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# The Role, Accomplishments, and Challenges of the Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust

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*Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust*

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# **25<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY REPORT**

## **The Role, Accomplishments, and Challenges of the Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust**

**Ron E. Armstead MCP, LSW**

**Executive Director**

**Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust**

**September 2016**

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**WILLIAM MONROE TROTTER INSTITUTE**

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## **William Monroe Trotter Institute**

The Trotter Institute was founded in 1984 to address the needs and concerns of the Black community and communities of color in Boston and Massachusetts through research, technical assistance, and public service. Many forms of technical assistance are provided to community groups, organizations, and public agencies. The institute sponsors public forums as a means of disseminating research and involving the community in the discussion of public policy and other issues impacting Blacks locally and nationally. The Trotter Review, an annual journal, publishes articles addressing Black Studies, race, and race relations in the United States and abroad. The institute also publishes research reports and occasional papers on a broad range of topics, including education, employment and training, public health, economic and community development, and race relations.

## **About the Author**

Ron E. Armstead is the founding executive director for the Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust. He was a consultant to the Advisory Committee on Minority Veterans under late Veterans Affairs Secretary Jesse Brown. Armstead holds a master's degree in city planning (MCP) from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and is a licensed social worker (LSW) in the Massachusetts, with more than 30 years of experience. He also was a doctoral student at Howard University's Graduate School of Social Work concentrating in social policy and planning during the late 1990s.

**25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Report**

**The Role, Accomplishments, and Challenges  
Of the Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust**

**September 2016**

Ron E. Armstead MCP, LSW  
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## **Introduction**

In 1971, the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) began its seminal investigation of racism in the military. A year into the investigation, the caucus reported the military had done little, if anything, to address racism in the ranks (188 Cong. Rec., 6739-6744, 1972). The problem continued as one of the most critical issues for the CBC during the latter years of the Vietnam War (188 Cong. Rec. pp. E8674-8688).

Concurrently, in 1971, the CBC held its first annual dinner, which some 500 people attended, including the late actor Ozzie Davis. Over the years, this dinner has grown into a five-day legislative conference, including workshops, issues forums, and “braintrust” sessions drawing more than 15,000 participants annually. In 1986, the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation (CBCF) was established as a nonpartisan research institute by CBC members and other concerned individuals who recognized the need to enhance Black involvement in all aspects of the political process. The current CBCF Annual Legislative Conference is perhaps the best known of the foundation’s activities, and is the focus of national and international attention because each year it attracts a cross-section of Black leadership from the fields of politics, business, religion, civil rights, and veterans affairs. Each year issue forums and braintrust sessions bring together academicians, political leaders, government officials, community leaders, and the general public to address almost every aspect of concern to the Black community. Thus, the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s Annual Legislative Conference (CBCALC) is recognized as one of the most important national Black socio-political gatherings for the development of new ideas. The political education, civic engagement, or activist participation and empowerment of Black America are its cardinal mission.

Representative Parren J. Mitchell (D-MD) created the braintrust model at the first dinner. As a new congressman, he was assigned to the House Small Business Committee and, determined to serve effectively, needed the expertise and resources of a cadre of individuals knowledgeable about small business and minority enterprise. Thus, Mitchell developed a braintrust of experts from across the country to advise him regarding legislation and the implementation of federal policy and programs. A series of braintrusts have since been stimulated by this model, including the Veterans Braintrust. Each meets during the CBCFALC and/or periodically throughout the year to review legislative action and to discuss recent developments.

First convened in 1988, during the eighteenth legislative weekend, the Veterans Braintrust has grown from a small core of founders to one of the largest single gatherings of Black or African American veterans in the country. It has evolved as a “think tank, advisory group, or advocacy group” to the Congressional Black Caucus, members of Congress, and other groups on such divergent issues as mental health, health care, employment and job training, higher education, small business development, homelessness, women, aging/elderly, families, and children as well as veterans of World War I, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, and

the global war on terrorism, and combat soldiers transitioning from Iraq and Afghanistan and their families.

Over the past 25 years, the Veterans Braintrust has undergone three stages of growth and development. First, it was a random issues forum from 1985 to 1987. Second, it was elevated to a braintrust by Representative Mervyn Dymally (D-CA), then CBC's chairman, and chaired from 1988 to 1994 by Representative Charles B. Rangel (D-NY), a decorated Korean War veteran. Third, the chairmanship transitioned from a northeastern urban liberal and senior statesman to leaders from the US House class of 1992, Representative Corrine Brown (D-FL), now the ranking minority member of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, and Representative Sanford Bishop, Jr. (D-GA), the ranking minority member on the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs and cochair of the bipartisan Congressional Military Families Caucus. Brown and Bishop provided a more socially traditional leadership style.

### **A Newer Approach to Veterans Affairs**

The Veterans Braintrust has tallied impressive accomplishments on behalf of Black or African American veterans. It has influenced federal legislation and programs, promoted historic recognition of their roles, supported resolutions on relevant issues, and contributed to related conferences. On legislative matters, the braintrust has:

- Played an instrumental role in drafting language for the Comprehensive Homeless Veterans Act in the early 1990s
- Caused the introduction of legislation that ultimately created the Chief Minority Affairs Officer Act of 1992 and a subsequent law that created the Center for Minority Veterans
- Coordinated special hearings on African American veterans of the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations in 1992, 1993, and 1994
- Had its comments and recommendations incorporated into the Veterans Entrepreneurship and Small Business Act of 1999
- Supported the cosponsorship of the Troops to Teachers Program Improvement Act of 1999
- Introduced through Representative Lane Evans (D-IL) legislation titled "Program Management Plan Navy Lung Disease Assessment Project Naval Health Research Center/Naval Lung Disease Assessment Program" under the National Defense Authorization Act FY 2001 that passed May 12, 2000

