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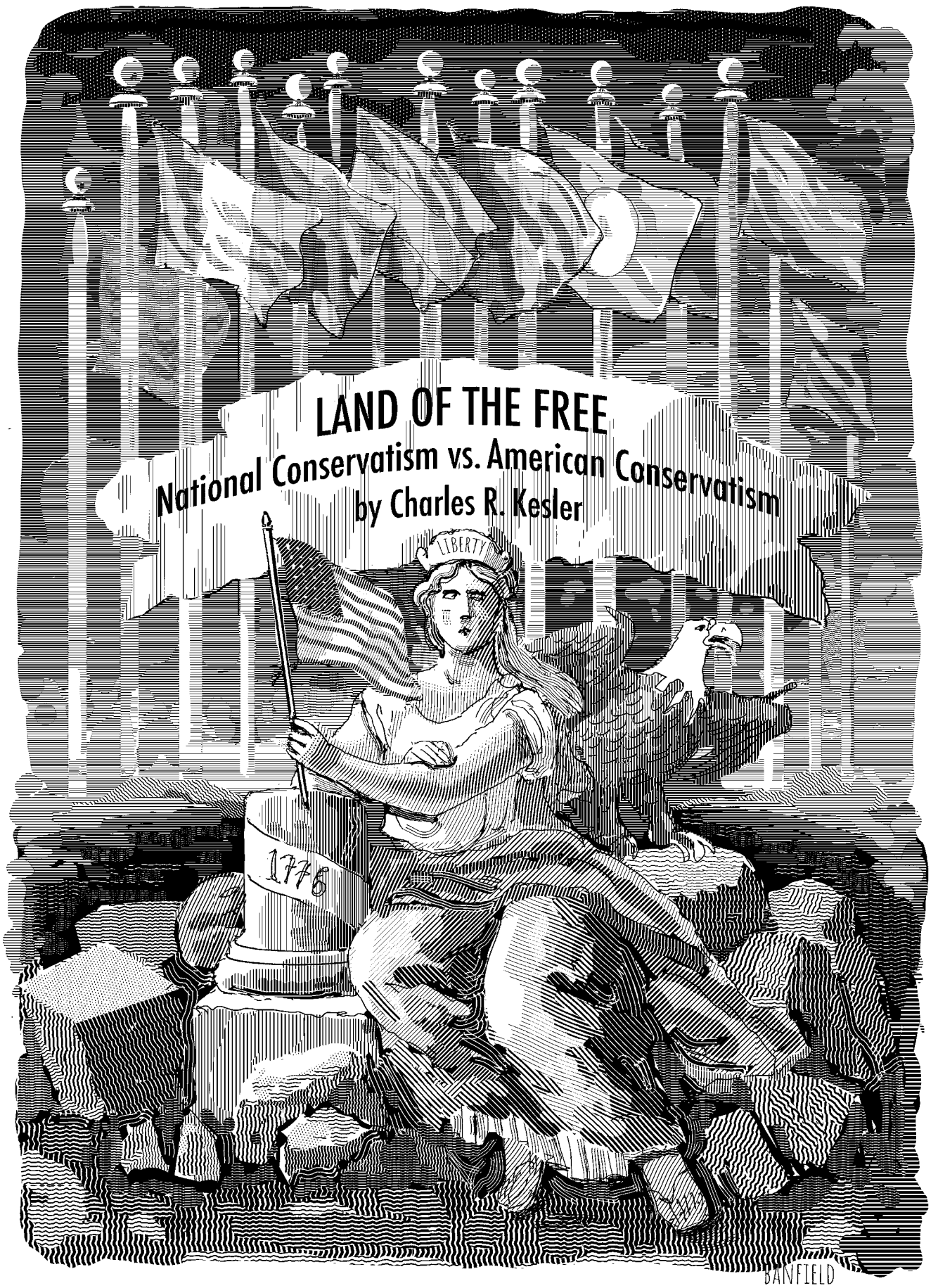

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Book Review by Will Thibeau

Quotas in the Ranks

An Army Afire: How the US Army Confronted Its Racial Crisis in the Vietnam Era, by Beth Bailey.
The University of North Carolina Press, 360 pages, $35

In his 1957 book, *the soldier and the State*, Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington described a long-forgotten paradox of civil-military relations in the United States. In order to manage the tension between a civil society that in its everyday life views war as an aberration, and a military built on the discipline required to fight and win wars, policymakers mustn't confuse the openness that characterizes civil society with the rigorous, merit-based command structure needed for an effective military.

Yet by 2010 even the nominally right-of-center American Enterprise Institute published an article arguing that "The Military Should Mirror the Nation." And at last summer's hearing to consider General Charles Q. Brown's nomination to serve as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Republican Senator Rick Scott of Florida endorsed the general's quota policies in order to achieve proportional racial and sexual representation in the Air Force officer corps, insisting that the "military is a melting pot."

An Army Afire by University of Kansas history professor Beth Bailey details the U.S. Army's policy changes in the 1960s and '70s that replaced non-discrimination and racial integration as goals with proportional representation by race (and later, under President Obama, by sex), prioritizing quota-based affirmative action over military readiness. President Harry Truman's 1948 executive order desegregating the armed forces had ensured that the nation's entire pool of talent would be available to a military entering the Cold War. It is a different matter, however, to believe that an army in which racial minorities and women are not found in proportion to their numbers in society is inherently unjust and must bend to social and political demands.

