

The Case for Col. Etue's Resignation

Since Col. Kriste Etue's late-September repost of a meme referring to NFL players choosing not to stand during the national anthem as "degenerates" and "millionaire ingrates," there have been wide-ranging calls for her resignation and for Governor Snyder to fire Col Etue. I reached out to her on Sept. 27, requesting a meeting, wanting first to meet with her before I issued any decision, since the Michigan Roundtable has been associated with the Michigan State Police (MSP) for over 25 years and this is the work I am involved with daily at a personal and professional level. I wanted to have a conversation about her comments and discern how best to support her on her path to a deeper and more functional racial awareness. I remain interested in meeting with Col. Etue even though she deferred my request earlier this month to a Detroit area State Police staff person. While these meetings are being arranged, conversations I have had with those most harmed by her remarks lead me to conclude she is no longer the correct person to lead the Michigan State Police.

Col. Etue's flat out racially harmful Facebook post comes at a time when the Michigan State Police is already failing to significantly bring and maintain diversity in its ranks. Since being released from its 1993 federal consent decree, MSP has seen a decline in its troopers of color that doesn't tap the surface of mirroring the state's demographic ratios. Further, the Colonel's post places the MSP at a disadvantage as they enter a very competitive market-place where only 3% of our state's police academies are made up of black candidates. Without many troopers of color, and many of that small pool frustrated by the systematic lack of support and promotion, Col. Etue's behavior makes for yet another strike against diversification. We know that diverse employees are often the best recruiters of diverse talent as they can speak about what an organization is really like.

Over the past 12 years, the Michigan Roundtable has more intentionally included racial equity on the continuum from diversity to inclusion. Through our work, we have learned history is a very important tool, as is the importance of hearing from people most impacted by racism whose voices are not being heard. The Colonel's remarks, the lack of diversity in the MSP, and the lack of trust in our communities of color are unfortunately part of a larger context which needs to be understood. For folks who don't look like me or the Colonel, it may seem that every day there is a new assault on the very foundation of their humanity from a call to ban refugees and immigrants to revoking pathways to citizenship for undocumented young adults to the continued water shut-offs in the largest city in Michigan, in a state surrounded by the largest, freshest water supply in the world. We must take pause and acknowledge that these assaults are not new or more prevalent, but that over the last fifty years racism has become a modern-day chameleon in America.

As a result, many of us went to sleep under the watch of this post-racial America while assaults on individuals like Trayvon Martin who was killed by a neighborhood patrolman because he looked suspicious for wearing a hoodie and a bag of skittles in his hand; Aiyana Jones who was shot and killed while she slept during a police raid by a Special Response Team; Michael Brown who, after being shot dead by the Ferguson police, lay in the hot street for four hours; Tamir Rice, a 12 year old boy shot by the Cleveland police for having a toy gun that resembled a real gun while playing at a playground; and Damon Grimes who was tasered in the back by a Michigan State Police trooper while riding a four wheel ATV have continued on a daily basis for our friends of color in this country.

This chameleon of racism became unmasked during the recent presidential election and has raised its voice in concert with the hateful remarks being spewed on a regular basis by political leaders across the country. The net effect is racism is front and center in the public's eye through the defiance of Black football players challenging the white social order of white police officers killing Black people and in some cases appearing to not be held accountable. This peaceful protest movement led by Colin Kaepernick recently incited President Trump to say to a crowd of white supporters in Alabama that white team owners should fire the "sons of bitches" [Black players protesting] who take a knee. A white Pennsylvania fire chief across America followed his lead by publicly calling a Pittsburgh Steelers coach "a no good ni****r." The remarks of Col. Etue ring loud and painfully as though she was calling our black neighbors the 'N' word.

Governor Snyder's decision to withhold five days of salary as punishment of MSP Director Colonel Etue for her harmful Facebook post is recognition of her inappropriate behavior. This sanction coupled by his order for whole scale changes in the State of Michigan's approach to diversity and inclusion is, for some, considered a strong move in the right direction. Gov. Snyder's decision however, is a betrayal to officers of color in the Michigan State Police, to the Black community who have struggled to fully trust the Michigan State Police, and to countless people like me who have listened to our fellow Michiganders' disappointment that she remains at the helm of the State Police.

Michigan Roundtable Calls for Resignation

Through our work helping organizations recruit and retain diverse talent, we know leadership is the single most important determinant of cultural change. If a leader lacks integrity, there won't be many people following them. If the Colonel were a leader of a company making widgets, she would still be under an obligation to be aware of structural racial barriers and its impact on her employees. She would be compromising products and productivity and the marketplace would judge her far more harshly than she has been judged by state leadership. To be a leader in our diverse state with a long history of racism, be you the governor, the state police director, or any organizational leader that engages the public, you have a higher obligation to fully examine the history of racism in the state.

Examination needs to go back to the time of the genocide of our indigenous peoples and move forward through the years of harm perpetrated upon various communities of color and most especially on African Americans, both physically and emotionally by individuals, institutions, and systems. This examination should be followed by learning the present-day manifestation of structural racism, which takes place in virtually every aspect of our lives. One must also understand their individual ignorance and unexamined privilege and how they exist in relation to the racial other. This is demanding work and requires strength to be vulnerable as one confronts their own ignorance and the racist society in which we live – but not where those we lead are harmed during our learning.

The Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion calls for Col. Etue to lead by example and resign from her position as Director of the Michigan State Police. This call for the Colonel's resignation is not meant to be disrespecting of those risking their lives to serve and protect the citizens of our state and those who work or visit our state. On the contrary, the Michigan Roundtable would be honored to assist the Governor as he seeks to drive change throughout state

government. I remain concerned for Col. Etue as she has, I trust, poured her head and heart into the challenging work involved in beginning her racial justice journey. There is much listening and humility ahead for her as she begins to deconstruct her participation in a racially unjust world. In all fairness to Col Etue, she is not unlike any other Michigander in that she suffers from the disease of racism. Far too few of us have been working on understanding race and listening to those most impacted by racism.

I invite Col. Etue to attend our racial justice programs which include movies and discussion, candid conversations about the spatial racism in which we are mired, touring an exhibit on housing segregation, engage in ALPACT (Advocates and Leaders for Police and Community Trust), and community work with citizens fighting racism in Detroit, Flint, Benton Harbor and the Native Community in the Upper Peninsula. But this journey and exploration should not be done while in a position of power in the state government where, not only fellow officers, but the public will be exposed to further bias. For more information I invite you to visit our website: www.MIRoundtable.org.