- Advocated at an early stage for waiving requirements to receive Section 8 housing vouchers for homeless veterans, a stance that eventually gave rise to the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) program
- Successfully pushed for broader funding under the Agent Orange Class Assistance Program by identifying the unmet needs of African American Vietnam-era veterans in the Readjustment Counseling Service program of the Department of Veterans Affairs
- Advocated for greater minority representation on the House Veterans Affairs Committee, leading to the assignment of four African American members to the panel in the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress (1993-1994), the most at one time

The braintrust has also been involved in other advocacy activities on Capitol Hill that included shaping legislation that unfortunately did not pass Congress but raised awareness of issues of concern to African American veterans. As a result of those activities, the braintrust:

- Had its comments and recommendations incorporated into the Bringing America Home Act, a homeless and/or housing bill sponsored by Representative Julia Carson (D-IN) in 2003
- Supported the efforts of Representative Michael McNulty (D-NY) to reintroduce HR 304 to award the Congressional Medal of Honor to Sgt. Henry Johnson posthumously and of Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX) to award the posthumous medal to Mess Attendant Dorius "Dorie" Miller, beginning in 2001
- Supported Representative Corrine Brown (D-FL) in her cosponsorship of three bills in 2005 regarding the Survivor Benefit Plan: HR 808, the Military Surviving Spouses Equity Act, to repeal provisions requiring the offset of amounts paid in dependency and indemnity compensation from survivor benefit plan annuities for the surviving spouse of former military personnel who are entitled to military pay or retired pay; HR 968, to change the effective date for paid-up coverage under the military survivor benefit plan from October 1, 2008; and HR 1573, to provide that the increase of \$250.00 per month in the rate of monthly dependency and indemnity compensation payable to the surviving spouse of a member of the armed forces who dies on active duty or as a result of a service-connected disability, shall be paid for as long as there are minor children, rather than only two years

The braintrust has also been involved in gaining deserved recognition for the contributions of African American military personnel in the nation's wars. It has:

- Recommended that Herman Johnson, Tuskegee Airman and son of a World War I hero, and Sgt. Henry Johnson be included in the African American National Biography, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Evelyn Higginbotham, a joint project of the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University and Oxford University Press
- Supported the \$1 million funding request of Representative Bishop for the Department of the Interior for a permanent collection and exhibit on African American POWs in Andersonville, Georgia during the Civil War, as well as adapted language for designing galleries showcasing historically significant achievements of African American POWs, encouraging visitors, walking the grounds, and offering lectures and other special events. Every activity was designed to further educate the public on the role African Americans played in various wars – Civil War, western frontier campaigns, Spanish-American War, World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, Persian Gulf, Iraq, and other conflicts. Funding included acquisition, digitization, and staffing and was incorporated into 2004 fiscal year appropriations
- Supported Representative Elijah Cummings (D-MD), then CBC chairman, in the “Salute to Our African American Veterans of World War II – Thank You for Your Service” during the national dedication of the World War II Memorial in Washington, DC on May 28, 2004
- Coordinated the first-ever regional meeting with the Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust and Andersonville National Historic Site in Georgia, in conjunction with National POW Recognition Day (April 9, 2005)
- Coordinated the first annual Black History Month event of the Andersonville National Historical Site in conjunction with the African American Civil War Museum and Memorial in Washington, DC. Frank Smith Jr., the museum’s founder and a native of Georgia, was keynote speaker on February 9, 2011
- Supported Rangel in his sponsorship of the famed Tuskegee Airmen for the Congressional Gold Medal (2007) and supported Representative Corinne Brown’s sponsorship of the Moffett Point Marines for the Gold Medal (2012)
- Received designation from the Department of Defense as a World War II and Korean War Commemorative Partner, in 1994 and 2000
- Won approval as an official national partner of the American Folklife-Veterans Oral History Project in January 2002
- Through the years, the braintrust has endorsed efforts to pass resolutions in Congress and other forums to honor military personnel and their allies and to call attention to the concerns of veterans. In those efforts, the braintrust has supported:
- Rangel in his sponsorship of House Concurrent Resolution 71, passed October 8, 2003, recognizing the importance of Ralph Bunche, the first African American to win the Nobel Peace Prize, accomplished scholar, distinguished diplomat, and tireless campaigner of civil rights for people throughout the world



- The special tribute to former prisoner of the Iraq war and Army Specialist Shoshana Johnson initiated by Rangel, in which the entire Congressional Black Caucus honored Johnson on Capitol Hill along with House Concurrent Resolution 210 passed on June 5, 2003
- Massachusetts State Representative Gloria Fox, a member of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators, and her Homelessness among Veterans resolution that the caucus passed on December 13, 2002, in Indianapolis, Indiana.
- Boston City Councilor Charles Yancey, past president and member of the National Black Caucus of Locally Elected Officials (NBC-LEO), in his Homelessness among Veterans resolution adopted by that caucus in 2004
- Fox and Maryland Delegate Clarence “Tiger” Davis, both members of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators, in their sponsorship of the Veterans Roundtable and Armed Services and Veterans Affairs Committee resolutions that the caucus passed in 2004 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Finally, the brain trust has coordinated national and regional conferences and forums on veterans health and housing issues. In this role, it has:

- Hosted the “Yesterday’s Military Heroes Ought Not Be Today’s Homeless” forum in 1992, the forerunner to the National Homeless Summit in 1994 called by Veterans Affairs Secretary Jesse Brown (138 Cong. Rec. 1992)
- Coordinated the first-ever Pacific Northwest Conference on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Community Development, in Seattle in 1994
- Co-coordinated the Third Annual National African American Veterans and PTSD Conference in St. Louis during 1994, along with the fourth, fifth and sixth annual conference in conjunction with Center for Drug Abuse Research at Howard University in 1999, 2000 and 2006; and since then the E.Y. Williams Symposium Series hosted by the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Howard
- Foreshadowed, by hosting a 2001 forum on disability and race, the Congressional Black Caucus Health Care Braintrust Annual Forum on Disability and Health led by nonvoting Delegate Donna Christian-Christensen (D-VI)

Emile Milne, former press secretary and legislative director for Rangel in Washington, DC, viewed other moments as the watershed events that have provided the greatest impetus for the Veterans Braintrust’s growth and expanding membership. He cited Gen. Colin Powell’s keynote speech and awards ceremony as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1990; the Tribute to the Original Tuskegee Airmen with Lt. Gen. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. in 1993, and President Bill Clinton’s Salute to World War II African American Veterans in 1994.

