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**FILE TITLE: PROJECT 100,000 ASVAB Misnorming and the Advent of AF Social  
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J.L.M.

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**PROJECT 100,000**  
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Is the United States Air Force a fighting force for peace or a welfare state for the disadvantaged? At unit level, it would seem that we are a fighting force for peace. However, at the highest levels of our national government, I'm not so sure that the United States Air Force is viewed from that position. In 1967, a very interesting period in Air Force history began as President Lyndon Johnson implemented a new program called Project 100,000. Carried out during a very emotional time in our nation's history, our government was enlisting hundreds of thousands of men that did not meet minimum aptitude standards for enlistment. This was done by design but with a hidden agenda. This influx of people that did not meet minimum standards occurred again in the early 1980s as a result of Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test scores being misnormed. This paper supports the hypothesis that the United States Government purposely used the Air Force, in part, as an institution for low aptitude recruits, many of whom arrived from very disadvantaged backgrounds. As a result, it was necessary for the Air Force to develop numerous social initiatives such as Social Actions, Drug and Alcohol Abuse Programs, and Equal Opportunity and Treatment Programs to counter the problems that resulted from Project 100,00 and ASVAB misnorming. In many ways, this put the Air Force ahead of society at large in dealing with the social issues of that time. Most of the programs developed back in the 70s and 80s are still with us today. This paper is neither a condemnation of the enlistment of low aptitude airmen or a diatribe

against the apparent hidden agendas that existed during both these periods. More so, it is an attempt to show a correlation between the influx of disadvantaged people into the Air Force through Project 100,000 and ASVAB misnorming and the initiation of Air Force Social Actions with wonderful results. In order to better understand this, it is necessary to go back in time all the way to the Kennedy Administration.

Variations of Project 100,000 had many false starts. The book Low-Aptitude Men in the Military states, "In September of 1963, President John F. Kennedy established the Task Force on Manpower Conservation because, in the previous year, one-third of all 18 year old men who reported for draft examinations had been judged unfit for military service. Nearly half were ineligible because of aptitude deficits." (3:15) President Kennedy believed that today's military rejects were tomorrow's hard core unemployed. A very accurate assumption. A study conducted in 1964 revealed that out of 2,500 rejects studied, 40% were unemployed and 50% were in unskilled labor-type jobs. President Kennedy formed a task force to develop a social program to help these disadvantaged men. Department of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara was assigned to the team.

The build-up in Vietnam was in it's infancy, and there was some thought that lowering aptitude standards would bring in more people to compensate for the build up. At the end of 1964 and again in 1965, Secretary McNamara proposed a program called Operation STEP (Special Enlistment Training Program) to take advantage of these disadvantaged men. This program would have established a pre-basic training for those with remedial skills problems or physical deficits. Designed for people with AFQT scores between 15 to 30 (border-line mentally retarded is considered 10 or below); it would provide a headstart for low aptitude

airmen. However, there was a problem. Congress would have none of it! Congress felt that this type of assistance should be provided by a civilian organization versus the military. This philosophy dramatically changed with the assassination of President Kennedy.

Soon after his appointment as President, Lyndon Johnson gladly accepted the baton as the champion of the less fortunate in the United States. He immediately adopted McNamara's ideas and in 1966, Project 100,000 was implemented. Given that the DoD was aware of the potential of increased manpower needs brought about by the buildup in Vietnam, many people believed that Project 100,000 was more readily accepted because of manpower necessities to provide "cannon fodder" for Vietnam. The Air Force was by far the most reluctant branch to participate but, by 1967, had adopted the policy and began accepting Project 100,000 enlistees.

The Air Force had always enjoyed high enlistment standards due to our prestige and high technical standards. The thought of allowing large numbers of low aptitude men into the Air Force was very disconcerting to most people. The biggest concern was the impact on training, both basic and technical. After careful thought, it was agreed that no changes would be made at Basic Military Training to accommodate Project 100,000 enlistees, technical training would have to be adjusted to compensate for projected additional training requirements. Project 100,000 began in January 1968.

