

★ ARMED FORCES ★

Special Edition

Bolstering Diversity

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after his first year at the U.S. Naval Academy, he saw the Watts section of Los Angeles aflame with race riots.

"I'm 15 miles from Watts, and it is burning down," he said.

The 1960s and 1970s put a glaring light on race and civil rights issues in America and the American military. As a young military officer, Mullen said, he learned early to focus on people's individual capabilities.

"Even back then, from my perspective, what I was trying to do was put the best talent together to get the job done," Mullen said.

When he became chief of Naval Operations in 2005, Mullen said, he made diversity a priority.

"When you're taking on a very, very difficult challenge like this and trying to change your institution, you can't go fast enough," he said.

Mullen said he focused his diversity goals for the Navy on two areas: minorities and women.

"That's where the leadership was really critical, and we were not doing very well," he said.

Now, Mullen said, the Navy has a number of female one-star officers who are competitive for the future.

"We know how to make [general officers]," he said. "We've been doing it a long time, and it's actually pretty simple. You put them in the right jobs, and if they do well, they get promoted. And a really interesting dynamic that was going on in the Navy in 2005, Mullen said, was:

"Who is putting people in jobs?"

When he looked into it, Mullen said he found that the people making officer assignments for the "hot" career paths were white males.

"There certainly wasn't much of a path for those that couldn't break through. Almost overnight, once I knew that, and we started to diver-



A diverse group of students at the Naval Air Station in Meridan, Miss.

sify our assignment officers... all of a sudden, records that were just as good as any other records started surfacing," he said.

His senior leaders regularly reported to him on their progress in increasing diversity, Mullen said.

"We measured ourselves on that ... and if there were senior officers that weren't doing this, they were leaving," he said. Mullen said he

now keeps a magazine on his desk with a cover photo of three Navy three-star admirals, all black, so that everyone who visits his office can see it.

"Three or four years ago, you didn't see that [senior-level diversity] in the Navy," Mullen said. Today's minority role models, he said, provide important examples of success to young military officers.

Without such role models "you're not going to make it, no matter what programs we have or how much we talk about it," the admiral said.

The drive for diversity in the military is talent-driven, Mullen said. Shortly after he became chief of Naval Operations, he recalled addressing a diversity conference comprised primarily of young officers. Mullen thought he had a strong message for them, but his message came back at him during the question-and-answer period.

"This young Coast Guard ensign asked me, 'What about that all white-male staff you just walked in here with?'" Mullen said. Two years after hearing that ensign's question, the admiral said he gathered his personal staff.

"I stood back from that and looked ... and I think I was the only white guy in the room," Mullen said. "It was all women and minorities. And what really struck me that day was how disappointed I was in myself that it took me so long. Because this was the best talent, the most talent, I'd ever seen in a room ... person by person."

Diversity is all about opportunity, Mullen said.

"This is not about bias or anything like that. This is: 'Here's the job, here's your opportunity -- sink or swim,'" he said. "There was way too much not getting the opportuni-

ties, for whatever reason: institutional, systematic, how we were assigning people, you name it. It just wasn't going on. And again, we know how to do this, because we know what it takes to get promoted in our system."

The military services and the officer ranks cannot remain effective if they veer away from the nation's demographic makeup, Mullen said.

By 2040 or 2050, he said, white males will become a minority segment of the U.S. population. But the service academies, which last year graduated the flag-officer class of 2040, do not reflect that reality in their current class enrollments, which are less than 50 percent -- and in some cases less than 25 percent -- minorities and women.

"The leadership has got to think about it, from my perspective, along those lines," Mullen said. "And then be very hard on ourselves: Are we making progress?"

Increasing diversity within the Defense Department's military and civilian workforces isn't magic, Mullen said.

"It's a lot of hard work," he said, noting increasing diversity requires commitment by the leadership.

"And, more importantly," he continued, "the opportunity for us as a military to just grow stronger and stronger and stronger, which we must do over the course of the next 10, 20, 30 years."

The American military, like American industry, has to work harder to increase diversity, the chairman said.

"There are a lot of things we can learn in terms of those who have done this before," Mullen said. "In the end, for us, I think it's going to come down to some very basic things."

Karen Parris writes for the American Forces Press Service.



Navy Adm. Mike Mullen

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