The Veterans Braintrust has received other honors in recognition of its advocacy, besides the Defense Department designation as a commemorative community. It received the NAACP’s prestigious Julius E. Williams Distinguished Community Service Award in 2000 and in 2005,

the George Washington Honor Medal from the Freedom Foundation at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

### **Veterans Braintrust Executive Committee**

Executive committee members have simultaneously directed or managed local community based initiatives, veterans nonprofit corporations and vet centers; and have lectured around the country. They have also helped plan and develop numerous workshops and conference proposals for presentation at state and national conferences, such as those of the National Association of Black Social Workers, the National Medical Association, Blacks in Government, the New Jersey Black Issues Convention, the International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies, the NAACP, and the National Black Caucus of State Legislators. Since 1995, they have attended international veterans gatherings in Africa and other continents through the braintrust's involvement with the World Veterans Federation, located in Paris. Those meetings, for example, have taken them to: Marrakech, Morocco (1995); Paris (2000); Abuja, Nigeria (2001); Johannesburg, South Africa (2003); Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2006); Maputo, Mozambique (2008); Amman, Jordan (2012) and Stockholm, Sweden (2013).

### **Strategic Assessment and Evaluation**

According to Lawrence Gary, professor emeritus of the Howard University Graduate School of Social Work, the Veterans Braintrust is "A Case Study in Black Males Organizing for Political Power." From this perspective, as a case study, it offers details, insights, and a socio-cultural and political-historical context about how African American males (and increasingly females) as veterans have struggled to self-actualize and readjust, rather than harbor, or succumb to, self-destructive impulses, attitudes, and behaviors. Further, he strongly urged members of the Veterans Braintrust "to get organized, get incorporated, and put resources in place."

This professional assessment is extremely important because it offers additional validation for the role and function of the braintrust by simply saying that it has significance. Moreover, Gary's assessment also serves as a special testament to its forward movement, unprecedented caliber of subject matter expertise, professionalism, and the quality content of its forums and national sessions. That assessment also reinforces its steadfast efforts to become a new standard bearer in terms of leading a veterans affairs paradigm, or cultural shift, championing diversity or inclusiveness, and an expansion beyond the traditional veterans service organization model (i.e., older White conservative males only club), or existing CBC member districts (representing 80 percent of the African American population in America) and build a new advocacy group, national support network, and knowledge base.

While perhaps viewable from the vantage point of a work-in-progress, or an emerging institute and/or institution, it is historically, socially and politically grounded within a contextual

framework involving racially biased U.S. governmental policies, practices, and programs of the military, Department of Veterans Affairs, and ultimately the country. There are two prime examples. During the Civil War, Black soldiers earned the right to citizenship on the battlefield, but were treated as second class citizens. Many members of the U.S. Colored Troops were ex-slaves who were illiterate, did not know how to advocate for themselves and lacked state and national advocacy groups.

Subsequently, according to Ira Russell, an Army surgeon, a large number of Black soldiers died from neglect by White officers and medical personnel (Humpheys, 2008). The other is the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital saga of syphilis, misdiagnosis of behavioral disorders, and bad conduct military discharges to Black veterans making them essentially ineligible for veterans benefits. There were also Jim Crow state laws that prohibited White doctors and female nurses from touching Black veterans who were patients (Kaplan, 2005).

Evaluations of braintrust forums have supplied critical assessment and feedback on panels, keynote speakers, awards ceremonies, themes, time management, legislative and policy recommendations, audience participation and questions, and potential areas of future research dealing with socioeconomic, political, and health-related issues, programs, and public policies.

The braintrust has forged a national purposive group and committed itself to addressing a host of overarching themes, issues, and concerns, such as unemployment and underemployment, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and mental illness, homelessness and health disparities, and historical evidence. Thus, the Veterans Braintrust is able to successfully say its cumulative accomplishments to date have proven significant. Moreover, recent summary evaluations over the past several years have provided additional knowledge and insights, as well as constructive feedback in terms of thinking, conceptualizing, designing, planning, and developing strategies, positioning itself, honing national organizing and leadership skills, building relationships and trust, targeting key socioeconomic and political issues, defining agendas, and controlling process management for the future. It has also built incrementally on its past successes - from the unique perspective of the strengths of African American veterans.

A few examples of comments from Veterans Braintrust forums include:

**Adriane Lentz-Smith, associate professor and director of undergraduate studies, Duke University's History Department (2014)**

“There’s actually a deeper and longer story, or view of the origins of the Civil Rights Movement than that of the 50s Brown v. Board of Education Decision of 1954 and the 60s successful passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.” New scholarship lends a sense of a longer and harder civil rights struggle, one that dates back at least to the World War I, leading Pellom McDaniels, a curator at Emory University’s library to call for the creation of a Consortium for the Study of African Americans in World War I.

**Everett Kelley, national vice president, American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) and Army veteran (2013)**

“We still have a great deal of work to do to fulfill President Obama’s mandate in Executive Order 13518 to make the federal government the leader in creating new job opportunities for veterans. Veterans comprise nearly 42 percent of DOD’s workforce, nearly 25 percent of Homeland Security’s workforce, and nearly 28 percent of VA’s workforce. In conclusion, we need to find a solution to the [federal budget] sequester, and not hold our military and their civilian supporters hostage. That is why AFGE is supporting HR 2785, introduced by Congressman (Tim) Walz (D-MN) to expand veterans’ preference rights for Reservists, and for employees of the VA health care system who do not have Title Five appeal rights.”

