

A Conversation with Dr. Beth Bailey



*In the following interview, I sat down with Dr. Bailey to discuss her new work *An Army Afire*. We also talk about completing research on the US military and its inherent challenges.*

Joseph Johnson: Thank you for taking the time to meet with me!

Beth Bailey: Of course!

JJ: Could you just tell us a little bit about *An Army Afire* and how you became interested in the problem of race in the US Army during Vietnam.

BB: The questions that led to *An Army Afire* have been generating for a good long time. When I went back and looked at *America's Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force*, which I published while at Temple in 2009, I found some of the material that I thought I had

discovered anew when researching this book. As I was thinking about the crisis of the US Army during that period, and writing about it in a previous book, I just kept stumbling over racial conflict and racial crisis.

When I was thinking about what to write next, which is always a hard thing to do as you get further in your career. First of all, you realize how much commitment it takes to a book to bring it to fruition, and, secondly, that you may not have endless numbers of books left in your lifetime or career. I have been thinking really hard about what I want to put that kind of energy into and questions around race just kept coming up. It's something that historians are talking about a lot today: the legacy of slavery, and the impact and significance of race. So, I began investigating the possibility of writing about race in the US military during this era.

As I was doing exploratory research in the National Archives to see what I could find, I could only find one file classified as 'Race' in the army during this period. It was an extremely thin file with only a single Xerox sheet in it. It was a newspaper article about Maj. Lavell Merritt, who had called the US military a 'citadel of racism' and 'one of the most racist institutions in the world.' It was just sitting there by itself and I got intrigued. Eventually I got thousands and thousands of pages investigating his charges and investigating him. At that moment I felt like I had the thread that I was going to follow for this book.

It was a very hard, calculated question of what I was going to spend my time on and what is significant. But that thread caught my imagination and I wanted to see where it leads me.

JJ: One of the things you refer to often in the book is the institutional hierarchy of the military and how these structures tried to accommodate the racial crisis. This really challenged the traditions and expectations of the military institution. Why wasn't the paper trail more visible when it caused such disruptions?

BB: There was an enormous paper trail, actually. It just becomes a question of what keywords you use when you're going through the National Archive and trying to figure things out. The keyword I used was my concern, but it wasn't the way that it was catalogued and published. The fact that I found something that intrigued me gave me enough of the sense that I would spend the time figuring out how to trace this down.

That's one of the reasons that writing about the US military up through the Vietnam War is such a great thing to do. They document everything. There is so much paper. Then you run into things not being documented and when it becomes digital there is a crisis. I chair the

Department of the Army Historical Advisory Subcommittee, which is in some sense a parallel to the State Department committee which Richard Immerman, who is a former CENFAD director, chaired for years. They've done great work in trying to get material declassified. We're

confronting baby steps at that point with the military. That's what our committee is really focused on, and it's a daunting task.

Up through the Vietnam War, though, every time somebody turns around it is written down and analyzed. So it's a great thing to study and we've got so much material.

JJ: So what keywords, other than the specific investigations you uncovered were helpful? Or were these incidents and cases central to finding the documents?

BB: Bryant Simon, who teaches at Temple, always advises graduate students, and I copy him shamelessly, to find a newspaper of record and create a timeline with incidents and key personnel. Then you use that as a basis for research. I had to figure out what offices within the military were responsible for the different decisions, the positions that made them, and the people who filled them.

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problems, and how they tried to solve the problems. That extends to where they are going to keep records about them. There is a huge amount of material in the Director of Personnel papers. They have a big set of files on ‘discrimination.’ But that is not immediately obvious if you say that you are interested in the problem of race and the US military and struggles over racial violence. That doesn’t necessarily tell you where you are going to find documents. The Office of the Inspector General is more obvious because if there is a crisis then they will open an investigation.

The Army logic about where things happen, and how they’re handled, determines where those papers are and not the historical question that I bring to bear. And that led me even further when considering that this was handled according to the logic of the US Army. Who is going to be taking responsibility for certain actions? Who is going to be assigned to study different problems? Who is in a position of authority? This is determined by Army logic, not by a set of a historical questions in 2023. And that logic is not the same logic that a university would bring to bear, or the Department of Education would bring to bear. It’s the Army’s own logic.

JJ: It’s fascinating because there is an internal logic behind the military that’s inconceivable to the public. There is a rigid hierarchy and operational structure that people must have a hard time grasping.

BB: Right. When I was starting to think about this in terms of the logic of the institution there were two main things that played a role. One, was that I was writing, not just researching, during the pandemic. Not just writing, but really getting into it around the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020. Looking at people call for institutional change kept this on my mind. The other element here is that I had a very close friend who had been in Vietnam, and then worked as a recruiter. He understood the Army very well. I came from nowhere, I knew nothing about how the Army worked. I spent years trying to understand how the Army works, even taking the “How the Army Runs” course at Fort Belvoir.

I kept asking him questions and finally he got exasperated, saying, ‘You keep trying to understand the Army like it’s a university, and it’s not.’ It’s like a lightbulb went off in my head. Obviously, I knew that, but it made me think about how different institutions function. And to understand this I had to think about how the Army as an institution functions, and how Army leaders saw this as such a pressing problem that they were willing to violate, in some senses, the normal institutional functions of the US Army in service of the larger goal of maintaining the machine of the US Army.

