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Segregated Soldiers: African-Americans, Civil Rights and the U.S. Military

Olivier BURTIN

Reviewed: Christine Knauer, *Let Us Fight as Free Men: Black Soldiers and Civil Rights*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014, 352 p., \$49.95.

The story of African-Americans' struggle for civil rights used to be told in a rather straightforward fashion. Typically, the tale would begin in 1954 with the landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, then slowly gain momentum through famous episodes such as the Montgomery bus boycott, before climaxing in the mid-1960s with Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and the adoption of the Civil and Voting Rights Acts, eventually collapsing in violence and tragedy with King's assassination, nationwide urban riots, and the emergence of more radical militants. This classical narrative still remains widely popular among the American public today.

Re-thinking the history of Civil Rights

Yet it has been more than two decades now since historians of the United States first started to revise it. They have revealed the contributions of various marginalized actors, like women or grassroots activists, and highlighted the origins of the civil rights movement not only before the *Brown* decision but beyond the South.¹ *Let Us Fight as Free Men: Black Soldiers and Civil Rights* represents Christine Knauer's contribution to this ongoing enterprise. Her book examines the internal debate within the African-American community (and the press in particular) surrounding the relationship between military service and citizenship in the pivotal years from World War II to the Korean War during which the U.S. armed forces were integrated. Remarkably, this is a topic that the recent wave of revisionist scholarship has neglected, and one

¹ See for instance Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1994); Vicki L. Crawford et al., eds., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (Atlanta, Georgia State University Press, 1990); Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, 4 (March 2005): 1233-63; Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York, Random House, 2008).

that most previous scholarly works had studied only from a sociological or political perspective.² As a result, there was ample room for the kind of cultural approach proposed by Knauer.

As her book shows particularly well, the fight for the desegregation of the military deserves to be recognized as a crucial turning point in the struggle for civil rights, and for at least two reasons. First, military service has long been inseparable from citizenship. Those who demonstrate their willingness to sacrifice their lives for their country, so the reasoning (still) goes, have satisfied the highest duty of citizenship and proven themselves worthy of being granted full political rights. For a black minority trying to achieve equal citizenship, its soldiers were therefore a potent symbol. “Every attack on the image and record of the black soldier,” Knauer writes, “represented an attack on the black fight for civil rights.” (p. 38) Second, service in the armed forces has historically been deeply embedded in notions of manhood. Ideas as to what makes a good soldier—honor, courage, duty, strength, etc.—have all been constitutive of masculine identity. It was therefore no surprise that in a society like the U.S in the 1940s-1950s, shaped by a system of racial segregation in which black men were seen as inferior to whites, the military would become the subject of particularly heated discussion. By proving their combat skills, black soldiers could undermine the ideological underpinnings of white supremacy. In short, race, gender, war, and citizenship are all at the center of this book.

The Fight for Citizenship on Two Fronts

The U.S armed forces were segregated throughout World War II. Though there were exceptions, most black soldiers were confined to unglamorous positions in service units far from the frontlines. Of course, the bitter irony of a segregated military fighting in the name of democracy and freedom against tyranny and racism, did not go unnoticed. The “Double V” campaign launched by the *Pittsburgh Courier*, for victory against racism at home and abroad, highlighted the unremitting pressure that the black press put on those issues throughout the war years. Black journalists in general saw their work as serving the larger purpose of building racial pride by correcting the overwhelmingly negative image that the mainstream press gave of black soldiers’ role in the war effort. As Knauer demonstrates, not only were there few reports on black servicemen in the most popular mainstream news outlets, but those that did appear were typically unfavorable or patronizing.

In their attempt to demonstrate the harmful consequences of racial segregation and discrimination in the military, black correspondents faced a thorny dilemma. On the one hand, they did not shy away from reporting cases of low morale or bad preparation among black troops, which served to illustrate the problems inherent to such a system. On the other hand, they also had to give their readers in the African-American community reasons to be proud, and therefore could not portray black soldiers as completely incapable. Put simply, they had to be

² Richard Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts, 1939-1953* (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1969); Morris J. MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965* (Washington, D.C, Government Printing Office, 1985), Sherie Mershon and Steven Schlossman, *Foxholes & Color Lines: Desegregating the U.S. Armed Forces* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1998).

critical of the system without painting an overwhelmingly unfavorable picture of its product. This was not always an easy line to follow, as demonstrated in the case of the 92nd Infantry Division. One of the few all-black combat units, this Division suffered massive casualties in northern Italy in February 1945 and was pulled out of the front. When the black civilian aide to the Secretary of War, Truman K. Gibson, sent to Europe to investigate, concluded that the blame lay not only with racial discrimination but also with black soldiers themselves, his report was deemed by many in the African-American community as “betraying the black soldier and the entire race” (p. 30). In other words, though ending racial segregation was something everyone could agree on, there was no consensus on how to achieve it.

The end of the war brought the issue to a head. Many white southerners feared that black veterans would be unwilling to accept a return to second-class status. As a result, they were the main targets of a wave of violence and lynching that swept the South in the immediate aftermath of the war. Its most notorious victim, described by Knauer in great detail, was Isaac Woodard, a decorated veteran of the Pacific blinded for life by South Carolina police men in February 1946. In a country where returning servicemen were being celebrated everywhere as heroes, Woodard’s horrifying story caused a national outcry. It seemed that the myth of a country coming together to overcome racial, ethnic, and religious barriers, carefully cultivated by various government and private agencies during the war, would not survive the peace. The news even “turned over” President Truman’s stomach (p. 51), causing him to take several groundbreaking initiatives including the establishment of a Committee on Civil Rights, the delivery of a historic speech to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, and a civil rights message to Congress.