**Gen. Lloyd Austin III, 33<sup>rd</sup> vice chief of staff, the first African American to hold that prestigious position (2012)**

“Our challenge is to continue to find ways that we may better assist our separating or retiring service members. They represent the very best of America,” Austin said. “They are highly disciplined, principled, mission-focused and often mature beyond their years. They’ve learned a tremendous amount over the course of these wars about the value of hard work and teamwork and, ultimately leadership. And they’ve put these skills into practice in some of the most challenging environments on earth. Suffice it to say, they will enhance the efforts of any organization or any team that they are a part of. And so, I hope that you will continue to talk about them to folks who may be in a position to hire them or support them in some way as they look for opportunities to contribute after transitioning from the military back to civilian life.”

**Four Star Gen. John E. Wilson, U.S. Army, Ret., second African American to achieve that rank in the history of the American military (2011)**

“Today, some 70,000 plus homeless veterans exist – about 50% are minorities. These conditions beg for a comprehensive, coordinated program between the administration, Congress, and the corporate sector. For example, as we tackle the unemployment issue, we need an accounting of the skill sets of the unemployed soldiers, or soon to be released population, as well as a survey of the functional areas they desire training within. Armed with this information, we may begin to forge partnerships with accredited vocational entities and trade schools. Accordingly, this effort could also facilitate the recruiting by our business community and allow them to recommend key courses for the curriculum which could enhance one’s chances for employment.”

**American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force Report: The Psychological Needs of U.S. Military Service Members and Their Families: A Preliminary Report, February 2007 (2010)**

“A major limitation cited in the Report of the Presidential Task Force on Military Deployment Services for Youth, Families and Service Members was the scarcity of rigorous research on the mental health and well-being of service members and families during periods of major military operations. Significant gaps exist in our understanding of the complex psychological and social effects on military personnel confronting the kinds of war zone exposures characteristic of the Global War on Terror and, in turn, the effects on their friends and family. Also of concern is the absence of research examining the unique needs of special populations (e.g. female service members, National Guard members, Reservists, and minorities).”

**Kristin Lester, clinical psychologist, Women’s Health Sciences Division, National Center for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, VA Boston Health Care System (2009)**

“Despite African Americans positive attitudes regarding treatment, they had higher early termination rates compared to Caucasians. We do not know the exact reasons for this finding although it is similar to findings from the existing literature which indicates that African Americans initially have more (pre-treatment) positive attitudes toward mental health care, but after utilization their attitudes are far less positive than Caucasians, and they tend to drop-out of (VA PTSD) treatment more frequently.”

**William King, professor of Afro-American Studies and associate chairman of the Department of Ethnic Studies, University of Colorado at Boulder (2008)**

“The chief weakness I find in the VA Health Disparities Report (2007) is no indication of what will be done to correct the problem of health disparities. Much of what is reported has been known for several decades. The issue now is how do we fix a VA system that was born and bred in a society that is insensitive to differences and operates on the myth of universality.”

**James Westheider, professor of American History, University of Cincinnati-Clermont College (2007)**

“The testimonies we have heard today point to a much wider struggle, and unfortunately, as Major General Vance Coleman has so eloquently illustrated, it also includes gender orientation. Many of the same criticisms aimed at African

Americans in the past to denigrate their worth as soldiers are now being aimed at gays and lesbians in the military. But if we have learned anything here today its that prejudice can be overcome, and perhaps the experiences of African Americans in the military can serve as a guide for future groups facing harassment and bigotry.”

**Elizabeth Allen, retired associate professor, Department of Nursing, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (2006)**

“On the issue of research participation, it appears that the VA researchers are unaware of the involvement of African Americans in the military, since greater than 25% of the military is African American. The other group left out of the process are women. Research done in veterans facilities and sponsored by the Veterans Administration has systematically omitted women from quality health care, relevant research, and compensation related to military participation. And today health services for women veterans are primarily based on problems of reproduction. Further, many providers in the VA system have the misplaced belief that all women regardless of the conflict were safe behind the lines. In addition to the fact that women veterans were not allowed to participate in congressionally chartered veterans service organizations (VSOS) until the Vietnam Conflict.”

**Henry Tomes, executive director, Public Interest Directorate, American Psychological Association (2005)**

“Preliminary reviews reveal published studies on widows and widowhood, but few studies have been published on the effects of widowhood on the survivors of military veterans. In general, studies have indicated the adjustment and readjustments required of widows and widowers following the death of spouses. However, little has been written (or published) about the unique impact on veterans’ wives, and more recently husbands, who must make those adjustments following the death of the soldier or veteran.”

**Leisa D. Meyer, associate professor, Department of History, College of William and Mary (2004)**

“What became abundantly clear in the powerful testimonies of the African American women veterans who spoke during this panel were two vital issues. First, the inadequacy and sometimes absence of adequate Veterans Administration services and programs for female military veterans. Second, the invisibility of their struggles and their frustration with the lack of methods available for redress.”

**Steve Harris, author of *Harlem's Hellfighters: The African American 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry in World War I* (2003)**

“First, I was moved by the passion of all the panelists and the issues, stories, and experiences they shared with everyone. It was inspirational. I felt myself choking up on occasion. But, when the son of the first African American officer to win the Medal of Honor talked so movingly about what it meant to him, his family, and to the nation there were tears running down my cheeks. And I know I was not the only person there who felt that same emotion.”

**George White Jr., assistant professor of history and African American studies, University of Tennessee at Knoxville (2002)**

“Given the intelligence, articulation, and gripping emotion of the presentations, there is no doubt that future panels should be convened and these stories should be disseminated in as wide a fashion as possible, either through television, movies, books, internet collections, etc. I highly commend the Veterans Braintrust for staging such a wonderful session and encourage them to continue their commitment to the betterment of the lives of Black veterans.”

**Sylvia Walker, director, Howard University Research & Training Center (2001)**

“The program reinforced the valuable contributions that veterans continue to make to America and to the cause of the disabled. While it highlighted the accomplishments, it also left room for articulating the shortcomings and the way forward. Most importantly, the forum created an atmosphere in which the voices of all concerned could be heard and respected.”