JJ: Just thinking about the flexibility of the Army during this time is interesting, and their willingness to accommodate their cadets. Were there any moments

that surprised you in terms of this willingness to be flexible? One of the chapters that stands out to me regards hair regulations and how the US Army was willing to forego hair standards for cultural representation, though they reclaim that authority later.

BB: Yeah. That shows how concerned some senior leaders were. The complication is that they were willing to give lenience in terms of allowing people to claim identities beyond that of soldier. Even to display those identities in uniform in ways that left people serving in positions of authority very unhappy. So it was not a generally agreed upon policy.

But, at the same time, creating regulations that allow that to happen become universal regulations. So, if they are going to allow Black enlisted men and soldiers to display symbols of Black identity and Black pride, then they have to allow other people from other ethnic groups to display parallel symbols. This of course led to some white Southerners saying they had the right to fly the Confederate flag. A lot of junior officers and NCOs were proudly bragging that they allowed their soldiers to display symbols of cultural identity like the Black Power symbol and the Confederate flag, not quite getting the way that flying a Confederate flag undermines Black soldiers displaying symbols of Black pride as the universality of

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regulations is a fundamental piece of Army practice.

Everything is pushing and in tension with one another, as they are trying to figure out how to do this. Even as they are being flexible, they are still thinking in terms of Army logic. So they decided to allow things, but by regulation. That was one of my favorite chapters to write.

JJ: That chapter has really stayed with me for many reasons.

BB: Yeah, it must be hard for anyone to understand how important hair was in the 1970s.

JJ: It's interesting, there is just much broader acceptance of hairstyles today.

BB: The way people wear their hair matters. I just read an article in the night about mullets in Australia. It claims a wide variety of things, and for young male soldiers to have short hair in the 1970s it marked them as military in a time when the military was not well-regarded in American society. It also separated them from claiming youth culture, it made them not cool – something else. The afro mattered a lot as a symbol of Black pride, but long hair on young white men also made a big difference.

I've told this story in public, but I'll tell it again. In eighth grade, my boyfriend's mother made him get a haircut right before the school dance and I told my mother that I

could not go with him because I was so embarrassed. It was a huge deal at that time.

JJ: What makes the chapter still resonate is the current conversation that still goes on about hair, especially if we consider discussions about wearing hair naturally for Black individuals in the workplace. This makes professionalism and appearance central for minorities who need to conform.

BB: Struggling with these issues made at least some senior Army leaders recognize that the regulations defaulted to white. Their definitions of a proper professional haircut was based on the assumption of a white soldier. They weren't taking into account those factors. It's not just a question of displaying ethnic pride or identities, it was even hair type. The regulations about shaving were based on an assumption of white soldiers. The assumptions about how hair worked weren't taking into account hair that was profoundly curly. Some of what happened is the notion that colorblindness doesn't work because that defaulted to white. So they had to pay attention to the diversity of people who were serving in order to establish regulations that took everyone into account. It's perfectly fine to have a regulation that says everybody has to look professional, but you have to take into account the variety of people who are serving.

Even beyond the question of people displaying pride, there are a variety of hair types. There are a variety of

ways that people can wear their hair that is very functional in the field. Take for instance the questions around Black women's hairstyles. They created a committee with people who were specialists in physiology to psychology to come up with answers about what was practical. But the point was that they were still defaulting white because they weren't recognizing highly practical hairstyles that many African American soldiers had adopted.

JJ: I think that's one of the real strengths of this chapter. You get to see the institutional changes on a commercial level. The PX has to offer different products to the soldiers, and this disrupts that defaulting process.

BB: And the PX at this point was, depending on your source, the third- or fourth- largest retail institution in the world. They did all sorts of studies about what Black preferences were. But for them to decide that they would stock products preferred by members of different racial and ethnic communities did not only serve the soldiers and their families, but it was a huge boost to the companies that manufactured these products. Being an in-stock record for the PX during this era could propel your music sales.

Committing to keeping magazines like *Ebony* in stock was a huge boost to the readership and sales of that publication. This institutional change reverberated into civilian life as well in ways that acknowledged

the centrality of the purchasing power of African Americans. By saying that one out of every four dolls in the window at Christmas would now be a Black doll acknowledged those soldiers and their families, while boosting the sales of these companies and their dolls.

JJ: I also want to talk about sensitivity training in the Army. You're a cultural historian, focused on the military. There is an intense internal culture in the Army. What was it like unpacking what sensitivity training looked like in the military?

BB: It was an uneasy fit in many ways. It was adopted, in part, because the institutional Army was trying to look at best practices wherever it could find them. There was a major trend in corporations in the United States, and culture, towards sensitivity training and these techniques. It often didn't work very well, and it bears a lot of resemblance to the ways that we consider encountering questions of race and racial violence today. It emphasized making people confront the level of white privilege they experienced, it emphasized making people confront their unacknowledged racial biases. Those techniques are difficult and problematic when used by people who are not trained in managing the results that they elicit. They are difficult when used on people who

are not there fully willingly, such is the case in the Army.

