



## HERITAGE EXPLAINS

### Critical Race Theory in the Military

How woke policies like CRT would destroy the military.

What would our military be like if Marines were taught to assess their fellow marines' trustworthiness or capability based on the color of their skin? This week, senior research fellow Dakota Wood talks about how woke policies like critical race theory would destroy the military.



Heritage Explains **Acast**  
Critical Race  
Theory in the...



6/27/2021 ·  
24 min ·

[Follow](#) · [Share](#)  
[View terms](#)

Michelle Cordero: From The Heritage Foundation, I'm Michelle Cordero, and this is Heritage Explains.

General Mark Milley: First of all, on the issue of critical race theory, et cetera, I'll obviously have to get much smarter on whatever the theory is, but I do think it's important, actually, for those of us in uniform to be open-minded and be widely read. The United States Military Academy is a university, and it is important that we train and we understand, and I want to understand white rage, and I'm white.

Cordero: That's General Mark Milley, America's top military officer, defending the teaching of critical race theory to Army cadets at West Point. Milley's remarks come on the heels of Admiral Michael Gilday placing Ibram X Kendi's 2019 book, *How to Be an Antiracist*, on the Navy's reading list. Here's an exchange between Gilday and Congressman Jim Banks in front of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Congressman Jim Banks: Kendi's book states that capitalism is essentially racist, and Kendi is clear that racism must be eliminated. Yes or no, do you personally consider advocating for the destruction of American capitalism to be extremist?

Admiral Michael Gilday: Here's what I know, Congressman.

Congressman Jim Banks: It's a yes or no question, admiral.

Admiral Michael Gilday: There is racism in the United States Navy.

Congressman Jim Banks: Admiral, you recommended every sailor in the United States Navy read this book. It's a yes or no question.

Admiral Michael Gilday: I'm not forcing anybody to read the book. It's on a recommended reading list.

Congressman Jim Banks: Admiral, did you read the book?

Admiral Michael Gilday: I did.

Cordero: Critical race theory makes race the prism through which all aspects of American life are viewed. It categorizes individuals into groups of oppressors and victims, and it's a philosophy that's infecting everything from politics to education, the workplace, and now the military. Our guest today says that success in combat depends on cohesion and competence, and that critical race theory would destroy that. What would our military be like if Marines were taught to assess their fellow Marines' trustworthiness or capability based on the color of their skin? Dakota Wood served America for two decades in the United States Marine Corps and is a senior research fellow for defense programs. Our conversation after this short break.

>>> Critical Race Theory Will Destroy Our Military

Dakota Wood: I joined, came out of the Naval academy in 1985, which seems like forever ago. Then, I was commissioned in the Marine Corps. I served 20 years in the Marines from 1985 to 2005. For me, the organizations I was with, the first one was a mixture of men and women. It was a truck unit that you would transport people and gear and supplies and all that stuff. Then, I was reassigned a year later to an infantry battalion, which was all male. Again, that's motor transport, the truck component to an infantry battalion. It gives you exposure to young men and women who have joined the military, in my case the Marine Corps, for a variety of reasons, but they came from all over the country. It's a wonderful introduction, especially a kid from Northeastern Oklahoma at the time, where I went to high school, that there was something bigger than the rural areas. My high school was, the graduating class was 63 people. Right?

Cordero: Wow.

Wood: Yeah, I'm not saying it was completely homogenous, all the same sort of folks, but there was a certain culture with that. Joining the military as young officer, you're just exposed to much bigger things and broader perspectives and different sorts of people.

Cordero: You'd say it's a diverse group of Marines that you served with?

Wood: Oh my goodness, yes, especially in that infantry battalion. Within that group in particular, my maintenance chief, Staff Sergeant probably been in about 12-13 years or so was from American Samoa. You talk about different. I mean, this is a completely different childhood, a different environment, personal habits, speech patterns, all those sorts of things. My operations chief was African-American, he'd come from a completely different part of the world in the United States, as opposed to the south Pacific, different background, different personal history, certainly different skin color, that kind of stuff. The more junior enlisted side, we had kids that had come out of Texas and New Jersey and New York and California. You can imagine the diverse array of musical tastes and what they ate during their lunch break and the humor and the whole bit, but what really brought everybody together regardless of their religious affiliation or their beliefs, their home life, the economic background, they came from their neighborhoods, their own personal experiences in schools. I mean, all of those things, right, which are extraordinarily diverse, is that in joining the military, they all go through the same training.