**Charles Johnson Jr., associate professor, Department of History and Geography, Morgan State University (2000)**

“The Korean War issues forum was a major success. There were many revelations that are generally unknown to the public and the informative, provocative, and emotional presentations which revealed difficulties that the soldiers faced provided the audience with a stronger impression of the struggles of these brave men than any history book ever could. Serving in airborne, artillery, infantry and ranger organizations, their experiences were different, but all suffered indignities from hardened White officers and noncommissioned officer cadres who attempted to maintain segregation at any cost...

“The involvement of African American soldiers must be included in the narratives of the Korean War before we lose these eyewitnesses and measures should be undertaken to establish a monument that recognizes their military service.”

**Deborah Newman Ham, professor, Graduate Faculty, Morgan State University, Department of History and Geography (2000)**

“I also believe that there is no stronger argument than the blood and sweat of African American soldiers for the equitable inclusion of African Americans in every aspect of the United States political and economic system. These men have fought in every conflict since the French and Indian Wars. It is past time that their role should be celebrated and compensated.”

**Shari Miles, director of the African American Women’s Institute, Howard University (1999)**

“An evaluation instrument should be prepared for the audience and the panelists to complete. Another obvious concern is the lack of female representation among the presenters and the lack of discussion of the specific concerns of female veterans.”

**Michael Tanner, director of health and welfare studies, Cato Institute (1999)**

“The program was highly successful at what might be called the tactical level, but less so at the strategic level. In short, a discussion of problems is important, but I would like to have seen more focus on solutions. There is always a temptation to turn such sessions into ‘*gripe sessions*.’ I don’t mean to imply that these panels went that far, but I think they were not as successful as they might have been if they had been more solution-oriented. I think many people left the event, as I did, with a better appreciation of some of the problems that African American veterans face, but without any real idea of what needs to be done to deal with the problems.”

**Phil Schervish, associate professor, Howard University, School of Social Work (1998)**

“The position of the Veterans Braintrust should be proactive – Braintrust members must read the Federal Register daily to stay informed, and equally important, was the need for all issues discussed, such as bad discharges, homelessness, remedial and adult education, PTSD disability, job retraining, health care, and small business development, to be seen as interconnected, and not as competing ones. Further, the issue of education should be the common denominator for the frequently overlapping and often interconnected concerns



stemming from small business development and/or the upgrading of quality health care with respect to cultural sensitivity and diversity. The Veterans Braintrust's focus should be on the finding of common threads or linking of issues and consensus building, as well as drawing correlations between cause and effect, employing research and analysis, while bringing in other perspectives.”

**Lawrence Gary, professor and researcher, Howard University, School of Social Work (1997)**

“I would like to offer my validation for the role of the Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust by simply saying, ‘it’s significant.’ In addition, that the Veterans Braintrust is really ‘A Case Study of Black Males Organizing for Political Power.’ In conclusion, I would like to strongly urge members of the Veterans Braintrust ‘to get organized, get incorporated, and put resources in place.’

“Equally important, the Veterans Braintrust has also provided quite rich content (or qualitative) documentation from those African American veterans, families, and supporters who have given (e.g., time, energy, and effort, not to mention money) in the quest for social justice; political redress; empowerment; strengthening of social ties, roles and bonds; rededication to a sense of self-determination; community involvement or connectedness; and last, but not least, to become leaders in their own right. These exemplify a rare commitment, persistence, and tenacity to civic engagement, or political involvement, advocacy, and organizing at the CBCFALC and beyond over the past twenty-five years, bringing about social change and enhanced public policies as well as national and social memory. Subsequently, there is a real desire to formalize or institutionalize its empowerment and transformative elements in addition to replicating its legislative issues forums (or public forums) on a regional, state, and local basis, while simultaneously bolstering its strategic alliances with a plethora of national organizations and grassroots African American and veteran community groups. Furthermore, its executive director has continued as the chief chronicler of the history of the Veterans Braintrust, reading, writing, and researching literature, journals, articles, newspapers, films, and videotapes as reference material for library and/or archival purposes.

“Most notably, this national cadre of African American veterans, family members, and supporters is, by and large, proactive, progressive, and positively responding to the social, political, and economic challenges of our time. They have embarked on the road to political empowerment through community organizing, advocacy, direct-delivery of veteran services, and the crafting of at first a bottom-up, next top-down, and now periphery-in agenda (or triangular

approach). The truth is the CBCFALC validates their collective concerns, heightens awareness, and provides a continuing teaching (both listening and learning) laboratory and training opportunity regarding current social, political, economic, and health issues in continuing need of monitoring. Yet some African American veterans, their families, and supporters have differing perspectives and interpretations of the relative significance of the Veterans Braintrust from the standpoint of operating year round as a national advocacy and public policy group. In addition, some question whether or not it constitutes a legitimate empowerment vehicle outside the context of the CBCFALC framework. Yet the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's ALC, in its forty-third year, has played an undeniably facilitating and validating role in giving African American veterans a national voice in and out of Congress, a national political platform, and unprecedented access to high ranking federal officials. Its African American veteran members are uncharacteristically motivated, optimistic, and cognitively aware of its strategic importance for resolving longstanding historical, social, cultural, political, economic, and health-related problems; leveraging a greater share of federal/state/local/private resources; and giving national voice and visibility to their collective concerns."

## **Problem Statement**

### **House Veterans Affairs Committee (HVAC)**

The late Representative Lane Evans (D-IL), a former ranking Democratic member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, observed that African American veterans were far from a political priority or legislative concern of the panel. The Veterans Affairs Committee had legislative and oversight jurisdiction over the VA and veterans employment programs administrated by the Department of Labor. The committee oversaw a \$35 billion budget, which was used by the VA to operate the world's largest health care delivery system. The Republican majority on the Veterans Affairs Committee said that congressional hearings focused on African American veterans would be divisive. Yet, ironically, in the opinion of Mississippi Republican party chairman Billy Powell, the committee's late former chairman Representative G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery (D-MS) voted pretty much like a Republican. Indeed, he followed the Republican line on many major votes, from the balanced budget amendment to a ban on federal funding of abortions. Moreover, Powell said, "a large number of Republicans had voted for Montgomery over the years, and a certain amount of people had wanted him to switch parties, but tolerated him being a Democrat." (Javers, 1995) More importantly, under his leadership the committee never gave African American veterans issues and concerns any attention at all.

