

Ex-military brass support affirmative action

By Frank J. Murray
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A cadre of military brass from past administrations yesterday joined forces to advise the Supreme Court that universities require racial preferences to assure enough minority officers to command the increasingly diverse fighting force.

"The progress the military has made thus far must be protected and must continue. An alternative that does not preserve both diversity and selectivity is no alternative at all," said the brief, whose 29 signers include two Clinton administration secretaries of defense and three of the last four chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"Full integration and other policies combating discrimination are essential to good order, combat readiness and military effectiveness," said former Army Undersecretary Joe R. Reeder, the Washington lawyer who prepared the legal brief with co-counsel Carter Phillips.

"We are looking forward to making sure we can have future Colin Powells," said retired Adm. Dennis Blair, the Navy's former Pacific

Brief in Michigan case aims to ensure 'future Colin Powells'

commander.

That brief is but one of dozens expected to be filed today in the high-court challenge to affirmative-action programs that help lesser-qualified blacks, Hispanics and American Indians win admission to the University of Michigan. The case will be argued April 1.

Most of the 20 briefs already on file back white students who challenged the plans. Those include one by the Bush administration that calls the university plan disguised quotas, so clearly unconstitutional that the justices need not decide if race ever can be a factor.

Michigan officials predict the filings by today's deadline may exceed the record for amicus curiae briefs. The 1978 University of California v. Bakke affirmative-action case set a record with 54 briefs, but was eclipsed in 1989 when 78 briefs were filed in an abortion case, Webster v. Reproductive Health Services. The runner-up is the 1997 assisted-suicide case, in which 60 friend-of-the-court briefs were filed.

University of Michigan President Mary Sue Coleman also emphasized the potential impact on military readiness as she urged justices yesterday "not to turn back the clock" by banning use of racial factors.

"The Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Marines rely on the ability to take race into account in our ROTC programs and at their highly selective service academies," Mrs. Coleman said in addressing the American Council on Education meeting at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel. She spoke via satellite from Ann Arbor, Mich., her university's seat, because of the snowstorm.

"We simply cannot handcuff our country's major institutions in their efforts to seek both quality and diversity," she said.

A Pentagon spokesman would not comment on the Michigan lawsuit but said, "The Department of Defense has been at the forefront of providing equal opportunity in the workplace and in education and will continue to do so."

Mr. Reeder said the brief-signers do not espouse quotas or believe that minorities must be led only by officers of their own race.

"Absolutely not. There's no implication whatever," said the former Airborne officer. "However, that serviceman needs to know that those officers exist and to the extent that he or she delivers excellence they have the chance to rise and the service is fair and recognizes merit."

He said progress has been made in desegregating military academies since his 1970 graduation from West Point, when seven blacks were in his 750-member graduating class. Currently, he said, about 300 of 4,000 West Point cadets are black.

"The numbers do not match society. They have not gotten to parity," he said of an officer corps that is 19 percent minority, while enlisted ranks are 30 percent so. Unlike the Michigan program, West Point and other federal service academies do not accept substandard applicants, but help prospects attend prep schools to hone skills.

"If someone is not fied, you're not going to said.

Among other signa Reeder's brief are for Secretaries William William Perry, former of Staff Chairmen Geron, Gen. John Shal Adm. William J. Crow man Schwarzkopf an Clark, and president Sen. John Kerry, Mass democrat, a Vietnam War

Mr. Reeder said Mr former general and J from 1989 to 1993, an tary of state — is a sup firmative action, but w to sign the brief beca have been improper for

CORRECTION

An article in Monday The Washington Times stated the name of St President Kim Dae-jun awarded a Nobel Peace forts to reconcile North Korea.