Wood: They either went through a Marine Corps recruit depot, Paris Island in South Carolina or in San Diego, California, it's either Eastern part of the country or Western part of the country, but it's the same uniform, same kind of drill instructors yelling at you, the same, "Hey, you got to climb the wall or the obstacle course, or fire a rifle at the rifle range a certain way." There were certain standards that had to be met. If you had made it through boot camp or basic training or [inaudible 00:06:07] get assigned to the unit, it's these common shared experiences you're assigned to the same unit. Everybody can either drive the vehicle or they can't. You can perform the maintenance function or you can't. You're cleaning up at the end of the workday or you're getting ready to load up the ship and sail off to Okinawa, Japan, those sorts of things that we did.

>>> VIRTUAL: Policy Pulse: Critical Race Theory in the Military

Wood: In spite of the diverse backgrounds, there was a unifying principle in joining the Marine Corps, meeting standard, getting the job done. If you didn't do that, it didn't matter where you came from or what you looked like, you weren't getting the job done and you were going to be taken to task for that. But this diverse collection of Americans were unified in purpose, in unit, and experiences. I thought it was just a wonderful representation of what America has come to represent, going from small to large, right? The detail kind of tactical example, really representing what America represents to the rest of the world.

Cordero: Isn't it that way by design?

Wood: It is, you're recruited as a new enlisted member, you're taking a particular type of oath, an officer is slightly different wording, but you're pledging allegiance to the constitution of the United States, you're serving the same country. You're there to take orders and do the best you can to keep America safe from enemies abroad, you often work or live in fairly difficult conditions. Certainly, when you

deploy to combat there's a lot of hazard that goes along with that, but even in peace time stuff, there's some long work days and the expectations are the same for everyone. Right? You believe in what you're doing, maybe you joined for different reasons, but once you're in this melting pot, this commonly understood and appreciated performance-based organization that expects high output, the standards are very high. If you're meeting those standards, how can you argue with that? Right? Different personalities, but you're all getting the job done.

Wood: Again, it was a unifying sort of thing where you could look to the left or the right, same [inaudible 00:08:23], same uniform, same rank on the collar, corporal and lance corporal, captain, and whatever that might've been, the differences, but everybody had their place in that organization. You're expected to measure up with that. I don't know, in combat you get wounded, what do you care the skin color, the ethnicity, the religious beliefs of the medic, the corpsman who is rendering assistance?

Cordero: I asked you these questions and we're getting to this point, because you wrote that critical race theory would destroy the military, how would it do that?

Wood: By definition, you are focusing via critical race theory on unique characteristics that differentiate people with one from another. As CRT, or critical race theory, has been described in the news for the last couple of months, I guess, if not longer, that there are classes of people that are constantly in competition. Right? That whites are inherently oppressors, that the constitution was constructed in a way that would formalize racial oppression via slavery or whatever that might be, that there are oppressed peoples. In this case, it would be blacks that are perpetually oppressed, but that could also apply to Asians that come in, or Hispanics or Latinos, perhaps more importantly, or maybe it's women versus men. It's this division oppressed and oppressors and that people are in particular positions because of their race. Right? That you have a position of prominence because you're white or because you're black and you were elevated to that position for tokenism or something along those lines.

Wood: In other words, you didn't get there by merit because you are capable or work hard or developed the skills, earned that right, you are only in that position because of your race or your ethnicity. In a military organization, if I have Latinos and Samoans and blacks and whites and city kids and country kids and all that stuff, are they now supposed to look at each other through this lens, right, of superficial characteristics, as opposed to appreciating I've got a Marine to my right and Marine to my left and behind me in front of me that I'm supporting or being supported by. Or, do I say, "Oh, you're the white guy." Or, "You're the black guy." Or, "You're the Latino woman." Or something like that and I view you through that lens. I mean, that can only be disruptive.

Wood: I mean, it breaks down this unity of purpose and unity of identity. The whole point of pushing everybody through the same basic training is that everybody appreciates you've had the same experience. You've met the same standards, same expectations have been put upon you. Apparently, all

that is meaningless. I should only look at you because you're a female or a white or a black, or whatever that might be and that's how you're defined. Right? I mean, it's the antithesis of out of many, one, right? E pluribus Unum. Right? It's the antithesis of a melting pot of assuming a common identity for a common purpose.