Beginning in 1981, Montgomery, a personal friend of former president George H. W. Bush, was the subject of numerous complaints, such as being out of step with majority Democrats, voting with the Republican administration, favoring older World War II over

Vietnam veterans, and completely ignoring ethnic minority veterans. As committee chairman, Montgomery effectively ruled the Veterans Affairs Department and its predecessor, the Veterans Administration, with a firm hand. He decided when government would approve what benefits for veterans and, thanks to an unusual agreement with the Rules Committee, no veterans bill was subject to amendment on the House floor. That gave Montgomery powers few House committee chairmen shared (McAllister, 1994). Despite such power, Montgomery narrowly escaped an ouster attempt in late 1992 by Lane Evans, a younger and more liberal member (Cooper and Pianin, 1992).

Several years ago Representative Maxine Waters (D-CA), also a former ranking member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee and past chairperson of the Congressional Black Caucus, publicly chastised Montgomery, then chairman,, at a committee meeting for referring to her by first name without permission and for not having one Black person on the committee staff, when a quarter of the armed forces were Black during the first Persian Gulf War. (Dumas, 1991, 3460(3)). At the committee meeting to consider legislation to establish a chief minority affairs officer with the DVA, the discussion turned to the composition of the committee staff under Montgomery (Curry, 2009). Waters' actions were sparked by passage of House Bill HR 3327. The bill reflected a compromise worked out by Rangel, chairman of the CBC Veterans Braintrust, to make the VA more accountable for its assistance to ethnic minority veterans.

Waters has fought tirelessly for hiring minority staff on Capitol Hill. According to a Veterans Affairs Committee aide, there were a total of 34 staffers on the panel at one point in the 1990s, 25 aides to the Democratic majority, and nine to the Republican minority. In addition, each subcommittee chairman and ranking member had an aide. Of the 25 Democratic staffers, 11 were men, eight of them professional staff (of the eight, one was Asian American). Of the 14 women on the committee, four were professional staff. The only Black aide was a female "investigative" staffer, which translated into a mid-level position. In addition to the 25 positions under Montgomery's control, the ranking minority member, Representative Bob Stump (R-AZ) controlled another nine aides, two males and seven females, one of them Hispanic. In response to Waters' criticism, Stump said, "I'll make you a deal, I won't tell you who to hire on your staff, and you don't tell me who to hire on my staff." (Anonymous, 1991) Quite similarly, former House Veterans Affairs Committee chairman Bob Stump (R-AZ) and his successors Chris Smith (R-NJ) and Steve Buyer (R-IN) had literally excluded minority veterans from the legislative process and/or veterans affairs congressional hearing agenda and testimony.

Simply put, congressional leaders on both sides of the aisle have politically postured, but practiced exclusion in setting the veterans agenda. Ardent critics of the House Veterans Affairs Committee and the congressional hearing process, particularly African American veteran advocates, say: "It's the same old story – putting African Americans on the frontlines in the Persian Gulf or elsewhere is one thing, but equal access and opportunity to participate in the legislative setting is another matter." Between the Veterans Affairs Committee shift from Democratic to Republican to Democrat and now back to Republican, little has changed when

looking objectively at legislative hearing participation, testimony and public policies, or agendas, despite some minor changes in committee staffing patterns. Continuing calls on the past chairman Bob Filner (D-CA) to open up the committee hearing and/or stakeholders meeting process to nonchartered African Americans and other ethnic minority veterans groups, especially given that African American veterans are the numerical majority of the ethnic minority veterans population, has led inevitably to the persistence of resentment and a growing degree of governmental cynicism and distrust.

### **Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA)**

Likewise, the Department of Veterans Affairs historically has viewed African American veterans' advocacy as an attempt to micromanage the large bureaucratic system or, worse, as simply irrelevant and of no tangible benefit to the larger veterans population or society as a whole. In short, African American veterans and their families can legitimately claim that they are caught between the proverbial "rock and hard place."

Numerous national forums, focus groups, roundtable discussions, and one-on-one meetings have been held in an effort to address existing systemic problems in the Department of Veterans Affairs. Those problems persist. For example, research findings reveal, despite more positive pre-treatment attitudes, African Americans tend to drop out of VA treatment more frequently (Lester, 2009); the DVA's intramural research framework prohibits historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) from funding and research participation (Lawson, 2009); why disproportionate Black veterans homelessness exists is essentially unanswered (Peake, 2008); lack of racial and ethnic data on disability benefits (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2008); less satisfaction with both VA inpatient and outpatient care (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2008, 2009 & 2010); persistently observed disparities in cancer, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, HIV/AIDs, hepatitis C and mental health (Saha, S., Freeman, M., Toure, J., Tippens, K.M., Weeks, C., & Ibrahim, S., 2007); DVA's myopic research agenda and aversion, or pervasive reluctance, to looking at racial data to guide scientific studies and intervention programs (Lehmann, 1997); the perceived ongoing disparity of disability benefit awards to minority veterans (H.R. Report No. 103-25, 1994); the need for special outreach to minority veterans, especially to those who are residing in socially and economically disadvantaged areas (Goss, 1996); inadequate access to quality mental and physical health care, and particularly misdiagnosis (Lawson, 1996); inconsistent disability ratings throughout the country (DeVictor, 1996); the VA's lack of clarity about the extent of the acute versus chronic effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (Mather, 1997); lack of VA data based on racial and/or ethnic minority characteristics of disabled veterans (Hensley, 1999); and community-based partnership tensions involving resources sharing and/or turf (Armstead, 1998). All lag far behind.

