't had that?" We grow up in the military understanding that there is civilian control. I don't unilaterally decide

something like we are going to go into Afghanistan with a few thousand people. In fact, nobody raced into Afghanistan after 9/11 UNTIL the President and Secretary of Defense told us to go to Afghanistan. That concept of civilian control is engrained in us. I send things to the Secretary of the Air Force and she tells me Yes or No. She approves those decisions as the senior civilian. At least in this area, that doesn't seem to be the case with police. So, there isn't an oversight board? Does the Commissioner just decide?

At my level, I also have the Board of Visitors. I have to answer to Congress. Now, I am no student of municipal government, and maybe it goes on in other places. However, just the idea that it didn't go on here, and the police chief doesn't have to stand in front of a board and say things like, "Here is how many people we hired and here is how many people we fired." "Here are the actions we have taken." If they don't have to do that like I do to the Board of Visitors, to Congress, or to senior civilian leaders, then they aren't accountable in the same way. General (ret) Edward Rice, the Board of Visitors Chairman, asks me about things and I have to present them the information that they request to make decisions.

Lindsay: Accountability is certainly important. I think that word "expose" you mentioned several times is important. When we are exposed to something, we either choose to act or do nothing. I remember back in November of 2017, there was an occurrence of racial slurs at the Air Force Academy Preparatory School. Immediately after that, you spoke publically to all cadets, faculty and staff and let them know that if they can't treat everyone with dignity and respect, without discrimination, then they needed to "Get out." When exposed of the issue, you felt the need to immediately respond in order to lead the organization through that. Now, several years later, can you reflect a little bit about why you decided to step quickly into that situation and how that resonates with what is going on today?

Silveria: There was a human reaction to that in that it made me mad. My uniform says "U.S. Air Force" and my ring says "Air Force Academy." The idea that a racist action or racist comments were on the Air Force and the Air Force Academy made me mad. Those comments and actions didn't represent me. It's like I said at that time, no one can write something on a dry erase board and define our values. Nobody gets to do that. Nobody gets to label us that way. So, there was kind of a visceral, human anger to the moment. My first instinct of wanting to step in was that idea of, "This is not us." Probably upon reflection of the moment maybe there was too much emotion. While there was the, "This isn't us," there is the point about ownership and we have to recognize that if it is there, then it is here in some manner.

In my own development from then to now, I recognize the need to be very specific in that moment and not equivocate. But, we must also not abrogate the responsibility. There is nobody who speaks for the institution but me. No one can say that for the organization except for the leader. I said then, racism is a small horrible idea and the only way to replace a horrible idea is with a better idea. So, moving forward to today, we need to keep working toward that better idea. For example, cadets may be confused, angry, emotional and unsure. So, we need to take the opportunity to replace that with a better idea. If I reflect back on 2017, of establishing our values and establishing a red line and not giving up that responsibility, we can take that responsibility now to move forward with replacing it with a better idea. The better idea is to have the reflective moment to look internal and see where we have biases. Where are our flesh colored band aids. We have to find those because they are here.

The Air Force Song was one of those which we started that change, by the way. When I stood with the women's volleyball team after a match, we were singing the Air Force song, and said the line about "... the brother men who fly..." That felt odd. At that

moment, I decided we were changing it. However, it turns out, and the Chief of Staff reminded me of this, that the Air Force song belongs to the Air Force, not just USAFA. So, we worked it through the Air Force channels to get it changed. By the way, when Col (ret, USAFA 1992) Jennifer Block made that pitch to the Chief of Staff, she took a band aid box and put pictures of Capt Amy Svoboda (USAFA 1989), who as a female A-10 pilot that was killed while flying. She put pictures of her on a band aid box and sent it to the Chief of Staff. It was a reminder of a flesh colored band aid. I think the real answer to your question is from defining our values to the idea that we have to take ownership and replace it with a good idea, I feel the same opportunity now that I felt a few years ago.

Lindsay: That is important, because people are watching what people are doing. It seems like everyone is lining up to make a statement about what is going on. To have their say. But that is really just the start. To your point, what are you going to do with that statement? Am I going to show ownership? Am I going to reflect and introspective to find where I need to be better? But really, it is about the accountability that is going to be telling. At USAFA, we are developing leaders of character. With what you just talked about, what do they need to be taking away from these experiences?

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Silveria: I think there are two things that are really important. The first is the ownership piece. Understanding what they have seen. We need them to be proactive and we need to take action. I also hope that one of the things that they would learn as young leaders is the idea of being a critic. With all of the

social media avenues that exist, there is the ability to blurt out in various forms about something without taking ownership or taking any action. This happens from time to time. For example, someone might say something to me about culture. I'll respond with "Okay. What is the action?" They will repeat, "We need to change the culture." I'll repeat, "Okay. Own it. What actions do we need to take? Give me the action." The best that you can usually get someone to say in a conversation like that is, "We should tell them _____." Really? You don't think we tell them? Trust me, it doesn't always work. How many times do we tell people to not do drugs or not to assault someone? It still happens from time to time. Of course we tell them, but they make their own decisions. That idea of not just being the critic, but taking ownership, and then taking action is important. Saying, "This problem is mine." As a leader, you don't get to spectate too long.

Lindsay: Taking ownership and also seeing our role in that solution or action. To not just say this doesn't directly impact me because I'm not a racist and I respect everyone, so it doesn't apply to me.

Silveria: Exactly. Here is an example of that. A couple of years ago, the University of Oklahoma had a racial incident. I remember thinking it will be interesting to see what the University President will say. He essentially said, this isn't a problem because I am not a racist. Whether he was a racist or not, that is not the whole issue and he didn't see his role in the problem. So, young leaders need to see themselves in the larger issues. To not just get caught in the, "That's not me so it doesn't apply to me." As a leader, that is not enough. You can't just be the critic. You have to do more. You have to have action. You also need the accountability. A leader has to get in there and mix it up.

I had a couple of other “Aha” moments this week. I received a note from someone who represented the LBGTQ segment of our faculty and cadets. I also received a note from a group representing our Asian cadets. They shared their hope to expose discrimination against any manner of human condition. That we have respect for human dignity and that applies across all groups. The Black Lives Matter movement is important and I understand the purpose and the oppression behind the movement. To go along with that we want to make sure that as we develop leaders, we are developing leaders that understand and lead across all differences.

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