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HEROES AND HYPOCRISY

AFRICAN-AMERICAN SOLDIERS, PROTEST AND VIOLENCE

1865 – 1945

“The Germans ain’t done nothin’ to me, and if they have, I forgive ‘em.”

James Weldon Johnson, when asked about enlisting in the U.S. Army to fight the Germans in World War I.

“The Negro cannot afford to be rated as a disloyal element in the nation. Imagine the results if he should for an instant arouse against himself the sentiment which is now directed against the pro-German element.”

James Weldon Johnson, New York Age, Mar. 29 1917.

INTRODUCTION

Many historians who have explored episodes of racial conflict and consensus in the American socio-political landscape have focused their attention on tensions that arose between collective organizations. Because of this focus on collective action – for example, the work of the Freedmen’s Bureau, the Ku Klux Klan, the federal government or the NAACP – individual voices outside of this organizing tradition have been left by the wayside. The purpose of this document is to highlight the actions of African-American soldiers in response to racial conflicts in the armed forces. As we shall see,

their forms of racial protest were particularly individualized for their circumstances.

While African-American soldiers are usually regarded as the unfortunate victims of racial repression, it is the opinion of the author that these men proved to be a catalyst for civil rights gains throughout the 20th century. Their very existence aroused tensions between both the African-American and white populations, tensions that boiled over into characteristic racial violence as well as political and social triumphs. These soldiers were not merely objects of racial violence and repression, but subjects in the framing of racial discourse in the United States well into the 20th century.

The armed forces provided a unique training ground for political and social action, both in domestic training camps and on the fields of foreign conflict. African-American soldiers demanded the realization of wartime aims for all African-Americans, aroused by the rhetoric of democracy and freedom put forth by Washington politicians and their own experiences of equality overseas. While few of these soldiers' and veterans' actions have been documented, their ability to effect change is evidenced by the strong reaction of the white majority. There are numerous reports of racial violence sparked by the appearance of African-American soldiers in military uniform, both immediately after the Civil War and through both World Wars. These soldiers, emboldened by their experiences on the battlefield and their military training, did not fit in the prescribed mold of segregation, which demanded the subservience and deference of African-Americans to all whites, regardless of status. Consequently, whites mounted a campaign of terror to keep these men "in line," through public and private forms of racial intimidation – from lynching and other forms of racial violence, to the use of the municipal and federal surveillance and imprisonment apparatus. A total of 210 outbreaks

of racial violence are recorded for the years 1910-1967; out of these incidents, 202 outbreaks occurred within a combined nine-year period during American international conflicts (1917-19, 1942-43, and 1964-67).¹ Indeed, African-American soldiers are the link between the rise of racial militancy among African-Americans and the rise in interracial violence from 1865-1945. They are pivotal symbols of African-American manhood and white fear, figures that are lost in the dominant narrative of the nonviolent civil rights movement.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN VETERANS IN THE RECONSTRUCTION

The entrance of former slaves and freedmen into the ranks of the Union Army during the Civil War created a huge outcry in the South. The Confiscation Act, passed by Congress in 1862, classified escaped slaves as “contrabands of war.” The Union Army utilized these ex-slaves as military laborers. With the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation and the establishment of the Bureau of Colored Troops in 1863, however, slaves and freedmen alike were armed by the Union against the Confederacy. Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy, threatened to recapture the African-American soldiers as slaves in insurrection, not as prisoners of war.² Regardless of Northern and Southern whites that feared the consequences of arming African-American men, these former slaves and freedmen enthusiastically set about the task of liberating their own people and occupying slaveholder territory. This occupation of the South during and after the Civil War by African-American soldiers sparked increased incidents of racial violence, violence that would again erupt stateside during both World Wars. Incidents like the

¹ Schaich, “A Relationship Between Collective Racial Violence and War,” 375.

² Berlin, *Freedom’s Soldiers*, vii.

massacre at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, proved to be emblematic of the atrocities visited upon African-American soldiers during the war. A column of Confederate troops, led by Maj. General Nathan Bedford Forrest, attacked the poorly manned post of Fort Pillow on April 12, 1864. African-American soldiers were the primary defense against the attack. Poorly trained and without a commanding officer, the troops fell back under Forrest's assault. Despite pleas of surrender, Confederate troops murdered African-American soldiers, burned tents with wounded soldiers to the ground, and buried soldiers alive. News of the atrocity spread around the country, and the incident at Fort Pillow proved to be a rallying cry for the beginning of a "Radical Reconstruction" of the South at the end of the war. Forrest himself went on to be the founder and first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.³

Units of African-American soldiers were organized as United States Colored Troops in 1863, serving terms of three years or the duration of the war. After the close of the conflict in April 1865, the War Department was faced with the task of maintaining order in the defeated South. Many African-American soldiers looked forward to the opportunities presented by continued service in the army – the opportunity to maintain their status as armed liberators, regular pay, and education. They continued service by staying stationed in the South for the remainder of their terms. Cognizant of prevailing attitudes of Southern whites toward African-American soldiers, most were hastily discharged from service in the year following the war. In 1865, there were 122,179 African-American soldiers in the Army; by 1866, only 14,656 remained.⁴ Many

³ Urwin, *Black Flag Over Dixie*, 89-125.

⁴ Fletcher, "The Negro Volunteer in Reconstruction," 126.