Overshadowing these and other issues, such as the VA budget, over the past two-and-a-half decades has been the major restructuring of the veterans health care system, reflecting resource reallocation based on the southeastern and Sunbelt migratory patterns of older White

veterans (known as snowbirds) and downward pressure on veterans programs nationally. Another example is the merging of the Lakeside and Westside VA hospitals in Chicago. The Westside hospital, now known as the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center, is located in the poor community and, advocates say, needs to be supported. The Tuskegee VA Medical Center, a historically Black veterans hospital, along with the Boston VA Medical Center and other others serving high percentages of African American veterans were proceeding along without adequate input from the African American community and other stakeholders. This omission raised serious concerns that African American interests were not being adequately represented, nor were those issues being raised (Williams, 1997), thus constituting a serious breach of the social contract with the African American veterans population, who suffer disproportionately from a myriad of social ills along racial, gender, and class lines.

### **Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs)**

The American Legion (AL), Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and Disabled American Veterans (DAV) alliance with the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) and the House Veterans Affairs Committee (HVAC) on Capitol Hill is known as “the Iron Triangle.” African American veteran advocates’ socio-political and historical analysis, however, indicates that the veterans iron triangle is in reality nothing more than an “old boys’ network” or “paradigm of exclusion.” George Duggins, late president and former chairman of the Vietnam Veterans of America’s Minority Affairs, noted: “There is often a feeling that the veterans community does not recognize the special needs of minorities and the VA and organized veterans groups are perceived by minority veterans as a White male club.” (The Veteran, 1993) Likewise, Representative Maxine Waters (D-CA) concurred that there are numerous reasons why there is not much African American involvement in the traditional veterans service organizations. She pointed out that she had heard from veterans of color from across the nation during her tenure on the House Veterans Affairs Committee who said they felt unrepresented, underserved, and unattended to (H.R. Report No. 103-58, 1995).

What lessons has the iron triangle learned, if any, about cultural diversity for the better part of the two, three, four, or five decades from the all-volunteer military since 1972? By most accounts, the lessons are few and far in between. In 1995, William Leftwich III, deputy assistant secretary of defense for equal opportunity, in addressing the question before a CBCVB forum about whether equal opportunity has been successful in the military, answered an unequivocal, yes! “Our military experience in WWII taught us that segregation was expensive, wasteful of human and material resources, and destructive of overall morale. During the Korean War we learned that racially integrated units were operationally successful, had high unit cohesion, and were able to maintain high morale. The war in Vietnam taught us that simply ‘being together’ was not enough. So we developed training programs to foster interracial understanding and eliminate racial tensions. Similarly, former president (Bill) Clinton and others have praised the military for its affirmative action successes, calling it the most successful example of equal

opportunity in the nation, as well as praising its equal opportunity education and training programs.” (Leftwich, 1995)

Finally, an analysis of ethnic minority veterans, particularly African American efforts over the past 25 years to address the existing “iron triangle paradigm” in Washington suggests deep divisions between VSOs and community-based organizations or ethnic minority group veterans over redressing social ills and funding service programs and research. Equally important, the denial of ethnic minority veterans, particularly African American voices and/or representation in Washington, exposes a seemingly unbridged gap between veteran haves and veteran have nots. Thus, the stalemate reflects a crisis of credibility, government trust, lack of confidence and moral courage, and a breakdown of political will between majority and minority representatives, as well as veterans, their families, and organizations.

### **Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust**

Testimonies before the Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust have revealed that many minority veterans continue to face serious and persistent difficulties relative to accessibility and the effectiveness of mental health and health care-related services for unexplained reasons (Gober, 1997). Equally important, at the height of the health care reform debate during the Bill Clinton administration, the late Veterans Affairs Secretary Jesse Brown testified that VA data showed 26 percent of VA health care system users were African American veterans who suffer a disproportionate rate of hypertension, homelessness, kidney dysfunction, respiratory disease, substance abuse, cancer, HIV/AIDs, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other mental illnesses (Brown, 1993). Further, women made up only 4 percent of veterans compared with 11 percent of the active duty personnel. Approximately 2 percent of all veterans receiving care in VA medical centers were women and just over 17 percent of these were African American women. But the VA had a well-documented history on inadequacy of care for women veterans (Mather, 1993).

According to late noted psychologist Erwin Parsons, numerous studies of African American veterans with PTSD and related problems found that they are vulnerable to myriad medical problems that worsen over time (H.R. Report No. 103-25, 1993). In many cases, these conditions also undermine veterans’ will to live. Together these factors often lead to homelessness, PTSD, and other related socio-emotional and medical problems considered critical factors in chronic unemployment and underemployment among inner-city African Americans. Equally important, Clyde Poag, past chairman of the National African American Veterans Working Group, cited the social implications for the society at large and the African American community in particular, because African American soldiers comprised a large percentage of the frontline troops in Vietnam and were subjected to racism and discrimination (H.R. Report No. 103-25, 1994). He also pointed out the traumatic irony or the psycho-social confusion in the minds of many as they witnessed and/or experienced the contradiction of water hoses and dogs attacking their friends and family members at home, heard themselves called fools for fighting

for a country in which they were not treated as first class citizens, and contended with youth adjustment problems. In recent wars Iraq and Afghanistan, those negative factors have been replaced by mental and behavioral health problems from multiple deployments, traumatic brain injuries, stress, depression, and suicide.

Furthermore, even some conservative commentators, such as Armstrong Williams, who supported military action against Iraq, have argued Blacks' views are shaped as much by historical and economic concerns as they were by partisan views of former president George W. Bush. "They have seen how we were treated in World War II and how Black veterans are treated," Williams said. "It's just something that has been passed down from their grandparents and parents."

