

Take a moment to think of song you may like. Is it just one note played by a single instrument over and over without any variety? Or does it have a mix of voices, instruments, beats and melodies that open your heart and your mind to the message in the song? I bet it's those lyrics, harmonies and rhythms that keep you listening to that song.

In 1900 James Weldon Johnson wrote the words to the song "Lift Every Voice and Sing" as a poem to celebrate Lincoln's birthday. After his brother put the poem's message of patriotism and hope for the future to music, the song was adopted by the NAACP as the "African-American National Anthem" and could be found in the hymnals of black churches across the country.

Today, as we celebrate African American History Month, I think of this song that calls for every voice to sing the “harmonies of liberty” and what that means for us as an Army.

The nation’s history has not always been a song of freedom sung in perfect harmony. In the past our nation called upon African Americans to serve their country, but their country did not always serve them. Despite the discord and the injustice our brothers and sisters faced, there was never a time in our history when African-Americans were unwilling to serve or fight bravely for their country.

Why did they serve a nation that denied them the rights and privileges that other Americans enjoyed? They served because they believed in the promises of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. They believed that their courage, honor, duty, sacrifice and love of liberty would one day win over injustice and that they, too, could lift their voices and sing the harmonies of liberty.

In every conflict and in every war, the drum of freedom called generations of Americans of all races to step forward to fight for freedom and to defend their country. These men and women who chose to serve, our nation's greatest generations, were made of America's strongest citizens – its Soldiers. (PAUSE) Men and women who should – despite their color – have their names etched into our memory.

When we think of the War of Independence, we should think of the African American voice that cried out “Be not afraid” and led the angry citizens of Boston to protest British law. We should remember Crispus Attucks, an escaped slave, who became the first man to die for the cause of liberty that would become the American Revolution.

United, we remember the “heroes proved” of the Louisiana Free Men of Color who, turned the tide of the War of 1812, the men of the Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup> Regiment who were first black regiment to fight in the Civil War, and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Buffalo Soldiers who protected the West and led the charge up San Juan Hill with Teddy Roosevelt’s Rough Riders.

Together, we celebrate the “patriot dreams” of the Harlem Hell Fighters and the Black Rattlers of New York’s 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment who, in World War One, became known as “The Lost Children”. Despite being barred from combat by their own country, these men fought side-by-side with the French Army, spent more days in the trenches than any other American unit and, by the end of the war, reached the point furthest east.

As one, we are in awe of the Greatest Generation that included the “Triple Nickels”, the “Red Tail Angels” of the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron, the brave drivers of the “Red Ball Express” and the “Black Panthers” of the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion.

We honor the men and women who fought in the wars in Korea and Vietnam, which became the crucible for future African-American four-star generals like General Daniel “Chappie” James and General Colin Powell, who rose to the position of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Gulf War.

In slavery and in freedom, their struggles have been at the heart of the American experience, and their “liberating strife” against racism is as testament to the American perseverance to overcome all adversity.

It is this fighting spirit that makes our Soldiers and our nation strong. Since the birth of our Continental Army, our Soldiers have developed into professionals, bonded together by implicit trust. This trust, this bond, this brotherhood of men and women was forged in the trenches. Though ignorance and prejudice had once divided this house, it is our bond that strengthens and unites us, because we are one nation and one Army.

This year, we join the nation in honoring some of the strongest voices of freedom's chorus – African American women -who have played a vital role in the history of our nation and our Army as well. Their patriotism, loyalty and leadership, coupled with their hard work, intellect and artistic expression, have enriched the African American community and the nation as a whole.

Women like Cathay Williams, who hid the fact that she was a woman so she could enlist in the U.S. Army during the Civil War, Major Christy Adams, the commander of the Six Triple Eight Central Postal Battalion and Major General Marcia Anderson, the first black woman to be promoted to major general, added their voices to the choir that “sings a song full of hope” and inspires an new generation of Army women.

For centuries, African American men and women have stepped forward to serve a nation without their nation serving them. They carved out a path to justice and equality with a resolute spirit and a dedication to liberty. Let us have pride in their past and confidence in our future. They laid a foundation for us.

Our Soldiers have built on this foundation to become leaders on the battlefields in Iraq, Afghanistan and in countries around the world. Today's squad leaders, sergeants major, commanders and generals reflect the diversity of Army that is truly a blended chorus singing a new verse in song of liberty. Diversity is something that unites our Army and strengthens our Soldiers to achieve the extraordinary.

For the Soldiers standing here today, you are members of the preeminent land force in the world. Your skill and dedication to mission are what keeps the Army the nation's force of decision action. In this world-class force, there is no room for racism, sexism, prejudice, bullying or hazing. Do not tolerate it. Do not accept it.

Embrace our past. Celebrate our diversity. Remember that it is the sacrifices men and women of ALL races that have made the African American experience THE American history.

We must look back on the lessons learned from the past and forge ahead on the path paved with the loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage of those who raised their hands to serve their nation and lifted their voices to sing the harmonies of freedom.

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Additional resources:

[African American History Month Stand To!](#)

[African Americans in the Army](#)

[Vice Chief of Staff of the Army - Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III](#)

[For Love of Liberty Script \(PBS Historical Documentary\)](#)