Southerners were offended by the important role these African-American soldiers played in rebuilding the region, and open hostilities against the soldiers were common.

African-American soldiers not only provided valuable support to the new infrastructure of the nation, their experiences in the military also informed political and social action among freedmen. The Reconstruction Acts of 1867 created about a million voters in the South – former slaves were granted citizenship and voting rights, regardless of property holdings. In defense of these new rights, ex-slave soldiers organized freedmen into clubs that patrolled former plantations, protecting former slaves from retaliation by displaced plantation owners. In addition, these soldiers took the lead in establishing political conventions, churches, fraternal organizations and schools.⁵ Freedmen adopted elements of military training of the former soldiers as an aid to collectively organize freedmen who worked the land of former plantations. Ex-soldiers created quasi-military “companies” of freedmen, complete with military drills, marches and parades. Aside from public displays, these companies also provided an outlet for political action. For example, some military companies defended the rights of freedmen to farm plantation lands for their own sustenance, as opposed to farming strictly for white tenant landowners. Members of a military company in South Carolina informed a federal commander that “they have concluded to work (per week) two days for the planter, three for themselves, and that on Saturdays and Sundays no work should be done.”⁶

These ex-soldiers utilized the protocols established in military command structure to facilitate communication among rural plantations. These lines of communication were important in uniting freedmen in collective action. The very existence of African-

⁵ Berlin, 46-47.

⁶ Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction*, 149.

American military-style “clubs” contradicted the white-dominated social order in the South. Adherence to military hierarchy of rank supplanted the prior dependence on white authority – the orders that were given within these clubs “introduced a mediating authority in areas where the claims of the master had once been sovereign,” notes Julie Saville.⁷ For example, companies like the “Tiger Zouaves No. 12” in South Carolina, imprisoned for reclaiming slave property, petitioned white federal authorities for their release. Other companies organized non-literate freedmen voters during the elections of 1867 and 1868, asserting the right to vote granted in the first Reconstruction Act. In response to instances where small groups of African-American voters were waylaid by whites on the way to the polls, these companies marched to polling places in larger squads, providing a greater measure of safety in numbers.⁸ These public displays of military organization and independence by former soldiers raised the hackles of white Southerners. On numerous occasions, these soldiers clashed with white citizens, police, and militia in Vicksburg, Charleston, and Wilmington, North Carolina.⁹ Southern alarmists blamed the presence of African-American soldiers for these violent incidents.

The presence of African-American soldiers posed a direct challenge to the reconstruction of racial boundaries in the post-bellum South. The Civil War and the “Radical Reconstruction” decimated the pre-existent legal and social underpinnings of racial subordination. For a brief period after the war, former slaves enjoyed more protection under the law, thanks to the amendments to the Constitution and the election of African-Americans to political offices throughout the South. Southern whites began to

⁷ Saville, 147.

⁸ Saville, 171-73.

⁹ Fletcher, 127.

strip away these new political rights from African-Americans over the remainder of the nineteenth century, and re-imposed a doctrine of racial subordination. New boundaries were drawn between the races, a color line built on in racial etiquette and racial violence.¹⁰ The very existence of African-American soldiers contradicted this new color line. Hardened by combat experience and cognizant of the roles they played in preserving the Union, African-American soldiers found it difficult to toe the color line and submit to the yoke of racial subordination. As a direct result, African-American soldiers became a locus of racial protest and violence from the Reconstruction period onward.

A notable series of clashes between African-American soldiers and white police took place in Memphis in 1866. When the Union Army occupied Memphis in 1863, commanders organized African-American volunteer soldiers as the Third Heavy Artillery, stationed at Fort Pickering. Relatives and friends flocked to join the soldiers from the surrounding countryside – the African-American population of the city mushroomed from 3,000 in 1860 to about 20,000 in 1865.¹¹ The population boom signified the start of stiff competition for employment between African-Americans and whites, especially the Irish immigrants that made up the bulk of the Memphis police force. Local whites, resenting armed and uniformed African-American soldiers as an affront to white supremacy, made numerous complaints about alleged public drunkenness and use of profanity by the soldiers. The police began in a crackdown on all African-Americans, using unnecessary force and imprisonment to strike fear in the hearts of the growing population. In response, African-American soldiers interfered with the police,

¹⁰ Harris, “Etiquette, Lynching, and Racial Boundaries in Southern History,” 390.

¹¹ Ryan, “The Memphis Riots of 1866,” 244.

forcibly rescuing African-Americans from imprisonment. On May 1, 1866, tensions erupted into an armed conflict between African-American soldiers and the police. After a skirmish that left one police officer dead and two soldiers wounded, the soldiers retreated to the safety of Fort Pickering, where they were disarmed and confined by white commanding officers. Local authorities raised posses to restore order in the city. Exaggerated rumors of the day's violence, coupled with rumors that African-Americans were planning to invade Memphis, spurred the white posses into violent action. For the next two days these posses ran roughshod through the large settlement of African-American freedmen, killing African-Americans and destroying their property. By the time martial law was declared on May 3, 46 African-Americans lay dead and \$100,000 in property was destroyed, including 91 homes, 4 churches and 12 schools.¹² Unarmed and confined to Fort Pickering, African-American soldiers were unable to aid the freedmen during the conflict.