The United States Air Force recruited over 35,000 Project 100,000 enlistees in 1968 alone. To put that in perspective, Air Force Recruiting Service only recruited 31,000 airmen in 1995. The question is: Where did they find them? The History of the Air Training Command, FY 1970, Vol III states, "The Air Force intensified recruiting efforts in highly compacted poverty

areas of the nation in March 1968 in three pilot cities, Detroit, Philadelphia and St Louis.

Soon it had grown to 21 cities all trying to bring in an average of 37 recruits a month.”

(1:148) All of these low aptitude enlistees were from the inner city and the majority were disadvantaged. With recruiting efforts concentrated in the inner city, Air Force Recruiting was able to enlist over 90,000 airmen during the 3 years that Project 100,000 was in effect. 90,000 airmen with lots and lots of heavy psychological baggage due to their disadvantaged backgrounds. Did this additional baggage impact our readiness?

It certainly did! Major General Hoyt S. Vandenburg, Jr stated in his USAF Oral History Interview, “Project 100,000 was impacting all the services, and I came out against reassignment of enlisted personnel that did not meet Air Force minimum standards. I offered supervisors a couple of options. If an airmen is a failure in his current AFSC and he can’t be retrained and made productive in another AFSC, then we ought to take action to get him out of the Air Force because we are wasting taxpayers’ money. Of course this flew right in the face of Project 100,000; but I had been exposed to this as a maintenance officer in Germany where we got people that weren’t qualified. They certainly weren’t qualified to work on or around airplanes, so we had them sweep out the orderly room and run messages up to wing and back and forth. But these guys were drawing the same pay checks as their counterparts that were on the swing shift in maintenance. This is a bad scene. I think using the military as a social welfare program is a mistake.” (6:187)

In the eyes of most Air Force leaders, Project 100,000 was a disaster. Discharge rates for low aptitude enlistees was three times greater than regular enlistees, and Technical Training Attrition was ten times higher. It brought about many more problems than it was worth and

certainly impacted the mission. In 1972, with the drawdown in Vietnam occurring at a rapid pace, it was decided that Project 100,00 was no longer necessary and congress denied funding for Fiscal Year 1973. This was the end of the program, but not the end of the story. Over 60,000 Project 100,000 enlistees still remained on active duty, almost 20% of the enlisted force. In addition, another problem loomed on the horizon. ASVAB misnorming was going to have a greater impact on the Air Force than Project 100,000 ever did.

In the aftermath of the Vietnam war, the time was ripe for ending the draft and relying on a volunteer recruitment scheme. The Air Force had always been an all volunteer force composed mostly of people avoiding the draft. Now we were in a position where we were going to go out and have to actually recruit sufficient numbers of high school graduates to support the needs of the Air Force.

In 1976, the Armed Forces implemented the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery Test which became the common measure to screen enlisted applicants. With the implementation of the test came artificially inflated scores. That is, an examinee's raw score was reported as being indicative of a higher percentile standing relative to the existing reference population than was actually the case. In other words, because the ASVAB was "mis-scored" the Air Force thought it was accessing smarter recruits than it actually was.

From 1976 to 1980, the Air Force was reporting substantial gains in high aptitude enlistments, but, in actuality, it was 180 degrees different. Due in large part to a rush to implement the ASVAB in 1975, the newly established norms were incorrectly calibrated to a great extent downward which caused thousands and thousands of otherwise disqualified applicants to enter the military. The Air Force actually received about 10% of its total accessions where



as, prior to misnorming, they were averaging less than 1% a year! The amazing thing is that the Air Force was aware of the misnorming and allowed it to continue!

