

16TH ANNUAL CONGRESSIONAL  
BLACK CAUCUS VETERANS  
BRAINTRUST

**HON. CORRINE BROWN**

OF FLORIDA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

*Friday, December 16, 2005*

Ms. CORRINE BROWN of Florida. Mr. Speaker, on September 10th, 2004, Rep. SANFORD BISHOP, Jr. (D-GA) and I convened the 16th Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust issues forum titled: "Honoring African American Women Veterans Who Served," because we both care a great deal about the well being of African America veterans. Moreover, for these past 12 years we have worked so very hard building the Veterans Braintrust, and carrying the torch for America's service men and women.

Nevertheless, we would be remiss if we did not recognize the special service to this Nation, and to this institution of Congressman CHARLES RANGEL of New York, a distinguished and decorated Korean War veteran in his own right, who is the father of the Congressional Black Caucus' Veterans Braintrust, established in 1988, and has carried the torch for African American veterans for over half a century. Since Congressman RANGEL's first Braintrust, the Veterans Braintrust has emerged as an institution "think tank" and "advisory group" for the Congressional Black Caucus and for other Members of Congress on the critical issues of education, health care, mental health, aging, research, employment and training, homelessness and affordable housing, small business development and veterans benefits and services.

Next, we were happy to extend a very warm welcome and deepest appreciation to our distinguished guests, panelist, moderator, and Bishop Imagine Stewart for performing our invocation. Which included State Senator Ed Harbison, Chairman of the Georgia Legislative Black Caucus special presentation to Spc. Shoshanna Johnson, who was captured in Iraq two years ago with other members of the 507th Maintenance Company. Shoshanna is the only African American woman to be held captive in Iraq. But more importantly, Shoshanna truly exemplifies the best that America has to offer—her courage under the most extraordinary of circumstances shows us all just how important the service of our ordinary airmen, marines, sailors, and soldiers are to our Nation. Thus, all those who serve, serve equally and should be awarded based on their service, and not by the color of their skin, or gender.

This led us to the issues we were there to discuss, the treatment of women in today's military, and as veterans. However, the discussion of the current state of affairs would be incomplete without a brief history, or stories of those who paved the way for the modern military woman. Early on, African American women played major support roles during the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, and the Civil War. For example: Harriet Tubman served as a Union spy, an unpaid soldier, a volunteer nurse, and a freedom fighter. While another runaway slave, Susan King Taylor, became famous for her volunteer service as a nurse and launderer as she traveled with her husband's unit, the 33rd United States Colored Troops (USCTs). She formed the Boston Branch of

the Women's Relief Corps after the war. Her memoirs published in 1902, became the only written record of Black volunteer nurses in the Civil War. Again, during the Spanish American War black women played the role of nurses. Yet, during the war, over 75% of all deaths resulted from typhoid and yellow fever. Many black female volunteer nurses were told they were immune to the diseases because their skin was darker and thicker. Because of this, many of them exposed themselves to the diseases and became casualties when they returned home. And because of segregated living areas, the Whites never knew the high rate of casualties that these women suffered.

However, during World War I for the first time in military history, African American females had an official organization where they found leadership and direction to use their abilities. The National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses founded in 1909 by Mary Mahoney, Adah Thoms and Martha Franklin. In 1917, the co-founder of the Red Cross urged Black nurses to enroll in the American Red Cross, although they were not accepted until two months before the end of the war in November of 1918. But it wasn't until World War II (1942) that women were officially allowed to serve in great numbers in the armed forces. The Army had the Women's Army Corps (WAC), the Navy had Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES); and the Coast Guard had the SPARS. With the majority of African American women serving in the Women Army Corps (WAC), where they remained in segregated units, as did African American men. Out of the highest number of women in the military during the period (271,000), only 4,000 were African American women.

Moreover, African American women continued to serve from the Korean Conflict through Vietnam to Operation Desert Storm. Of the 35,000 women who went to Desert Storm, an estimated 40% were African Americans. And today, the statistics tell us that over 30% of military women are African American, approximately 33.6% enlisted, and 13.1% commissioned and warrant officers. Notably in 2002, African American women were over-represented in the armed services as compared with their proportion in the civilian population. This is simply to say that, African American women made up 30.8% of all military women, while making up only 12% of all civilian women.

Equally important, the purpose of this forum was to discuss issues pertaining to women in the military and veterans, but particularly black women veterans. The overarching questions however were: What happens to these women socially, economically, and politically, when they return to the civilian sector as military veterans? Or what effects does military service have on their subsequent lives? With the second question being: how can we systemically help the masses of young women veterans in order to inspire them to reach their fullest potential?