Despite incidents like these, African-American freedmen continued to use the example of the African-American soldiers as a method to agitate for full civil rights. Freedmen emphasized the role of African-American soldiers in the victory of the Union Army to claim these rights. For example, as African-American Tennesseans petitioned white unionists in 1865 to abolish slavery and grant citizenship rights to all African-Americans, they called upon the legacy of the African-American Union soldiers:

“Near 200,000 of our brethren are to-day performing military duty in the ranks of the Union Army. Thousands of them have already died in battle, or perished by a

¹² Ryan, 246-49.

cruel martyrdom for the sake of the Union, and we are ready and willing to sacrifice more. But what higher order of citizen is there than the soldier? Or who has a greater trust confided to his hands? If we are called on to do military duty against the rebel armies in the field, why should we be denied the privilege of voting against rebel citizens at the ballot-box? The latter is as necessary to save the Government as the former.”¹³

AFRICAN-AMERICAN SOLDIERS AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Despite the appeals of African-American freedmen and the active organization of Civil War veterans, white Southern politicians and law enforcement maintained a vice grip on the African-American populace. In the years leading up to American involvement in World War I, African-Americans faced intimidation and terrorism from almost all corners of society. The end of the Reconstruction era left political power in the hands of the white Southern planter class, who promptly undid many of the anti-discrimination legislation of that period. The onset of the war intensified feelings of national unity and xenophobia in equal measure. In the South, the number of incidents of racial violence – in this case, lynching – increased dramatically during the World War epoch.¹⁴ Riding this wave of new aggression against African-Americans, the Ku Klux Klan was revived in 1915 and boasted a membership of four million by the 1920s.¹⁵ Moreover, racial militancy began to increase among the African-American population after the death of Booker T. Washington in 1915. The subsequent decline of Washington’s

¹³ Berlin, 145-46.

¹⁴ The year 1917 saw 36 African-Americans lynched; this number rose to 60 in 1918 and 76 in 1919 (Schaich, 381).

¹⁵ Wynn, “The Afro-American and the Second World War,” 9.

acommodationist program – a program that encouraged economic mobility for African-Americans, but social separation from whites – allowed the emergence of more militant rhetoric among race leaders of the time.

The onset of World War I evinced skepticism and optimism from the African-American public. The passage of the Selective Service Act in 1917 allowed African-American men the right to be drafted into the armed forces, albeit in segregated units. One on hand, some of these men saw military service as a means for further equality with whites on the home front. These soldiers believed that by fighting alongside white soldiers against Germany, white Americans would finally allow all African-Americans to enjoy all the privileges of full citizenship. They also believed that if significant numbers of African-American soldiers served in the conflict, their value in American society would increase and they could demand better treatment in said society.¹⁶ Wartime mobilization also offered African-American men – especially those from the South – an opportunity to escape white control. However, the draft also threatened the delicate underpinnings of the color line and white social control. As soldiers, African-American men would have access to weapons, heroic status within the African-American community, and potentially social relations with white women in Europe – all breaches of racial etiquette in the South. Consequently, many whites saw the draft as an opportunity to exert control – for example, driving African-American soldiers off the streets and out of town.¹⁷

Some African-Americans saw little cause to support the war. Many African-American journalists and educators concluded that this was a “white man’s war.”

¹⁶ Mennell, “African-Americans and the Selective Service Act,” 275.

¹⁷ Harris, 398.

Unwilling African-American draftees voiced their protest in song as they waited to embark overseas:

I ain't got no business in Germany
And I don't want to go to France
Lawd, I want to go home, I want to go home.

Other African-American soldiers sang songs that echoed the opinion that the aims of the war had little to do with their immediate circumstances:

Jined de army fur to git free clothes,
What we're fightin' 'bout, nobody knows.

Some African-American soldiers made even more daring challenges. Pvt. Sidney Williams of the 368th Infantry sent this letter to his draft board, with a copy to a white Memphis newspaper:

It afoads to the soldier boys wich you have sint so far away from home a great deal of pledger to write you a few lines to let you know that you low-down Mother Fuckers can put a gun in our hands but who is able to take it out? We may go to France but I want to let you know that it will not be over until we straiten up this state. We feel like we have nothing to do with this war, so if you all thinks it, just wait until Uncle Sam puts a gun in the niggers hands and you

will be sorry of it, because we is show goin to come back and fight and whip out the United States...

The newly created Federal Bureau of Investigation was responsible to investigating cases of draft evasion. The bureau defined a “deserter” as anyone who failed to present himself for induction or transport to a training camp. The draft boards themselves, however, made a practice of “railroading” African-American men into the armed forces. Nearly all the members of the Selective Service across the country were white. White men who were eligible for service were able to take advantage of occupational or educational deferments, while African-American men were hardly granted deferments at all. For example, the Exemption Board for Fulton County, Georgia (Atlanta) granted deferments to 526 of 618 whites, but only 6 of 212 blacks in 1917.¹⁸ It comes as no surprise, then, that statistics compiled by the War Department by the end of the war show that African-Americans had the three times the desertion rates as whites.¹⁹

The Bureau of Investigation played a critical role in stifling racial militancy among African-American draftees and the African-American intelligentsia. Enlisting the aid of local police forces, the bureau tracked down African-American deserters and threatened them with long jail sentences if they refused to report for duty. The bureau also interfered with African-American publications that publicly opposed the war, like the *Messenger* (edited by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen), the *Chicago Defender*, and the *Crisis* (edited by W.E.B. DuBois). For example, the Post Office Department suppressed the distribution of these magazines through the mail, citing the

¹⁸ Murray, “Blacks and the Draft: A History of Institutional Racism,” 59-60.