Once again, you need to look at where the Air Force was in 1976. Vietnam was just over. Jimmy Carter had been elected president, another socially oriented democrat, and the economy was in the pits. Inflation was at an all-time high and so was unemployment. The Air Force was a viable solution for many high school graduates including myself. Almost immediately after the new ASVAB test came out, it was suspected to be flawed. The number of applicants who scored in the high range, significantly increased and the number of low scores decreased. The Navy raised the first signal, but it fell on deaf ears. Recruiting was going great, and quotas were being met. Life was good or so we thought.

The Air Force originally complained about the misnorming in July of 1976 and was rebuffed. This resulted in a situation where from 1976 to 1980, almost 45% of the people who entered the military and 10% who entered the Air Force were not mentally qualified to do so.

Recruiting was booming and nobody was complaining. We were bringing in the big numbers of people in the right mix and our attrition rates were remaining constant. When the four branches finally agreed to look at the ASVAB misnorming situation in 1978, the Secretary of Defense was hesitant to do anything about it because all was well with the world.

But was it? The Air Force had enlisted thousands and thousands of potentially ineligible applicants without knowing it, and a large majority of these airmen came from disadvantaged backgrounds. So despite the fact that attrition rates were low, this merely compounded the problem. We now had an Air Force that was still dealing with the after effects of Project 100,000 and enlisting large groups of disadvantaged people that we didn't even know about.

Recruiting service gets them where they can and most of these recruits were coming from the inner city, bringing with them, lots of problems.

This was a very critical time for the Air Force. Morale was very low. We were still suffering with low public opinion of the military, low pay, and a disaster in Iran. Readiness was at an all-time low and the Air Force was struggling to stay on top. People problems were beginning to surface. There was much social discord within the Air Force and our low morale only served to bring it to the forefront. Drugs and alcohol were increasingly impacting the mission. Race issues were becoming a huge problem and all forms of discrimination were running rampant. The Air Force reacted with the development of Social Actions initiatives to stem the growing tide of problems.

The Social Actions Program appeared as a new organization in October 1971, but it was not truly an innovation. Elements of the program, for example the Air Force Program for Drug and Alcohol Abuse, had existed for some time. However, earlier these elements operated independently for the most part. The goal was to implement a unified structure for social actions. The urgency of an improved race relations program actually brought the Social Actions Program into being.

In 1971, racial disturbances increased throughout the Air Force. There were 31 racial incidents at 15 bases in the first 3 months of 1971. The following months saw 86 more disturbances at many more bases. The most serious crisis came from Chanute and Sheppard AFBs.

On June 11, 1971, there were two incidents of assault between black and white airmen at Sheppard AFB. The confrontation expanded the next day, and it was not until the 13th that

base officials brought the rioting under control. Augmentation of security police from other bases helped avert a more serious problem. As a result, the Air Force organized a special Human Relations Team and sent it out to the field to assess the situation and make recommendations. The team received direction to survey all aspects of Air Force human relations efforts. The report submitted proved candid, and verified problems throughout the Air Force. As a result, the Air Force began implementing a composite Social Actions Program in 1972.

After more than a year, the Social Actions Program became a full-fledged reality in 1973.

The Air Force had been sensitive to a changing environment for some time. An environment with social attitudes which had serious repercussions on the military services. Air Training Command, in the business of recruiting and training, was especially aware of the changing climate in the Air Force and was a pioneer in social actions.

Many factors were involved in the creation of Air Force Social Initiatives. Introduction of the all-volunteer concept, coupled with social issues such as drugs, permissiveness, human rights, equal employment opportunity and more, caused a basic shift in military thinking. The Air Force was beginning to become people oriented rather than mission oriented. The impact of contemporary issues on the Air Force was profound. We had to decide how to face the issues. The Air Force has always regarded people as our most valuable resource. Moreover, it was good business in an organization of almost a million people; and, finally, it was right.