What happened too often is people with the best of intentions took a unit that was functioning pretty well, and got people to say things that was probably beyond what they actually felt that totally disrupted that unity by saying nasty things about members of other races and ethnicities. In the end they could not pull them back together. It turned out to not be the best way to confront institutional or individual racism.

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One of the things I hope that I accomplished in this book is that the refrain that 'nothing ever changes' is wrong. An enormous amount changed. It certainly doesn't mean that things are where they should be left. The Army 'solved' the problem, but the problem was how to stabilize the US Army against a highly disruptive force of racial violence within. In the process of doing that, it definitely improved the circumstances of people of color who were serving. But its goal was not to address racial justice as a whole, but to do what was necessary to stabilize the army. That process

involved acting in ways that did improve racial justice and equity within the service.

There are two ways to evaluate how they came out. They did what they meant to do. They made significant progress in the other category, but that wasn't the goal of leaders in the US Army, though plenty of individuals supported goals of racial justice. But that wasn't the purpose of this effort.

I'm always amazed at the amount of creativity and flexibility I find in these records. And also by the resistance, recalcitrance, and stubbornness of some. I'm not suggesting that the Army is full of super enlightened people and that if we followed their path all would be well. But, when confronted with a problem they understand to be existential, there is a fair amount of creativity there.

JJ: It just goes against the conventional wisdom that the military is an eternal, unchanging institution. But talking about institutions, let's change our focus to CENFAD. I know that you previously taught here, and now you got to lecture to us. How was that experience?

BB: Well, I taught at Temple for eleven really great years. I came in with a group of other senior historians. There was this amazing hiring flurry led by Richard Immerman, who was the head of CENFAD. I think there were thirteen of us hired in a year and a half. It was a really good department already, but I'd never had a cohort

before. Back in the 80s when I was on the job market people were just hired alone. There were never others who came in with you.

CENFAD was a highlight of my time at Temple. The programs you do now go back a long way. There was a regular rotation of fascinating scholars coming through with the chance to talk to them and learn about their work. Some became people I have collaborated with since, who I had not known before. It is a wonderful institution, and it has been a big part of my professional life. I was interim director for a brief period, I led a small workshop, and co-organized a few others with Richard. CENFAD is a remarkable institution that has built its reputation over decades, and it continues to be central.

I've got a lot of friends in the department. It was weird to be standing up there because I felt like I walked into a room that I just left. We are all a bit older, but it still felt so much the same. It was so nice. And there were really smart questions from the graduate students, which makes me very happy.

JJ: Do you have any future projects in the pipeline, now that you are done with *An Army Afire*.

BB: I'm working on getting a collaborated book about the US war and environment in the Pacific world with Drew Eisenberg, who is a former Temple faculty member. I'm also going to follow up on the Army education material because I found some fabulous new sources that

were closed during the pandemic, and now they are open again. I want to write an article about the ways that the Department of Defense created this Defense Race Relations Institute, which became the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute. They took a group of military officers and dumped them in the middle of a challenging neighborhood in Miami. I found some recordings of their debriefings.

The big project I'm probably going to work on is how the defense and military-industrial complex affected local communities, looking at Lockheed and its relationship to Smyrna. It's funny because I grew up there, and so some of this is what I remember from childhood. Realizing how those events were shaped around the federal policy of defense. They said when Lockheed sneezed, Smyrna caught a cold. But it also meant that the person I sat next to in high school was from Saudi Arabia. It was not a cosmopolitan town, but Lockheed changed that. I want to try and figure out how that worked, and how it changed a formerly tiny town, turned early Atlanta suburb.

JJ: I look forward to that. My last apartment in Atlanta was in Smyrna and we saw military planes and heard sonic booms all the time.

BB: Yes, you have that Atlanta connection!

JJ: I also wanted to ask you about your new position. I've heard that you have been awarded the Pitt Professorship at the University of

Cambridge. Could you tell us more about that?

BB: I'm really excited about this. Cambridge has a nomination committee. It was nothing I applied for, but I got an email as I was getting on a plane to go to the SHAFR conference last year. It said that they nominated me for this professorship. The nomination meant it had to be approved, but I have been named the Pitt Professor of US History and Institutions. Every other year they have a historian, and the list of people that I'm joining is incredible. It definitely makes me feel humbled to be asked. I will spend the academic year of 2025-26 in Cambridge, I'll teach a graduate seminar, and participate in their ongoing history seminars – just being part of their intellectual life. It's an amazing opportunity and I'm very excited.

I also wanted to brag on one of the former Temple graduate students who moved to KU with me. His name is Bryan Trump, and he has a long connection with CENFAD. He is now working at the Digital Kentucky Civil War Governors project, which is a really interesting project. He won the prize for all non-hard sciences dissertation at the University of Kansas last year. His dissertation was judged the best out of a two year sequence of all non-science dissertations at KU.

JJ: Well congratulations to Bryan! I really appreciate you taking this time to speak with me.