¹⁹ Kornweibel, *Investigate Everything*, 77-84.

broad purview of the Espionage Act and the Sedition Act.²⁰ DuBois subsequently took an abrupt about-face to his early condemnation of the war in his 1918 editorial in *Crisis*, entitled “Close Ranks.” DuBois was a long-time advocate of racial equality, weighing against the accommodationist viewpoint of Booker T. Washington. However, DuBois contradicted his prior militancy in the editorial. “Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy,” he wrote.²¹ DuBois argued that despite being party to a completely segregated military, African-American soldiers could make contributions to the war effort that could only improve matters for African-Americans on the home front. After all, he argued, the involvement of African-American soldiers in the Civil War influenced the emancipation of slaves and the Emancipation Proclamation. Both the African-American elite and the African-American soldier faced a paradox, a paradox based in the political and social realities for African-Americans at this juncture. In the face of a seemingly hopeless situation of racial violence and intimidation, DuBois’ capitulation to accommodationism may be explained as an attempt to find a pragmatic solution to the racial problem. DuBois was not only hopeful of improved relations between African-Americans and whites, but he was equally afraid of what might happen if African-Americans took an opposite viewpoint to the war.²² Unfortunately, as domestic racial violence only increased during the war, DuBois was forced to concede privately that war itself had “wide impotence as a method of social

²⁰ Kornweibel, 123.

²¹ “Close Ranks,” *Crisis*, vol. 16 (July 1918), 111.

²² Jordan, “The Damnable Dilemma,” 1563 - 64.

reform.” His slogan during the post-war period is evidence of his bitterness: “*We return, we return from fighting, we return fighting.*”²³

The passage of the Selective Service Bill also came on the heels of increased racial violence between African-American soldiers and the white populace during this wartime era. The riots in East St. Louis and Houston in 1917 are eerily reminiscent of incidents between African-American soldiers and whites during Reconstruction. In East St. Louis, white mobs killed thirty-nine African-Americans – patriotic mobs also attacked whites that opposed the war.²⁴ In Houston, armed regular soldiers from the 24th Infantry Regiment were sent to guard an outpost near Houston. These soldiers had been kept at remote outposts since their inception after the Civil War, engaging in battle with Indians. Local whites, incensed at the presence of armed African-American soldiers, subjected these soldiers to continuous insults. In response, the soldiers rebuked the city’s segregation ordinances, refusing to sit in Jim Crow streetcars and theatres and tearing down Jim Crow signs. The tensions between white civilians and African-American soldiers soon reached a boiling point. When a rumor spread that a Houston policeman killed a soldier, other soldiers took up arms to avenge his death. African-American soldiers killed seventeen whites, armed with weapons from their camp.²⁵ Sixty-four of the soldiers were arrested and accused of murder; thirteen were sentenced to death and the remainder received life imprisonment after a one-day trial.²⁶

Incidents like these led some whites to argue against the incorporation of African-Americans in the military, recalling Southern white resistance to African-American

²³ Wynn, “The Afro-American,” 12.

²⁴ Jordan, 1565.

²⁵ Mennell, 277; Barbeau and Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers*, 28-31.

²⁶ Wynn, “The Afro-American,” 7.

uniformed soldiers during the Reconstruction. When the Selective Service Bill was debated in Congress, Southern politicians like Senator James Vardaman argued that conscription and arming of African-American men would be dangerous to “racial harmony.”²⁷ Caught between white southern leaders seeking to preserve the status quo and more militant African-American leaders who threatened national protest, President Woodrow Wilson passed the bill. African-Americans could be drafted, but to appease the South, draftees had to indicate their race on the registration form so they could be segregated when and if they were called up. By 1918, 367,410 African-Americans were drafted, with 200,000 men serving overseas. In the same year, 60 African-Americans were lynched. This number increased to seventy-six in 1919 as African-American soldiers returned from the front lines.²⁸ African-American soldiers were lynched for appearing in uniform in public in Mississippi and Georgia, an admission to the power military service grants to one’s place in society – and the power to disrupt the status quo of segregation. Violent confrontations between African-American soldiers, white police and white citizens took place in the North as well during this period – in New London, Connecticut (1918), Baltimore, Maryland (1918), and Bisbee, Arizona (1919).²⁹

The experiences of African-American soldiers in World War I also proved to inspire political action among African-Americans, as well as the opprobrium of whites. The personal experiences of African-American troops in France and the prevailing rhetoric of Wilson’s “war for democracy” inspired political organization amongst African-Americans. As one African-American soldier serving in France noted, “I have

²⁷ Mennell, 276.

²⁸ Mennell, 284.