From gettysburg to normandy, as Huntington's book recounts, our national security has been defined by our military's ability to perform in combat. The stakes are too high for decisions to be made on any other basis than merit and ability. The tradition that won two world wars was built on the concept of a military separate from civil society, almost indifferent to the perils of partisan politics. Army officers from William T. Sherman to Jack Pershing and George Marshall even considered no longer exercising their right to vote. For those in uniform, it was a personal and collective mission to remain insulated from social pressures in order to preserve the highest standard of military professionalism. Although "general politicians" like Dwight Eisenhower and Douglas MacArthur drew a lot of attention, Huntington shows that their public standing was unique among the rest of the officer corps.

Huntington also gives examples, from 19th-century France to Russia in World War I, of armies that lost wars by succumbing to society's prevailing political ideologies. These militaries sacrificed their "functional imperative" to fight and win wars on the altar of society's "social imperative." All of this is lost on Bailey, as well as on the defense establishment's leaders for the past 60 years. But *An Army Afire* is still helpful in tracing the many public statements, policy issuances, and internal discussions by which the Kennedy, John-

son, and Nixon Administrations uniformly drove the Department of Defense to replace racial integration with affirmative action as its goal.

The call for a race-based quota system was first issued in 1964 by a civilian committee that had been established, before his death, by President John F. Kennedy. A 1967 directive to army recruiting leaders made clear that "West Point…should have at least the same percentage of minority students as did the civilian college population." The military academy would no longer select cadets primarily for their potential capacity to lead soldiers. Less than two years later, the army approved a formal admissions plan "to increase the number of minority cadets so that their ethnic distribution in the Corps of Cadets is commensurate with that of the national population." Skin color would now formally define admissions criteria. Decades later, West Point leaders remain committed to convincing lawmakers and themselves that racial quotas do not exist in the admissions process, speaking instead of "benchmarks," "goals," or "guidelines."

It is clear that military leaders at the highest levels thought their mandates for equal opportunity would naturally result in proportional representation. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara initially proclaimed that his department would only consider "merit and fitness" while integrating the military. But when reasonable efforts to end discrimination didn't result in the preferred outcomes, McNamara "would go further," as Bailey puts it—in a tacit admission that affirmative action must overlook merit and fitness—by employing more and more extraordinary measures to equalize the military's ranks.

Amid unrelenting pressure to achieve racial equality, the Department of Defense in a 1970 directive "stressed 'the need for [the Army to implement] Aggressive Affirmative Action programs that utilize the use of numerical goals and timetables which have not been previously used.'" "Affirmative Action [was] a step beyond non-discrimination," Bailey admits, even as she faults the army for stubbornly resisting a genuine revolution in how the military decides matters of warfighting.

The army did itself no favors by hiding the 1975 Butler Report, which revealed different promotion rates for black officers and white officers during the 1950s. Still, disparity is not necessarily discrimination. As unfortunate as these differences may be, Bailey doesn't provide evidence that widespread institutionalized racism in the military persisted through the civil rights era. This modest point must be understood if one is also to appreciate the faulty pretext on which the military was forced to adopt quota-based affirmative action as a remedy for supposed bias.

Demands for the military to reflect American society went beyond personnel statistics. The army sought to prove its mettle as an institution of social progress for the rest of the country. L. Howard Bennett, the acting deputy assistant secretary of defense for civil rights under President Lyndon Johnson, stated that the armed forces should naturally "mirror and reflect the patterns of the black-white relationships that exist in the nation's civilian communities." Yet the nation was enduring in the '60s and '70s the most significant period of racial tension since Reconstruction, exacerbated by a draft—itself seen as inequitable—for an unpopular war America was losing in Vietnam.

Bailey barely ponders the question of the military's force effectiveness during the implementation of Vietnam-era affirmative action measures. This is not to say racial quotas lost the war, but Bailey's neglect indicates how strongly she considers the military to be built for social progress rather than combat. The closest she comes to linking proportional racial representation in the ranks to a more effective and stable army is when she, without evidence, asserts that more black officers would have remedied racial violence in the force. Bailey simply assumes that equity and diversity quotas guarantee harmony. But in a 2017 op-ed for *The New York Times*, historian Gerald Goodwin noted that in the Vietnam era "[i]ncidents of racial tension were uncommon in the early years of the war, but following [Martin Luther] King's assassination they became a weekly if not daily occurrence." This finding suggests that there was no magic number of black officers that would have prevented the tragic racial violence within the military during the Vietnam war. Goodwin's comments also reflect the reality that the military must not embrace, by default, civil society's social dynamics if these could exacerbate tensions that destabilize the military and jeopardize its mission.

Beth Bailey's *An Army Afire* is a thorough, bracing account of the army's effort to achieve racial equality during two tumultuous decades. But today, in the face of plummeting enrollment numbers and decades of embarrassments abroad, military leaders, policymakers, and civil society as a whole should return the armed forces to being a unique, professional, and separate institution, ruthlessly ensuring a lethal and effective military for the future.

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