To address these questions we had two distinguished panels with us that day to discuss a range of issues pertaining to the African American woman veteran. Among the topics discussed were those of post traumatic stress disorder, homelessness, physical disability, and sexual harassment, or assault. Our first panel of presenters consisted of Attorney Herbert Fenner of the law firm McKenna Long

and Aldridge who presented the case of Jemekia Barber; Muriel Gibson, Senior Staff Assistant to U.S. Senator PATTY MURRAY's office discussed several cases. We also heard from three African American women veterans themselves: Kericia Smith, SSgt. Vanessa Turner, and Carolyn Williams. Followed by a second panel consisting of Dr. Laura Miller, Social Scientist with the Rand Corporation, who has researched extensively women in the military, including sexual harassment and assault; Dr. Saharra Bledsoe, Executive Director of Mozella's House for Women Veterans; Zerell Johnson-Welch, Director of the Southwest Veterans Service Center, and Ms. Deborah Scott, a disabled veteran having a lot of problems receiving fair and just treatment at the VA.

While Shoshanna easily connected with the audience with both humor and humility, what we heard from her female counterparts was gut wrenching emotion, anger, and frustration, with more than a few VA officials expressing utter surprise at their anger. From Senator PATTY MURRAY's Senior Staff Assistant Muriel Gibson, who shared strategies that she helped develop through her women veterans group and advocacy work leading the state of Washington to some improvement in their options for VA healthcare and timeliness; Deborah Scott, an Army veteran, whose physical illness was misdiagnosed by VA medical personnel as "personality disorder"; Kericia Smith whose attempts to get adequate treatment and support for her struggle with PTSD have been repeatedly mishandled by VA officials; SSgt. Vanessa Turner, whose critical illness still has not been diagnosed by Army medical personnel since returning from Iraq, and who has struggled to find and maintain adequate affordable housing and/or timely treatment for her health through the VA; to Carolyn Williams speaking of her struggle for over 30 years to have her sexual assault recognized and addressed by both Navy and VA officials. Although the outward appearance seemed to be "VA bashing," we all realized that their problems arose from systemic problems, or inadequate governmental policies and practices, and were compounded by human errors.

Although issues were brought up which are undoubtedly begging for attention, this forum was just our beginning. Of those concerns addressed, however, it was abundantly clear that there were three vital issues: First, the inadequacy and sometimes absence of adequate Veterans' Administration services and programs for female military veterans. Second, the invisibility of their struggles which are quite often ignored and their frustration with the lack of methods available for redress. Third, the need to consider organizing some type of national conference where the issues facing African American women veterans might be highlighted, discussed, and strategies for addressing these challenges suggested. Such a national conference where these issues are addressed through panels and workshops, with the latter focused on sharing strategies that have proven effective and creating new possible roads to take for the future. Why, because we also heard comments such as, I wish to thank you to the experience at long last gave them an opportunity to find not just an ear that would hear their story. Or their first real opportunity and chance to speak publicly regarding fighting for VA benefits over many

years. But also left them with hope for the creation of an avenue that would rightfully address the life altering negative injustice that black women have and continue to be confronted by while in performance of their military duties, as well as afterward as "veterans" seeking help through the VA. For many years they did not believe that anyone cared, or would ever be concerned about the injustice that black women have endured at the hands of the U.S. military.

Again, the generosity of Wayne Gatewood, Jr., President and CEO of Quality Support, Inc., and Amistad Associates paved the way for a gala evening of socializing, recognition and public acknowledgement for the following female veterans and groups from the Civil war to World War II to the war in Afghanistan and Iraq: Deborah Bretey, Antoniette Edwards, Mary Jackson Fears, State Representative Gloria Fox, Vernessa Franklin, Sgt. Casaundra Grant, Col. Delores Hampton, USA, Ret., Hattie Harris, Vera Haskins (now deceased), Lorenza Hilliard, Lt. Col. Patricia Jackson, USA, Ret., Sarah Jackson, Willette Jenkins, Lillie B. Johnson (known as Miss Lillie B, now deceased), Spc. Shoshanna Johnson, Pfc. Sarah L. Keys (Sarah Keys Evans), Noel Mitchell, Capt. Margaret Oglesby, MNG, Col. Marie Rogers, USA, Ret., Mildred Smith-Kidd, Willie Whiting; House of Imagene, Mozella's House, My Women Veterans Group, Black Women's Leadership Caucus, Center for Women Veterans (Department of Veterans Affairs), National Association of Black Military Women, Harriet Tubman Home, League of Women for Community Service, and the Colored Ladies Christian Relief Society of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteers.

In return, they especially thanked us for giving accolades to the female veterans of color, and for always remembering heroine Harriet Tubman. Some felt humbled to receive their awards, other felt good to read the words of acknowledgement and appreciation in addition to giving them motivation to continue on in both their personal and professional lives. As well as for providing one of the few venues that allows them to smell their flowers, or roses before they die.

In closing, I thank Sarah Ann Shaw, Drs. Brenda Moore, Laura Miller, Leisa Meyers, Robenia Gary, A.V. Hankins, Shari Miles and Ron Armstead for their continuing help in making the Veterans Braintrust an ongoing success. Also speaking on behalf of all my colleagues I thanked our African American veterans in the audience for coming and their service to our great nation. Needless to say, it was overwhelming to be in a room with so many true heroines and heroes, because it makes me very very proud that this is one of the best-attended issues forums during the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Annual Legislative Conference (ALC).