²⁹ Schaich, 383.

but one desire, and that is to be able to go all over our land and tell of my experiences in the democratic France, and the manly qualities displayed by our soldiers under conditions so very foreign to those at home.”³⁰ The French treated all American soldiers as liberators, regardless of skin color. Benjamin Mays wrote in 1945 of the experiences of the African-American veterans: “they experienced for the first time a world community. They felt for the first time that they were ‘somebody,’ that they were significant, and that they were part of a world plan ... they received democratic treatment in Europe which they had never experienced in many sections of America, particularly this was true in England and especially in France.”³¹ Returning soldiers fed into the growing ranks of the NAACP. For example, the Texas branch of the NAACP sponsored lectures by African-American veterans, and local NAACP leadership leveraged the tales of their experiences on the bloody fields of Europe to demand “the rights of the race which have been bought by blood.”³²

As in the Reconstruction, the image of African-American soldiers in uniform proved unpalatable to Southern whites. When appeals to War Department were ignored, whites took matters upon themselves, meeting discharged African-American soldiers at train stations and cutting the buttons and armaments from their uniforms before forcing them to remove their uniforms altogether.³³ The return of African-American soldiers also led to increased alarm among military intelligence officials. According to U.S. military intelligence reports, discharged African-American soldiers created secret societies to “protect the interests of the colored race,” to guard against “any white effort, especially in

³⁰ Reich, “Soldiers of Democracy,” 1479.

³¹ Mays, “Veterans: It Need Not Happen Again,” 206.

³² Reich, 1494.

³³ Reich, 1485.

the South, to re-establish white ascendancy,” and to “maintain and strengthen the social equality between the races as established in France.”³⁴ In 1919, whites in Texas reported that African-American veterans were conducting meetings with local African-American residents, ostensibly encouraging disruption of the social order. One intelligence officer claimed that “arrogant” African-American soldiers, emboldened by the spirit of racial equality encountered among the French people, would surely bring about a new “era of bloodshed ... as compared with which the history of the reconstruction will be mild reading.”³⁵

A new era of bloodshed did begin indeed in the “Red Summer” of 1919. At least thirty-eight riots between the races staggered the country in that year, from Washington D.C. to Arizona. The timing of these outbursts of racial violence is crucial to the understanding of the roles of African-American soldiers. The Red Summer witnessed a showdown between two strong forces. On one hand, the African-American community was emboldened by the experiences of their soldiers in the fields of France. These men returned to the United States on their own feet, refusing to be bowed by domestic segregation. In turn, the soldiers themselves were disgusted by the abuse they suffered within the ranks of the armed forces. For much of the war, African-American soldiers were portrayed as cowards – an accusation that would hamper the entry of African-Americans into combat again until the Korean War.³⁶ African-American soldiers now had the requisite training, composure and anger to face down Jim Crow at home. On the other hand, whites recognized the dangers of African-American soldiers returning home,

³⁴ Kornweibel, *Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925)*, 21:231.

³⁵ Kornweibel, 12:391.

³⁶ Barbeau and Henri, 136-157.

with the rush of freedom of freedom running through their veins. Whites reacted to this postwar defiance among African-Americans by using violence to keep them “in their place” and enforce the color line.

The riots in Washington D.C. began as an alleged “crime wave” by blacks hit the capital. Newspapers claimed that African-Americans assaulted six white women. White servicemen and civilians took it upon themselves to “clean up” by invading an African-American neighborhood and beating up every resident in sight. Local police did not protect residents, and President Wilson stood idly by, so African-Americans protected themselves with their own arms. The *New York Times* claimed that “bands of negroes, hundreds of them carrying revolvers, razors and blackjacks”³⁷ were attacking servicemen and civilians alike. The violence was halted four days later by over a thousand troops. Whatever the outcome, the riots marked a turn in the minds of African-Americans. One woman remarked:

“The Washington riots gave me the thrill that comes once in a lifetime. I was alone when I read between the lines of the morning paper that at last our men had stood like men, struck back, were no longer dumb, driven cattle. ...The pent-up humiliation, grief and horror of a lifetime – half a century – was being stripped from me.”³⁸

Indeed, African-American veterans faced many of the same issues upon returning from the war that African-American soldiers faced during the Reconstruction. Despite

³⁷ *New York Times*, July 22 1919, 1-2.

³⁸ Barbeau and Henri, 182.

their influence on local and national African-American organizations that mobilized against oppression, these soldiers found themselves once again denied the American freedoms that they dearly paid for on the battlefields of Europe. However, their new self-respect and familiarity with the ways of violence triggered a response from the white majority – a response designed to maintain the structures of white supremacy.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN SOLDIERS AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The tide of racial militancy ebbed after the stock market crash in 1929 and the subsequent depression. Members of the working class, both African-American and white, concentrated their efforts on merely surviving a period of widespread poverty and despair. The increased involvement of African-Americans in Roosevelt's New Deal policies contributed to some limited success in the battle for civil rights. A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement was successful in forcing the Roosevelt administration to desegregate the defense industries and establish the Fair Employment Practices Committee in 1941.