Other pressing socioeconomic concerns of African American veterans over the past twenty-five years center around lower educational attainment levels, limited access to start-up business capital, higher rates of unemployment, more underemployment, and lower median incomes than their White counterparts (H.R. Report No. 103-58, 1994). Persistently, African American veterans have suffered an unemployment rate two to three times higher than most veterans. Gen. Preston Taylor, former assistant secretary for veterans employment and training in the Labor Department, concluded that African American veterans faced a double stereotype based on racial discrimination and misinformation about veterans: "Too many Americans are still living with the old Vietnam Syndrome that veterans are drones and drug addicts." (Anonymous, 1996) And, according to Representative Charles Rangel (D-NY), where there is high unemployment and homelessness, health care concerns prevail (139 Cong. Rec., 1993).

### **The Veterans Braintrust Model and Strategy**

There are several major strengths to the Veterans Braintrust model and strategy that deserve special attention:

- 1) The braintrust's model is first and foremost inclusive and similar to a national umbrella organization, because of the multiplicity of individuals and organizations distributed across different geographical areas and regions of the country.
- 2) It builds upon a national network of preexisting veterans and community-based organizations (VCBOs), grassroots leadership, social science, and numerous reports stemming from congressional and other research services (Congressional Research Service, congressionally mandated studies, surgeon general reports, Governmental Accountability Office reports, inspector general reports, etc.).
- 3) It mobilizes a cross-section of politically active, or adjusted (yet, often frustrated and angry), highly self-motivated African American veterans who hold multiple roles and affiliations as spokespeople, advocates, advisers, opinion makers, community leaders,

researchers, clinicians, community practitioners, and family members in the African American community.

- 4) The membership is homogeneous (Black, or African American), but not monolithic. It recognizes the intra-group diversity contained within the African diaspora and is particularly sensitive with respect to managing stress, diversity, conflict resolution, consensus-building, and building trust.
- 5) The braintrust relies on the co-chairperson's congressional offices as national points of contact, a clearinghouse, strategic resource, and asset headquartered in Washington. That arrangement offers several unique advantages: congressional leadership and staff support, congressional research services, interoffice coordination and collaboration (i.e., "Dear Colleague" letters and legislative cosponsors), and direct organizational links such the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), Congressional Black Caucus Foundation (CBCF), Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, NAACP, National Black Caucus of State Legislators, Association for the Study of African American Life and History, etc.
- 6) Veterans and citizen soldiers have direct participation in political involvement, civic engagement, and monitoring of various venues or forums concerning legislative and public policy. The braintrust also utilizes national analysis and data collection that can be keenly assessed through the lens of the Congressional Black Caucus and/or a Black perspective.
- 7) The braintrust hones national organizing, public policy formulation, and development skills, along with leadership development skills, especially nonprofit organizational development and management, skills, as a prerequisite for spinning off a national advisory, advocacy, and public policy group with community related linkages and programming at the national, state, and local levels.
- 8) Finally, the braintrust offers a vital teaching experience before participants enter the mainstream of veterans affairs, replicates public issues forums (or initiates national dialogues and conversation), and promulgates public policies at the national, regional, state, or local levels.

## **Conclusion**

Although the Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust and its national support network are well established, CBC members and the CBC Foundation often appear ambivalent about doing anything special with the Braintrust until the Annual Legislative Conference (ALC) in September. Paradoxically, the ALC also offers a permanent national strategic platform,



stability, and continuity for ongoing public debate and policy development. Furthermore, braintrusts like the Veterans Braintrust are essentially informal groups and lack budgets for travel to meet with other individuals, organizations, or groups. Also, under the existing congressional ethics rules and CBC Foundation rules, braintrusts are prohibited from raising money and/or conducting programs. Compounding the situation even further, in 1995 the CBC lost its federal funding, along with 28 other legislative service organizations when Republicans took over the House of Representatives. And in 2011 the CBC was informed under the new ethics rules that members are prohibited from endorsing or promoting private events such as the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's Annual Legislative Conference (ALC).

Nevertheless, the Veterans Braintrust's incremental growth and perseverance over the past twenty-five years has greatly contributed to grasping the fundamental nuances of national advocacy and the legislative process, as well as compiling and analyzing numerous congressional testimonies for the preliminary drafting of a comprehensive long-term development plan, organizational structure, and a thorough legislative agenda. Simultaneously, the Veterans Braintrust is continuing to broaden and deepen its base of support beyond the districts of Congressional Black Caucus members, while garnering input and feedback nationwide. Additionally, the crafting of the CBCVB strategic platform planning and getting the message out has continued with the assistance of current and former House members Charles Rangel (D-NY), Corrine Brown (D-FL), Sanford Bishop Jr. (D-GA), Gwen Moore (D-WI), Julia Carson (D-IN), Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX), Maxine Waters (D-CA), Lane Evans (D-IL) and other dignitaries, professionals, academicians, and practitioners.

Equally important, when Black, or African American veterans come to Washington, DC at their own expense for the CBCFALC, it is one of the few times when a critical mass, a gender-mixed and intergenerational cross-section of African American veterans, families, and supporters are in the same place, at the same time. But these national socio-political gatherings are only a fraction of what could be accomplished if and when the Veterans Braintrust takes the next logical step and organizes, reinvents, or repackages itself into a national advisory, advocacy, and public policy group, with the support of the CBC, its members, the CBC Foundation, and others.

As a spin-off group of the CBC Foundation's ALC, African American veteran activists can inform and educate legislators in Washington, host semi-annual regional forums, and contribute to or at least continue to assist in planning, coordinating, and underwriting certain aspects of the annual legislative conference's Veterans Braintrust.

Other activities it could undertake in the next stage of development include fundraising; publishing a blog or quarterly online newsletter; developing a website that is interactive and transactional (as in e-commerce); outlining programs; packaging and marketing legislative agenda items that encompass a nationwide Black perspective that reflects the thinking of African American veterans, their families, communities, and supporters. Also, the braintrust could exert a year-round socio-political presence and rapidly respond to national and international news

media on stories about African Americans and veterans and function as a real national think tank, and advisory, advocacy, and public policy group.

The Veterans Braintrust has tangibly illustrated that there is an abundant talent pool available for developing and branding this new nonpartisan entity. It has the proven track-record with over 25 years of experience. The only question is: “Does it have the political will?”

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