Lastly, Representative SANFORD BISHOP, Jr. and I agree Gen. George Washington had it right when he said, "the morale and strength of the nation's military forces would be directly proportional to how well veterans who already served and sacrificed for the country are treated and appreciated."

#### TRIBUTE TO DON CHALMERS

### HON. TOM UDALL

OF NEW MEXICO

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, December 16, 2005

Mr. UDALL of New Mexico. Mr. Speaker, I would like to rise today in recognition of Mr. Don Chalmers, an outstanding citizen in my district. In acknowledgment of the successful management of his business, Don Chalmers Ford in Rio Rancho, N.M., Mr. Chalmers recently received the Zia Award, Quality New Mexico's highest performance excellence honor.

The New Mexico Quality Awards program is modeled after the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Awards, a program initiated in 1987 when President Ronald Reagan signed the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Improvement Act of 1987. Every year businesses that apply for New Mexico Quality Awards participate in training, education, and assessment programs. Throughout the year, performance levels are checked and commitment to quality business is assessed. Participants are then considered for three levels of recognition. The most outstanding of these is the Zia Award for performance excellence.

By participating in New Mexico Quality training and analysis programs, Mr. Chalmers dealership has become a benchmark for excellence in New Mexico. Mr. Chalmers demonstrated a commitment to improving his already very successful business by surpassing the needs and expectations of his employees and the residents of our New Mexico communities. Because of these accomplishments, Don Chalmers Ford received the most prestigious of performance awards, the Zia Award.

Beyond his business success, Mr. Chalmers has been an active and outstanding citizen of New Mexico over the last 10 years. Mr. Chalmers has participated in a number of community projects such as the Equal Access to Justice Campaign, the New Mexico Balloon Fiesta, and Women on the Move.

It is with pride an appreciation that I congratulate this outstanding citizen on his contributions to our great State and on receiving the one and only Zia Award granted by Quality New Mexico in 2005.

#### TRIBUTE TO RADM CHRISTOPHER WEAVER

### HON. IKE SKELTON

OF MISSOURI

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, December 16, 2005

Mr. SKELTON. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor RADM Christopher Weaver, United States Navy, who is retiring after more than 34 years of faithful service to our Nation.

A native of Harrisonville, MO, Rear Admiral Weaver began his career in 1971, when he graduated from the United States Naval Academy. He holds a bachelor of science degree from the Naval Academy and a master of public administration degree from George Washington University. He is also a distinguished graduate of the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. Rear Admiral Weaver is an honorary Seabee and honorary master chief petty officer.

During the years that followed, Rear Admiral Weaver accrued an impressive operational career highlighted by command of USS *Exultant* and USS *Spruance*. Rear Admiral Weaver was designated a surface warfare officer in 1973. His sea tours also include duty aboard USS *Marvin Shields*, USS *Capodanno*, USS *Boulder*, and USS *Samuel Eliot Morison*.

Ashore he commanded U.S. Naval Station, Norfolk, VA, the world's largest Navy base, and served as an assignment officer in the Bureau of Naval Personnel, as head of the Seamanship and Navigation Department at the U.S. Naval Academy, as head of the Surface Combatant Branch of the Surface Warfare Division and as head of the Mine Warfare Branch of the Expeditionary Warfare Division. He also served as executive officer to the director of Logistics, J4, the Joint Staff.

He was selected for Flag rank in February 1997. Rear Admiral Weaver served as the 83rd commandant of Naval District Washington, the oldest continuously operated Navy installation in the Nation. In his most recent assignment as commander, Navy Installations Command, and director, Ashore Readiness Division, Rear Admiral Weaver led unprecedented organizational change amid an historic time of overall Navy transformation in the Navy's shore infrastructure.

Rear Admiral Weaver is an exceptional leader. He is an individual of uncommon character and his professionalism will be sincerely missed in the Navy. Mr. Speaker, I am certain that my colleagues will join me in thanking RADM Christopher Weaver for his honorable service in the United States Navy, and wishing him and his wife Chris all the best in the years to come.

#### EXPRESSING SENSE OF THE HOUSE THAT SYMBOLS AND TRADITIONS OF CHRISTMAS SHOULD BE PROTECTED

SPEECH OF

### HON. EARL BLUMENAUER

OF OREGON

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, December 14, 2005

Mr. BLUMENAUER. Mr. Speaker, this legislation is an excellent example of how the House Leadership politicizes non-issues to distract Congress from substantive issues.

The Federal Government is obviously not opposed to Christmas, an annual celebration that has deep significance for those of us from a Christian tradition. In that sense, a "Yes" vote is appropriate.

But Christmas is not under assault from the Federal Government; there is no need for this resolution. Therefore, a vote of "Present" could be appropriate; there is simply no controversy here.

I chose to vote "No," however, because the resolution is flawed. It misses the point. Christmas is not being threatened by the federal government. Instead, the season that celebrates Christ's humble birth in a manger has been commercialized and cheapened by those who celebrate it as the retail highlight of the year.

My sincere wish for the New Year is that House leadership sets aside its penchant for distracting and divisive issues to focus on solutions to problems that face Americans every day.