Despite the desegregation of war industries, many African-Americans protested the continuing practice of segregation within the armed forces themselves. There was little organized draft resistance among African-Americans during World War I. Beyond individual desertions, one of the few organized resistance actions was the "Green Corn Rebellion" of 1917, when a group of 500 African-Americans farmers and white socialists staged a brief uprising.³⁹ World War II witnessed a marked increase in organized draft

³⁹ Murray, 61.

resistance among African-Americans. Groups like the “Conscientious Objectors Against Jim Crow” in Chicago fought military segregation in the courts.⁴⁰ The organization, led by anthropologist and activist St. Clair Drake, hoped to establish the right of African-Americans to declare themselves exempt from military service because of segregation and inequality in the military. The organization publicized cases of African-American seeking draft exemptions in the press, like those of Ernest Calloway, Lewis Jones, Donald Sutherland and George Haney. All four men asserted their rights to not serve in a segregated army; all four were jailed for terms of one to three years for draft evasion.⁴¹

Some African-American groups organized resistance to military service based on philosophical objections to fighting in a “white man’s war.” Notable among these groups were followers of Elijah Muhammad’s Temple of Islam. Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation rounded up sixty-three temple members, including Elijah Muhammad himself. These “Black Muslims” were sympathetic to the Japanese because they were also “colored”, and advised African-Americans to resist the draft. Although no sedition charges were ever proven, Elijah Muhammad was imprisoned on charges of draft evasion for five years, while his followers received terms of three years apiece. Other African-American separatist organizations like the Peace Movement of Ethiopia, the Iron Defense Legion, the Moorish Science Temple, and the Pacific Movement of the Eastern World, were also believed to be sympathetic with the Japanese. While the FBI did its best to find

⁴⁰ Sitkoff, “Racial Militancy,” 666-67.

⁴¹ Wynn, “The Afro-American and the Second World War,” 25-26.

links between separatist groups and Japanese agents, most of these “cultists” were eventually imprisoned for draft evasion, not sedition.⁴²

The longest legal challenge to military segregation during World War II was the two-year saga of Wilfred W. Lynn. Lynn was notified of his draft classification of 1-A in 1942; he refused to report for induction on the grounds that segregation in the armed forces was a violation of the 1940 Selective Training and Service Act, which outlawed discrimination in draft selection. “Unless I am assured that I can serve in a mixed regiment and that I will not be compelled to serve in a unit undemocratically selected as a Negro group, I will refuse to report for induction,” wrote Lynn to his local draft board in New York. Lynn was subsequently arrested and indicted for draft evasion. Lynn agreed to submit to induction so that he could file suit against his superior officer for serving in a segregated unit. The case eventually worked its way up to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1944, where it was dismissed on a technicality.⁴³

Those African-American men who did appear showed little enthusiasm for the war. “Here lies a African-American man, killed fighting a yellow man for the glory of a white man” was a popular saying among these draftees. The draftees were trained in segregated camps, mainly in the South, and upon deployment they were restricted to noncombatant units of the Army and Navy. Furthermore, the military refused to protect African-American servicemen off the post, and used white military police to enforce Jim-Crow restrictions. Summarily, the War Department received numerous reports of low morale among African-American troops, taking the form of suicides, mental breakdowns,

⁴² Wynn, “The Afro-American and the Second World War,” 104-105; Esseim-Udom, “Black Nationalism,” 48-49.

⁴³ McGuire, “Desegregation of the Armed Forces: Black Leadership, Protest and World War II,” 154-155.

and desertions. Racial violence became a common occurrence at base camps during this period, with separate incidents recorded at Forts Bragg, Benning, Bliss and Camps Stewart, Shelby, Davis and Gibbon.⁴⁴ One month after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, police in Alexandria, Louisiana shot twelve African-American soldiers after an incident between a white policeman and an African-American soldier. Two weeks later came the highly publicized lynching of Cleo Wright, who was dragged from the back of a car by a mob of 600 whites and set afire for allegedly raping a white woman.⁴⁵ The bloody summer of 1943, with race riots in Detroit, Los Angeles and Harlem, loomed on the horizon. Tensions between the races were clearly rising; the specter of armed African-Americans in uniform inflamed simmering sentiments of fear and hostility among white Southerners. African-Americans men became increasingly disillusioned about fighting for democracy abroad when their rights were so severely and violently circumscribed at home. As one African-American officer reflected in 1943: “The Negro soldier’s first taste of warfare in World War II was on army posts right here in his own country. This in its turn caused considerable confusion in the minds of the draftees as to who the enemy really was.”⁴⁶

African-American draftees and enlisted men engaged in racial protest on an almost weekly basis at training camps across the nation. The African-American newspapers and periodicals of the period, most notably the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Chicago Defender* and the *Baltimore Afro-American*, published letters of draftees and enlisted men to highlight the poor treatment of these soldiers on American soil. The

⁴⁴ Sitkoff, 668 - 69.

⁴⁵ Finkle, “The Conservative Aims of Militant Rhetoric: Black Protest During World War II,” 700.

⁴⁶ Motley, *The Invisible Soldier*, 40.

press and numerous African-American organizations eagerly embarked on a “Double-V” campaign, which called for victory for democracy abroad against the Nazis and victory for democracy at home against segregation and inequality. To that end, the press published letters from African-American soldiers detailing the injustices visited upon them by white soldiers, officers, and civilians at their respective posts. The act of writing a letter to a newspaper was in itself an act of protest and resistance. Soldiers detailed the various humiliations, from eating the leftovers of white soldiers to witnessing the murders of soldiers for infractions against the dictates of “racial etiquette.” Fifteen African-American sailors were put in the brig for writing a letter to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, detailing the conditions of being mess hall attendants and fights with enlisted white soldiers.⁴⁷ The military hardly took steps to protect African-American soldiers from civilian violence. One soldier stationed at an airfield in Texas wrote of the persecution of the military and civilian police:

“The city police have pulled our men out of Government cars and beat them up. One of our boys locked himself inside the car and they broke the glass and took him out forcibly and beat him unmercifully. He got 30 days in the guardhouse and 15 days were solitary confinement, while he was sick with bruises from the terrible beating. Our commanding officer asked him about it and before he could tell his side of the story he (the officer) said ‘That’s not the way I heard it.’ So the boy just shut up and waited for his trial. The adjutant of our squadron wanted to

⁴⁷ James, Breitman, et al. *Fighting Racism in World War II*, 64.

beat him up again because the boy resented the attitude that they took toward his case.”⁴⁸

In fact, many African-American soldiers found themselves being treated worse than German prisoners of war. In many cases, German POWs in the United States were allowed to use the same facilities as white soldiers – washrooms, cafeterias and the like – where African-Americans were denied entry. One soldier described a particularly telling incident of racial segregation: “At a train station in Texas I had to walk down an alley to a back of an eatery to get something to eat. Yet there were white MPs with German prisoners of war inside enjoying each other’s company over a steak dinner. It sickened me so I could not eat a bite after ordering.”⁴⁹

Conditions for some African-American soldiers resembled slavery – three soldiers in Arkansas wrote of a fellow soldier who was chained to a tree so long that his arm began to swell, and fed bread and water. The soldier’s infraction was leaving the post without a pass – eerily reminiscent of slaves leaving plantations without written permission. The parallel was not lost on the soldiers. As one wrote from an air base in Colorado: “We have come to the conclusion that before we’d be a slave, We’d rather be carried to our graves and go home to the Lord and be saved. In fact we’d rather die on our knees as a man, than to live in this world as a slave, constantly being kicked around by others just because we happen to be of the darker race.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ McGuire, *Taps for a Jim Crow Army*, 69.

⁴⁹ Motley, 61.

⁵⁰ Motley, 65, 109.

Some African-American soldiers responded to unfair practices in the armed forces by engaging in nonviolent forms of resistance, with mixed results. Soldiers often complained of being paid less than their white counterparts for equal duty while in the service. For example, while most African-American soldiers labored in support capacities at mess halls and post exchanges, they received less money per month than white workers. Some African-American soldiers responded by using labor union tactics. At an airfield in Arizona in 1944, fifty-seven African-American soldiers went on strike for extra pay for working in the cadet mess hall. The extra pay was entitled to them through army regulations. The soldiers failed to report for duty and braved imprisonment in the guard house before the white post commanders acceded to their demands – by granting them an extra twenty-five dollars per month, yet simultaneously increasing their work week from fifty-six to eighty-four hours. At times, African-American soldiers were prosecuted for being unwilling to perform dangerous duties like handling live ammunition. A notable case involved the disaster at Port Chicago, California in 1944. African-American seamen worked as gang labor in the Navy, loading ships with ammunition with little or no training in the handling of explosives. One ship exploded, killing 327 men; 202 were African-American enlisted men. After the disaster, many of the surviving African-American seamen filed petitions to transfer to less dangerous duty. White commanding officers viewed these petitions as refusal to work, and tantamount to mutiny. Two hundred and eight men were court-martialed and received bad conduct discharges; fifty men were tried for mutiny and received between eight and fifteen years of hard labor. In fact, President William Clinton pardoned one of the surviving fifty men, Freddie Meeks, in 1999. Another African-American labor battalion in Oahu banded

together in a work stoppage to protest the replacement of their African-American commanding officers with white officers. Seventy-three men were court-martialed for the action, and each man received fifteen and twenty-five years. In 1945, over one thousand African-American seamen went on a hunger strike to protest lack of advancement in the Navy. The hunger strike at Port Hueneme in California lasted for two days, though the seamen continued to work. As a result, the white commanding officer, the focus of the grievance, was replaced.⁵¹

Some African-American soldiers simply broke camp and went AWOL in disgust at the harsh treatment at domestic bases. Leaving camp was a risky proposition, especially in the South. White civilian police and citizens themselves took great offense at seeing African-American soldiers in uniform; without the safety of numbers, single soldiers were easy targets for violence on the back roads and rail lines. Large groups of soldiers went AWOL, heading back to better training camps in the North or simply back home – countless numbers were hunted down or never heard from again. As white civilians and police got reports about groups of African-American soldiers in flight, they scoured rail depots and train boxcars throughout the South for the soldiers.⁵²

White officers did their best to stifle resistance among African-American soldiers through extreme and unwarranted punishments. In addition, officers hoped to forestall violent revolution by disarming African-American soldiers whenever possible. As one dishonorably discharged African-American soldier threatened, “All revolutions have been initiated by minorities. Remember the French Revolution and Russian Revolution. In each case it was a minority who ruled, and some day I, too, will be in a position to

⁵¹ James, Breitman et al., 312-313, 321-333, 340-341, 347.