Nevertheless, African-American activists continued to clamor for change. Joining forces, former Army chaplain and civil rights activist Grant Reynolds and union leader A. Philip Randolph formed the Committee against Jim Crow in the Military Service and Training in October 1947 to press for immediate racial integration. When they realized that most of their demands “fell on deaf ears” (p. 65), they decided to resort to more radical tactics of civil disobedience. In a hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee in March 1948, Randolph announced that should a “Jim Crow draft” be implemented, he would “advise Negroes to refuse to fight as slaves for a democracy they cannot possess and cannot enjoy.” This dramatic declaration represented, in Knauer’s words, “the dissolution of an already nonfunctional, male-focused social contract of citizenship”: what Randolph was trying to do was no less than to break the age-old bond between military service, manhood, and first-class civil rights. Turning the table on traditional gender norms, he sought to argue that “draft resistance was not a sign of lacking manhood, but a sign of true masculinity.” (p. 69-70)

For all the attention garnered in the press, however, the campaign got off to a difficult start. Both at the leadership and grassroots level, no agreement could be reached on the relevance of civil disobedience at a time when the Communist threat seemed increasingly real. In the end, membership remained limited and the group eventually collapsed. Nevertheless, Knauer makes the case that the civil disobedience campaign had not been entirely pointless. More moderate

groups like the NAACP, which shared its goal but not its radical methods, were able to use its “shock effect” to stress the urgency of their cause to white politicians (p. 100). In its own limited way, it even helped push Truman to issue Executive Order 9981 in July 1948, which called for “equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the Armed Services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.” (p. 112) This order was a momentous victory—even though, as Knauer rightly emphasizes, it was only the beginning of a long process in which the Presidential Committee in charge of implementing the order wrestled with a conservative military establishment reluctant—especially in the Army—to serve as a laboratory for “social reforms” (p. 114).

Once again, it was war—this time in Korea—that served as a catalyst of social change. Many of the same dynamics that Knauer highlighted within the black press during World War II were re-enacted during this conflict. Black correspondents had to cover uplifting as well as demoralizing news. The battle of Sangju, won by the all-black 24th Infantry Regiment victory—the first U.S land victory in Korea—gave them one more opportunity to press the case that blacks should be granted first-class citizenship. At the same time, the case of Lieutenant Leon A. Gilbert, sentenced to death for refusing to fight, “epitomized the persistence of racial bias and white supremacy” in the Army. (p. 199). In addition, black correspondents had to be especially careful in their criticism of racial segregation: with Communist propaganda claiming that the conflict in Korea was a “race war” between an imperialist, U.S-led force and colonized peoples, their own arguments could easily be construed as giving ammunition to the enemy and thus dismissed as un-patriotic. As the war dragged on, however, the American public in general increasingly lost interest in a conflict with no decisive outcome in sight.

It was therefore largely “out from the spotlight,” in Knauer’s own words, and not “for moral, but for pragmatic reasons” (p. 219) that racial integration took place. On the defensive after the unexpected intervention of Chinese troops, the Army was forced to recognize that integration not only allowed for higher morale and better preparation, but solved many of its manpower problems. Thus by the end of the war in July 1953, segregation had been abolished in the armed forces. Certainly, it would take a long time for all vestiges of discrimination to be eradicated, and even longer for black veterans of the Korean War to correct their negative image in the historical record. Nevertheless, a crucial victory had been achieved in the fight for civil rights. Black soldiers were now officially recognized as whites’ equals, a historic victory whose ripples civil rights activists hoped—correctly, as it turned out—would be felt throughout the civilian realm.

Conclusion

The greatest scholarly contribution of *Let Us Fight as Free Men*, its emphasis on discourse and textual analysis, is also the source of its greatest limitation. By focusing so much on what her actors said, Knauer often either forgets to provide the necessary contextual information—for instance when she mentions the first victory in Korea by an all-black unit in July 1950 (p. 175) without telling us exactly how this victory came about—or, inversely, dwells on topics that seem

only loosely connected with the main theme of her story—as is the case with her lengthy discussion of how the black press fell victim to Orientalist clichés in its coverage of South Korean soldiers and women (pp. 153-159). The result is a book whose narrative thread may be difficult to follow for readers not already familiar with the details of this time period. But there is a larger and more important methodological problem with her discursive analysis. Though Knauer also covers the reactions of intellectuals, civil rights leaders, and the mainstream white press, her book remains primarily a study of how the black press pushed for racial integration. She uses the medium to describe, in her own words, “the perception of these events in public discourse” as well as “the experiences of the American population in general, and of African Americans in particular.” (p. 6) Using the press as a proxy for public opinion is an entirely valid method in itself, but the unspoken assumption that runs through this book seems to be that newspapers and journalists are truthful reflections of what the larger African-American community thought. The problem with this premise, of course, is that it is only true to a certain extent, for journalists and the companies they work for are more than mere passive reflections of their readers; they are semi-autonomous agents who have their own set of incentives and constraints—a public to please, editorial policies to follow, careers to make, budgets to meet, a newsroom to answer to, etc. Public opinion is not simply reflected in the press, it can also be distorted by it. All these structural factors have as much impact on the content of the articles that eventually get published as the more cultural forces of race or gender that Knauer focuses on. It is therefore unfortunate that she pays them only passing attention, even though this does not prevent this book from being an important addition to the revisionist literature on the civil rights movement. Hopefully, her example will inspire more scholars to bridge the gap between cultural and military history.

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