Cordero: If you take that and we say that this is going to break the military. With a broken military, what do we have?

Wood: Well, not a very good defensive posture, that's for sure. When you get in to, again, a combat situation would be the ultimate expression of this, I've deployed to a few different war zones. When you're in the thick of things, the last thing you need to have in the back of your mind is "Can I trust the person from whom I'm expecting support?" Or, if somebody calls for support, do I hesitate and assess first, well, what is that person's race? Where did that person come from? They don't like rural kids and country music. Maybe I don't respond to a fellow Marine who came from an urban environment and listens to a different type of music. Right? This hesitancy, this questioning purpose, so let's say there's a black in a platoon and he's got a white platoon leader and the white platoon leader orders the individual to rush the machine gun nest from the enemy.

Wood: Well, am I ordering that person because they're black and I don't like them, or am I ordering that person because they are the most capable [inaudible 00:13:08] in the platoon. They are more likely, because of their skill set and mentality and all this other stuff to actually accomplish the mission. Right? When we introduce questions and these ambiguities and these frictions, it breaks down the coherence of the units, it breaks down the discipline to either give an order or to receive an order. Should I not order that person to do this because it might be interpreted that I am selectively conveying favor? Right? Or putting this person in danger based on the differences between my background and the other person's background, or the skin color and stuff. These critical race theory and similar sorts of identity politics things introduced into a military environment degrade that trust relationship.

Wood: I think it upends the whole idea of appreciating this commonality of experience in duty and obligation and mutual responsibility and mutual respect. Right? That you achieved your position or hold a position or do a job because of your capabilities, not because your gender or your race or your religious identity or something along those lines. Right? Again, it's the opposite. It destroys the inherent discipline and unity and commonality that you want military units to have in order to be effective in the most high stress situations that you can imagine.

Cordero: I want to take a second to flip this on its head a little bit. I try and do this every episode. As you're talking about this, to me, it all sounds very clear as to why this is a bad idea, but obviously someone thinks a good idea. Can you shed any light onto that perspective?

Wood: I think that there are things that we can indulge in and imagine in purely academic or theoretical situations. Right? I can imagine a perfect world where countries only interact in terms of trade and shared ideas and ideals and values and those sorts of things. Right? The reality of the world is a bit different. Right? You could have a megalomaniac as a leader or some kind of an oppressive regime or the communist party weren't ruling out of Beijing or something like that. Regardless of Western traditions or values or respect for sovereignty, they might invade, right? Or take, or try to impose their will. Well, why would somebody do that? Well, it's the nature of people, regimes are competition. It's an example of the ideal versus the reality.

Wood: In academia, we can deconstruct Western ideas of literature or art. Perhaps that's an interesting intellectual exercise, to always question, well, maybe the artist represented this, or maybe differences between the races manifest in a particular way. Or, if you look at the ideal encapsulated in the US constitution, right, the ideal in that and what we're always striving forward to, and then you look at historical incidents, the civil war was supposed to have done away with slavery. Yet, what did we see right in the immediate aftermath? There were parts of the south in particular that didn't want to let go of that. We saw a lot of racial upheaval in the twenties and thirties and the fifties. I mean, it's just, it's been an issue. Right? We've seen a huge waves of immigration into the United States in the late 1800s, early 1900s.

Wood: The old signs, "Irish need not apply." Suspicions when John F. Kennedy was running for president, ugh, a Catholic in the White House might be under the control of the Pope in Rome. Right? Even on a religious thing among white people, Protestants versus Catholics. It's not unique to racial things, right, but you can have these kinds of discussions in theoretical constructs, in academic settings. Then, there is this friction about how do we actually apply them and make them realities in the real world. Whereas we can never achieve perfection in reality, reality is also proof that all the worst attributes never fully manifest either. Right?

Wood: My experience in the Marine Corps was, yes, there are different people, but it's amazing how people get past the superficial aspects, right, of skin color for example, or speech patterns, or musical things, and actually focus on what really matters and that's mutual respect. It's mission accomplishment. It's I've got a brother or sister in uniform who need some assistance that I'm there for them. Right? Or you want to see them achieve so I'm going to get that person that school slot or help them on their way in studying for the next exam for promotion or whatever that might be.