⁵² Motley, 42, 48.

dictate.”⁵³ African-American sentries were forced to walk guard duty on post with empty rifles. White military police carried loaded side arms, while African-American MPs were denied weapons. In some cases, African-American troops made a practice of stockpiling weapons in secret, in preparation for a riot with whites. One Navy draftee wrote of white officers searching for weapons in African-American barracks, “a shakedown similar to that they have in prison ... they found straight razors, knives, dirks and daggers. It is also said they found men with hand grenades, fifty caliber shells and different kinds of ammunition.”⁵⁴ Though often outnumbered and outgunned, African-American soldiers gave no ground to white oppressors. One riot at a military reservation in Georgia was sparked by a fistfight between white and African-American soldiers over the use of a swimming hole. The African-American soldiers called for backup, and the white soldiers enlisted the aid of National Guardsmen. Although no one was killed in the ensuing battle, one witness remarked upon the tenacity of the African-American soldiers. “The significant part of this incident is the courageous spirit of the Negro soldiers,” he wrote. “That they fought back in the Deep South is astounding. It will give the general staff something to think about.”⁵⁵

African-American soldiers were left wondering what the point of fighting for democratic rights could be, when their own rights went unprotected in their own country. “I learned early in life that for the Negro there is no Democracy,” wrote one draftee:

⁵³ James, Breitman et al., 297.

⁵⁴ McGuire, *Taps for a Jim Crow Army.*, 74.

⁵⁵ James, Breitman, et al., 94.

“I found that a Negro in civilian life has a very tough time with segregation in public places and discrimination in industry. I knew this and I thought white people would react differently to a colored soldier ... I couldn't understand how white people could be so down on one who wears the uniform of the fighting forces of their country. From civilian life I was drafted and now I prepare to fight for -- The continuation of discriminatory practices against me and my people.”⁵⁶

As in World War I, exposure to military service abroad made African-American soldiers less likely to accept racial discrimination back on American soil. Military service was instrumental in transforming the attitudes of these men toward white authority. According to surveys of white and African-American servicemen conducted in 1944, African-Americans were more likely to view military service as a turning point in their lives than whites.⁵⁷ A 1953 study of the attitudes of 219 African-American World War II veterans shows that an overwhelming majority of veterans from the South had negative attitudes towards whites prior to military service. The predominant reasons given for this attitude were “segregation and discrimination,” and “superiority attitudes of Whites.”⁵⁸ John Modell notes that military service placed these men into new working relationships with whites, many of whom were agricultural laborers in the South with an impersonal relationship to the white superstructure. The military itself is “governed by impersonal, public, rational rules aimed at task-specific efficiency.” Military training, therefore, “exposed men at all levels to a universalistic ethos ... to a view of an

⁵⁶ James, Breitman, et al., 85.

⁵⁷ Modell, “World War II in the Lives of Black Americans,” 838-39.

⁵⁸ Roberts, “Prior Service Attitudes,” 457-59.

organization largely based on functionally specific roles rather than on particular persons.”⁵⁹ By nature, segregation of any form contradicts a system that subordinates the individual to achieve a larger goal. Nevertheless, African-American soldiers were still subject to the injustices of Jim Crow while serving overseas.

The tide of discontent among African-American soldiers rose as the American government addressed the rise of fascism in Europe. The African-American press exploited the government’s rhetoric of creating a democratic Europe by issuing a call for democracy for African-Americans. The contradiction of fighting for freedom without freedom was not lost on African-American soldiers in the field. “Why were we fighting? Why were we there? If we were fighting for the four freedoms that Roosevelt and Churchill had talked about, then certainly we felt that the American soldier should be free first,” said Mississippi civil rights organizer and veteran Amzie Moore. During the war, the Japanese used radio broadcasts to remind African-American soldiers that there was going to be no freedom for them, even after the war.⁶⁰ Indeed, a number of civil rights organizers – many affiliated with the NAACP during the 1950s – cut their teeth in the European war. Medgar Evers dropped out of high school to enlist, and his experiences in France and England made him less tolerant of segregation in Mississippi. Robert F. Williams, who dared to advocate armed self-defense among African-Americans in the South at the height of the nonviolent civil rights movement, was influenced by his tour of duty overseas in World War II. He recalled that military training gave African-American veterans “some feeling of security and self-assurance ... The Army indoctrination instilled in us what a virtue it was to fight for democracy and that we were fighting for

⁵⁹ Modell, 842.

⁶⁰ Payne, *Light of Freedom*, 29-30.

democracy and upholding the Constitution. But most of all they taught us how to use arms.”⁶¹ African-American veterans marched in voter registration drives in the South, and mobilized with the NAACP to block the seat of racist Mississippi congressman Senator Theodore Bilbo in 1946.

The frustrations of African-Americans culminated in the bloody specter of increased interracial violence during 1943. In that year, there were more than 240 racial incidents in 47 towns and cities across the nation, from riots in Detroit and Harlem to lynching in the South.⁶² As a result, the focus of African-American movements shifted away from the masses and toward the middle-class, who joined with white liberals to lobby Washington for racial reforms. The legacy of African-American veterans on the ground, however, embodied a challenge to the prevailing social order, a challenge that was answered by African-American and white masses alike. The African-American veterans of the Civil War and the World Wars called upon American authority to live up to the rhetoric of freedom and democracy on their own soil. Their military training gave them the tools to organize and facilitate communications among African-Americans. Their exposure to racially tolerant foreign societies gave them the impetus to fight segregation at home. In those brief but turbulent years of civil and international conflict, African-American soldiers began the process of dismantling the master’s house with the master’s tools.

⁶¹ Tyson, “Robert F. Williams,” 548.

⁶² Wynn, “The ‘Good War,’” 472.

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