

Chapter 13

Making it in the National Security Field as a Millennial Minority

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Being a Minority in the US Defense Sector

As a young Chinese-American woman, I stand out in the stuffy meeting rooms of the DC national security industry. In meetings I am often the only woman of color and millennial—I am often asked if I am an Intern or whether this is my first job. I've been working in national security since 2003 so while this question is flattering and amusing, it demonstrates how few other millennial minority women decide to enter and remain in the national security field.

It can be intimidating to enter a room full of men who are older, Caucasian, often with prior military experience; it is a struggle to find mentors or senior managers who look like me. If you look at the leadership organization chart of any U.S. government agency—you will see a stunning lack of diversity. My background has allowed for some unique insights to succeeding in a challenging field. It is essential that other millennials and minority women join this industry and have a voice in the future direction of U.S. national security.

Academic Background

In 2003 after graduating with a B.A. in Asian Studies, I began my career working for U.S. Pacific Command at Pearl Harbor, HI as a political-military Intelligence Analyst.

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Since then, I have earned a M.A. in International Affairs and served at other Department of Defense (DoD) organizations, the U.S. Department of State, and across the Bush and Obama Presidential Administrations at the White House.

Shifting from Cybersecurity and Terrorism to Process Improvement and Project Management

Over the past few years I began to transition away from being a subject matter expert (SME in DoD parlance) in regional security issues, cybersecurity, and counterterrorism, towards business process improvement and project management; I find it exhilarating to enable national security professionals to do their jobs while not working directly on the content.

Coming from a liberal and Liberal Arts background, as well as being multilingual, I find that my way of communicating and creative, holistic, thinking is often different than those around me. My unique background has enabled me to resist groupthink and attack difficult problems such as business process improvement, which pays dividends and adds value to the national security field.

The work we do is essential—threats against the United States are always evolving, amplified by technology and social media. This benefits those who are flexible, willing to take calculated risks with confidence, and proactively embrace change rather than fight it. This flexibility has served me well over the years: because my professional experience is so diversified, I can pivot in a number of directions as project scope or current events necessitate.

Restrictions on Information Sharing

Let me share a vignette from my first job—I attended a 2004 interagency conference on Asia regional security issues, and the final agenda item was on how to more effectively facilitate information sharing between intelligence agencies. There were about 40 SMEs sitting around the room, each representing a military branch of service or intelligence agency; I was the representative from U.S. Pacific Command. U.S. government agencies often work in silos and analysts sometimes do not share information outside their agencies due to restrictions on information sharing, lack of communications infrastructure, or management culture. As you can imagine, this tendency to stovepipe time-sensitive intelligence has significant implications for national security.

The conference chair, a very senior intelligence officer, asked for ideas on how to facilitate interagency information sharing. After no one else volunteered a comment or suggestion, I raised my hand and suggested that we create a blog to share intelligence reporting and coordinate finished intelligence products. The conference

chair got red in the face and said the idea “stupid” and it would never happen on his watch. I was stunned at his emotional reaction to a valid suggestion; a tiny voice in my head whispered that I was an imposter and the idea *was* stupid, but I was determined not to take it personally.

After the conference concluded, several representatives from other agencies thanked me for speaking up and said we should absolutely have a blog site to share intelligence information, because there was no way to share information other than by point-to-point emails which is not reliable or sustainable. I kept in contact with these colleagues and we worked with other SMEs and stakeholders to roll out a classified blog with interagency points of contact, a shared documents library, and information on upcoming conferences or events.

While that workplace example is charmingly outdated, this demonstrates the importance of following your instincts and working collaboratively with like-minded colleagues when met with pushback or resistance to innovation.

Groupthink in National Security

Groupthink and lack of diverse ideas is a very real problem in the national security field. I believe one reason is there are not enough millennial innovators who enter the field, commit to a career, and become a senior level decision-maker to enact positive change and innovation. This is frustrating but is balanced by the satisfaction of knowing that by coming from a diverse worldview, utilizing excellent communication skills, you contributed to the mission, and even in a small way, your good decisions help keep men and women and our country safe.

As a minority in this field, I have been closely watched because I stand out, but I always turned that scrutiny into an opportunity to excel. The statistics are well known—women, especially younger women of color—are absent at the top of organizations.

One Door Closes and Another Opens

My sense is that our upbringing does not always train us to succeed in this testosterone-heavy defense industrial complex. For example, the messaging I received growing up from my parents and at school was to behave, get good grades, and don't rock the boat; while compliance was an excellent way to make parents and teachers happy it was not necessarily a recipe for success in the real world.

Being raised to be a “good girl” meant that I have to override my instincts on a near-daily basis and to speak up and be heard. I was slow to become confident in my abilities, have a voice in meetings, and to cease feeling like an imposter in the room.

Over time, successes, failures, and hard work have given me the courage and conviction needed to be successful in this industry and to believe I can contribute in a meaningful way.

Another key factor for success is to ignore the haters—I've had managers tell me I "wasn't a good fit" (every other employee was an older Caucasian male) or that "I didn't seem committed to the organization" (after being promoted without a raise).

Doors will slam in your face but don't be afraid to bang on another one; if an organization does not align with your personal values, don't burn your bridges but do consider finding a new job. I've been told this lack of loyalty is a uniquely millennial mindset—but I believe you should always look out for yourself.

Utilizing Soft Skills to Get Things Done

My niche is enabling others to do their jobs on a project or program—working with stakeholders across unwieldy national security organizations to effect a small or large organizational change is what I enjoy doing.

"Soft skills" such as business process reengineering, strategic communications, and stakeholder engagement are often overlooked; too often large-scale organizational change is implemented without considering the people side of things.

Since the 2004 conference example above, I've found that utilizing "soft skills" effectively had a positive impact on a number of projects such as transitioning an intelligence organization from shared drives and SharePoint to the cloud, or streamlining the delivery of time-sensitive cybersecurity products.

Be Open When Opportunity Calls

Again, there is ample space in the national security industry especially for non-technical staff who can bring a similarly diverse and unique perspective to the field. It is imperative that we attract and broaden the base of women and minorities entering this industry, and also to retain them.