Wood: I think in a macro, a very large perspective, the United States in particular has enjoyed 30 years of peace and prosperity. I mean, the big scheme of things, at the end of the Cold War, during that period we were worried about thermo nuclear war and you had massive armies facing off in Europe between the Warsaw pact and NATO and stuff. The reality of what war might mean tended to focus people. When

all that went away and we had the happy decade in the 1990s and everybody's making money and you can just get kind of loose and silly in your thinking, and we can come up with theoretical problems.

Wood: When you look at the real world, truck drivers and postal carriers and store clerks and doctors and lawyers, who has ascended to the heights of the presidency, who are major sports figures and entertainment figures and all those sorts of things, I just don't see where the evidence really supports the theoretical problems that critical race theory is espousing. Right? I think most people that I've talked to that are still in the military and have to go into these kinds of training sessions or awareness sessions that they hear what's being proposed. Then, they look at the reality around them and there's this huge disconnect. I think that erodes the integrity and credibility of the system that the government or these authorities are telling me something that doesn't resonate with my personal experience.

Cordero: That brings me to my last question for you. That's do we know if these trainings are already happening in our military today?

Wood: Yeah, in various ways. I mean, the Navy has really taken some hits. The chief of Naval Operations Admiral Gilday has been taken to task by various members of Congress for this reading list and all the services have reading lists. The idea is, hey, these are works, literary works or books that talk about various things, whether it's a military history or leadership techniques or whatever there might be. We would recommend that you read these to gain from the experiences of others who have committed to paper, and it's a way to just kind of broaden your own experience base. Right? Some of these books on the Navy's reading list have really been perpetuating, or they're about critical race theory. The Chief of Naval operations, the CNO was challenged. Do you believe in this? There was some equivocation. Yes, we do have some problems with racial tensions or with male-female relationships, these sorts of bit. Well, you will have those things, but does it constitute a service wide endemic, systemic, structured sort of prejudicial thing. That just is not the case.

Wood: From reading lists to these training packages, a bunch of PowerPoint slides that have some of these points illustrated on them, and you'll have a moderator or somebody that facilitates discussion, and they are presenting this stuff to units, whether it's on ships or air force squadrons, or Marine Corp platoons, and companies, headquarters units states side, or field units that are abroad, they're being presented this sort of material. What I'm hearing and my colleagues outside of the military are hearing from those who've continued to serve is that people leave these sessions to shaking their head. They're saying this just doesn't make any sense. It appears to be an intentional drive to create problems within the military that ultimately if pursued would degrade the performance and the effectiveness and the cohesion that you actually want in the military, and it just begs the question of why would somebody want to do this?

Wood: The only conclusion I can come to is it's a liberal, progressive agenda where you have these, for lack of a better word, academics or activists that want to push a particular view of America and relationships between the races and male and female genders and whatnot for whatever reason, but they're imposing this. I guess, I think a very important point that people don't perhaps fully appreciate is the military is wonderful because it receives orders and it executes those orders. We don't want a US military that is in opposition to civilian authority. I mean, can you imagine that? I didn't like that order, so I'm not going to follow it. We don't want that world. The military, if they receive a lawful order and however stupid it might be, if it's not illegal, they're going to try to implement it as best they can.

Wood: Where a president's administration like the Biden administration today has political appointees imposing these things, right? In lawful positions, or if they direct a uniform military to do these things, it's not really within the purview of the military to say, "No, we're not going to do that." They're going to try to carry these things out as best they can. If the military in some ways can not speak for itself, I think it's incumbent upon those outside the military, like us, like the general American public to say this isn't right. This is injurious. Veterans can speak from their own experiences across the decades about how disastrous this might be and what the effect could have been on their own units when they served. This popular push back will influence their elected officials. I think that's probably the most effective way to combat this.

Cordero: Dakota Wood, thank you so much for talking with us on this difficult topic.

Wood: Great pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Cordero: That's it for this week's episode of Heritage Explains. Thanks for listening. We'll see you next week.

Heritage Explains is brought to you by more than half a million members of the Heritage Foundation. It is produced by Michelle Cordero and Tim Doescher with editing by John Popp.

## COLLECTIONS

Critical Race Theory

## COMMENTARY

Institutionalizing Racial Fanaticism Across American Society

May 12, 2021 3 min read

## COMMENTARY

Don't Let Critical Theory Cancel History

Feb 3, 2021 4 min read