



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Building the Coast Guard America Needs: Achieving Diversity, Equity, and Accountability within the Service

June 23, 2021

Admiral Schultz, I am pleased you are appearing before the Committee to discuss the Coast Guard's efforts to develop a culture of equity, inclusion, justice, and accountability. Today's hearing is part of this Committee's long-running efforts to help the Coast Guard develop a diverse, inclusive environment free from harassment, bullying, assault, and retaliation. It is precisely because this Committee supports the Coast Guard, its mission, and its people that we are committed to ensuring the Service addresses the challenges it faces.

I have long had concerns about the lack of diversity in the Coast Guard, especially among its officer ranks and among its leadership. The demographics of the Coast Guard fail to reflect the diversity of the American public. For example, only 5.6 percent of active duty members self-identify as Black or African American, compared to about 14 percent of the U.S. population.

Fostering diversity is critical to building a culture that welcomes and celebrates varied perspectives and experiences and ensures the Coast Guard reflects the public it serves. Last weekend, we lost a trailblazer as Commander Merle Smith Jr., the first Black graduate of the Coast Guard Academy, passed away. We must honor his service by working to ensure more minority cadets enter and graduate from the Academy, which serves as a conduit to the Service's leadership ranks.

I am also thinking today of my late friend and colleague, Elijah Cummings, who was fiercely dedicated to demanding accountability, protecting whistleblowers, and supporting the Coast Guard. I was pleased that language I authored to increase diversity and cultural competence at the Academy was included in last year's Coast Guard Authorization Act—which, fittingly, was named for Chairman Cummings. As we will discuss today, the Coast Guard has much further to go to ensure diversity and inclusion across the Service.

In 2019, this Committee and the Oversight and Reform Committee investigated the Coast Guard's handling of allegations of harassment and bullying made by Lieutenant Commander Kimberly Young-McLear, a member of the Coast Guard Academy's faculty who is Black and identifies as lesbian. The investigation made clear that the Lieutenant Commander's allegations were never investigated properly, and as the Department of Homeland Security Office of the Inspector General substantiated, she was retaliated against for raising the allegations.

The Committees issued a joint Majority staff report that highlighted significant problems with Coast Guard policies and practices that contributed to the failure to fully and fairly investigate the allegations. The report also included seven recommendations to improve investigative processes at the Academy and throughout the Coast Guard. I am glad the Coast Guard agreed with the Committees on the need for major changes and concurred with all the recommendations, and I look forward to hearing from the

Commandant about the status of their implementation. Unfortunately, Lieutenant Commander Young-McLear's experience is just one example of such issues within the Coast Guard.

Since the Office of the Inspector first reported on her case in 2018, it has identified three additional instances of whistleblower retaliation within the Service. In each case, a member of the Coast Guard reported misconduct only to be retaliated against in the form of poor performance marks, removal from leadership positions, or other negative consequences. I find these reports extremely troubling. These violations of the Military Whistleblower Protection Act contribute to a culture of fear that discourages reporting of misconduct.

The Office of the Inspector General also issued a report in June 2020 documenting major cultural problems at the Coast Guard Academy. The report found problems with how the Academy investigated allegations of race-based harassment in 11 cases between 2013 and 2018. In six cases, the Academy did not thoroughly investigate the allegations or discipline cadets. In some instances, cadets committed similar misconduct again. Just last week, the Committee received a Coast Guard report documenting disturbing trends in the numbers of sexual assault and harassment allegations.

According to the Coast Guard, reports of sexual assault have more than doubled in the last ten years, with 245 reports of sexual assault in Fiscal Year 2020 alone. This report follows a 2018 survey that found almost half of female cadets at the Academy said they were sexually harassed, and about one in eight women said they had received unwanted sexual contact. Taken together, these reports should be setting off every alarm bell, warning light, and alert system at Coast Guard Headquarters and on every base, cutter, and air station.

As the senior leader of the Coast Guard, Admiral Schultz is ultimately responsible for responding to this five-alarm fire, and I look forward to hearing his plans for putting it out. Unsurprisingly, this Committee continues to hear from whistleblowers regarding disturbing allegations of sexual assault, harassment, bullying, retaliation, and mishandling of internal investigations. I have pressed the Coast Guard about some of these cases.

In one case, a servicemember was recently granted a retroactive promotion after her performance suffered due to her supervisor's abusive and inappropriate behavior. It should not take congressional intervention for the Coast Guard to do the right thing. While I understand there is a strong desire from the Coast Guard to be forward-looking, the Service cannot reach its full potential if it does not learn from the past.

I appreciate that the Commandant has led efforts to address some of these issues, but unfortunately it is clear those efforts are either falling short of what is needed or not making an impact quickly enough. The Coast Guard, with the help of this Committee and stakeholders, must confront harassment, bullying, and retaliation head-on. The Coast Guard must do more than pay lip service to diversity, inclusion, and equality in press releases and congressional testimony; it must deliver results for the servicemembers of the Coast Guard.

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