The Air Force had been aware of these problems for some time. According to the History of the Air Training Command, Fiscal Year 1971, Vol XXIII, "Major General John R. Murphy, Vice Commander ATC, summed up the situation when he noted that incident reports were

constantly increasing. Riots, racial troubles, assaults, confrontations, drug abuse, alcohol related incidents, all contributed to an initial uneasiness in the minds of senior leaders. This uneasiness soon changed to anger, shock, dismay, and soul-searching.” (2:314) The most pertinent question of all seemed to be, “What’s really the matter?” The Air Force Human Relations Team provided most of the answers, and ultimately set off a chain of events that culminated in the Air Force Social Actions program.

Is there a correlation between the development of Social Actions and low aptitude, disadvantaged enlistees? Major George McCrillis in his ACSC research study, The Air Force Counselor and the Disadvantaged Airman, states, “Disadvantaged persons are those people who are products of situations that have not provided them with the opportunities that will enhance their chances for competing successfully with fellow citizens who have been so enhanced.”(4:05) Considering where most of these recruits were coming from, this must have been just about everyone. We know that Recruiting Service has a charter to recruit from the inner cities across the United States to support Project 100,000 and that many of these recruits came from very disadvantaged backgrounds. After Project 100,000 was disbanded, many thousands of these airmen were still in the Air Force and at a distinct disadvantage to their peers who met the regular enlistment standards. The Project 100,000 recruits had a much higher discharge rate, punishment rate, and were selected for promotion to E-4 at about 50% of the rate for regular enlistees. In addition, their service numbers identified them so the whole Air Force knew who they were. Could this have led to tensions in the Air Force? The question should really be, “How could it not?” The rise in social actions initiatives occurred during the same time that Project 100,000 was winding down, and ASVAB

misnorming was in full-swing. Air Force recruiting was making a special effort to recruit people from the inner city where disadvantaged youths were available in large numbers. The requirement to have a High School diploma probably slowed down the influx of disadvantaged people in to the Air Force, but I believe sufficient numbers entered to become a very vocal and initially unsupported minority. To the Air Force's great credit, we rose to the challenge by developing programs to help not only the disadvantaged members of the Air Force, but all Air Force members!

Implementation of Social Actions Programs gave all Air Force people a chance to be successful no matter what their background. Supervisors were made aware of the immense variety of people on the Air Force team and provided the skills and training necessary to help disadvantaged youths be successful in the Air Force. This worked to the benefit of all Air Force members and by 1983, the Air Force was acknowledged as the leader amongst the military branches in social initiatives. In fact, we were well below national averages for Drug Abuse, Alcohol Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Racial Discrimination cases. In my opinion, we had met the challenge and exceeded. We were truly people oriented!

In conclusion, "Is the Air Force a fighting force or a social institution?" Actually, I think we are both. If we can help people while they are helping the Air Force, then we are accomplishing two noble acts at once. The Air Force has been helping people through training, education and experience. Why should it stop there? In the 70s and 80s, we took it to a higher level than ever before with the creation of Social Actions. I believe this was a result of Project 100,000 and ASVAB misnorming. Not because people had low aptitude scores, but because of their diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds. Readiness may have

suffered in the beginning but I do not think it was a permanent situation. Perhaps the book Cast-off Youth, Policy and Training Methods from the Military Experience stated it best, “In 1983, some 8,200 Project 100,000 personnel had achieved career status and were still on active duty. As a group, their years of education were up, their aptitude scores had increased and they were working in middle-management and supervisory roles in occupations with higher cognitive demands than those characteristic of the first job assignments of Project 100,000 Personnel.”(6:182) In my opinion, there is a strong correlation between Project 100,000, ASVAB misnorming, and the implementation of the Social Actions Program. Many people, including myself, benefited from Social Actions Programs that may not have developed without Project 100,000 and ASVAB misnorming. We took a potential negative and turned it into a strong positive, demonstrating that the Air Force could accommodate all types of people from every background and accomplish the mission with the highest success.

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