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Valor in the Face of Suffering: The Story of Black Soldiers in the Union Army

The best known chapters of history all seem to have one thing in common: their narratives would translate seamlessly to Hollywood's silver screen as big-budget blockbusters. From the kidnapping of Helen of Troy to the Bombing of Pearl Harbor, humanity's most accessible and generationally defining stories have simple themes [romantic, idealistic heroism; selfless, unconditional sacrifice] and all parties involved, save for the occasional spy in a war story, have a well defined allegiance to a cause or country.

Conversely, some of the lesser known facets of the historical canon would make for unequivocally more compelling movies. These films would appeal less to the popcorn crunchers and more to an audience with a keener, more nuanced sensibility. The experience of African Americans fighting for the Union Army during the Civil War is a prime example; give the script to Spike Lee and the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences would probably give him an Oscar on the spot for "best marriage of writer and subject matter ever." The screenplay, if written by a proper craftsman like Lee, would be historically invaluable for its ability to clear up unfortunate misconceptions.

For the common notion that black soldiers were seamlessly integrated into an army that welcomed their help with open arms is simply not true. The view that black soldiers were always fighting for their freedom alongside mutually interested and holistically supportive white soldiers is also false. The simple truth that emerges from a close study of these black freedom fighters is that their battle should be conceived of as an extension of their long-running struggle against exploitation and injustice, and not a victory lap that ensured them immediate acceptance

and toleration within the framework of a Union they fought to preserve. However, improvement of the lot of minority groups in history is often gradual, and the valor of African American troops certainly helped their cause. Through the eyes of individuals ranging from the famous [Abraham Lincoln] to the less than famous [an everyday Ohio infantryman], one can get a clear sense of how black soldiers were regarded during their struggle at every level of American society.

Sometimes, the general character and reputation of a historical figure can color and distort certain “facts” about them. When that character is Abraham Lincoln, a larger-than-life American legend known for his sound judgment and impeccable honesty, it is hard to imagine any of his actions being untimely or any his views being prejudiced, so we simply don’t. He is the penny to every loafer, his face is on a massive mountain and he was “The Great Emancipator.” End of story. However, when one analyzes his statements regarding the complex issues surrounding African Americans and the Union, undeniable inconsistencies arise between a more objective view of Lincoln’s Presidential performance in general and his handling of this specific issue.

“The senators went to Mr. Lincoln to urge upon him the paramount importance of mustering slaves into the Union army” [Lehrman]. This group of Republican senators, including Iowa representative James Harlan, met with a pensive and conflicted President Lincoln in 1862 to discuss the potential of blacks “taking part in their own salvation” by joining the Union ranks [Lehrman]. Although the strategic benefits were undeniable (a large-scale infusion of thousands of able bodied, healthy, extremely motivated men who knew nothing other than a life of stringent discipline), Lincoln initially balked at the urgings of his fellow party members. Few American sixth graders enrolled in an American history course would believe that Lincoln uttered the following quotation:

“Gentlemen, I have put thousands of muskets into the hands of loyal citizens of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Western North Carolina. They have said they could defend themselves, if they had guns. I have given them the guns. Now, these men do not believe in mustering in the negro. If I do it, these thousands of muskets will be turned against us. We shall lose more than we should gain” [Lehrman].

When Lincoln did decide that the military necessity of adding troops while simultaneously decimating the Southern labor force trumped any potentially negative reactions from the border states, his racial misgivings and trepidations become all the more obvious. “The act of July 17, 1862 gave him complete discretion in the employment of Negroes for any purpose whatsoever, but he had shrunk from using black men to kill white men”[Lehrman]. Perhaps nothing else could so succinctly summarize how far away Lincoln was from treating blacks with equality and contemporary definitions of justice. Not only does his statement betray a prejudiced mindset that wrestles with the “moral” implications of whether a black soldier was fit to draw white blood, Lincoln also entertained the possibility that black soldiers would be unreliable and dangerously unpredictable. Lincoln thought that to “put weapons in the hands of black men, some of whom might become frenzied with the flush of new-found freedom, was a matter of most serious consequence.”

But Lincoln was not afraid to change his beliefs and ideas as situations evolved. When he received a positive report from General David Hunter concerning the progress of black soldiers fighting on the Sea Islands off the South Carolina coast, he replied that “The enemy will make extra efforts to destroy them; and we should do the same to preserve and increase them” [Lehrman]. If it is possible to be a racist without malice, Lincoln was the closest thing to it in 1862. Just because he had misgivings about blacks being competent soldiers does not mean that

he would perpetuate those apprehensions out of spite; rather, he changed his ideas as more information became available to him. As long as blacks were a solid military asset, they and Lincoln would get along just fine. Effective administrators need to put preconceived notions aside for the sake of overarching goals. If Lincoln had continued to distrust African Americans after receiving positive reports from military brass, it would have shown that he was committed to a racist ideology and was an impractical Commander in Chief. Upon his assassination it would be hard to argue that he was either. In the end, the group of people Lincoln did have malice for was the southern gentry, as evidenced by the following quotation:

“He had known in early life what it meant to earn bread in the sweat of his brow. He was offended by the arrogant complacency of the planter interests and especially by their mouthpieces in the clergy. Mr. Lincoln understood that fundamental to one's attitude toward slavery was one's willingness to let others' sweat on one's behalf” [Lehrman].

The officers who administrated Lincoln's Union Army recorded conflicting reports regarding the African American soldiers in their ranks. Some had only criticism and condescension, like this officer from New York: “...a lazy white man will do more work in a day than half a dozen of their smartest specimens” [Wiley. P. 106]. Another expressed his distaste for black soldiers' attitudes, accusing them of insubordination. “You can't speak to them and have a civil answer. The smarter they are, the worse they are” [Wiley, p. 106], said an officer from Ohio.

Such observations betray a prejudiced sentiment among many officers, which is not surprising if one considers how black soldiers were punished. “Much of the harsh discipline imposed on black troops was inflicted by officers who were themselves mercenary opportunists and had little sympathy with the antislavery cause” [Wilson, p.2 6]. Officers not only punished

soldiers in unprecedentedly brutal fashion, but also made it into grisly sport. “In some cases, family and friends promoted special forms of discipline for black troops” [Wilson, p. 26]. In one such case, a certain Mrs. Major Green was made aware of a wood cutting in *Harper’s Weekly* that depicted a black soldier straddling a fence that had been sharpened to a protruding point directly under where he was forced to sit [Wilson, p. 26]. Quite simply, she was not looking at woodcutting of tough military discipline, she was viewing a depiction of torture. She was nonetheless undeterred, and excitedly sent the article to her husband, who replied that he had “a wooden horse twelve feet high especially constructed for his recalcitrant troops” [Wilson, p. 26]. Apparently, atrocities of this nature were not uncommon, as this brand of punitive measure was said to be “common in the Army of the James among the Darkies” [Wilson, p. 26]. Chaplain Samuel Gardner noted that extremely harsh punishments were “evidently against military order and wouldn’t be practised on white soldiers” [Wilson, p. 27].

But not all of the Union officers were vehement racists. Many were legitimately impressed with the quick progress black soldiers made learning the ropes of the military. “My colored regiment is progressing handsomely” wrote one officer from Ohio. His soldiers had made enough of an impression on him that he lobbied for them with the Governor, writing that “They are expecting the usual pay of white soldiers. Will they get it?” [Wiley, p. 109]. An officer from New York had effusive praise for his African American troops, writing that “The experiment has succeeded. By exemplary conduct, the Negroes have won the respect of our troops...We are fighting for an empire; they wish to fight the same battle for freedom” [Wiley, p. 110]. A German, and thus perhaps more objective, officer commented that “we have a lot of black soldiers that used to be slaves, they make good soldiers” [Kamphoefner, p. 294].

When historical facts are in such stark juxtaposition, one must consider the source to evaluate the validity of their claims. Clearly, we can dismiss the possibility that the discrepancy between the reports of the officers can be attributed to varying performance levels of black troops, because they all commented on their black soldiers in general and not individually. It is pretty far-fetched to think that about half of the African American regiments as a whole performed admirably and the other half were collectively lazy and useless. If we can agree that one group was lacking in objectivity, is it more likely that the card-carrying racists were lying, or were many white officers just trying to compensate for the brutal treatment black soldiers were receiving elsewhere? Additionally, African American troops were seen as a viable scapegoat by some officers when the Confederates were finding success. “The peaks of anti-Negro feeling in the Army of the Potomac seems to have been reached in the wake of McClelland’s repulse before Richmond in the summer of 1862 and Burnside’s bloody failure at Vicksburg the final year,” according to historian Irving Wiley in his book *The Life of Billy Yank, a Common Union Soldier* [Wiley, p. 109]. Also, reports of some black troops being “lazy” can be attributed to “long days of fatigue duty strung end to end...and a lack of training that compromised military efficiency,” according to another historian, Ira Berlin, in *Freedom’s Soldiers, The Black Military Experience of the Civil War* [Berlin p. 36]. Exhausted, inexperienced, and untrained white soldiers would not have fared any better, and probably worse. One can be safe in assuming that black soldiers in general performed admirably and bravely. It is a travesty of historic proportions that so many officers were not willing to acknowledge the quality performance of their own troops.

While there was great polarizing variability in how officers perceived black soldiers, this paper's research showed that the enlisted men who didn't resent or simply distrust African American troops hated them. It is hard to imagine how the Union Army was able to function when so many white troops passionately despised their fellow soldiers. The problem is particularly thorny because most groups find success when they communicate their issues with one another, only this problem had no solution; rather, no matter how good a black soldier's conduct was, his essential character would be ignored in favor of focusing on his skin tone. One enlistee from Ohio commented that he "...didn't think enough of the Nigger to go out and fight for them. I would rather fight them" [Wiley, p. 54]. A soldier from New York commented that "I think the best way to settle the question of the Darkies would be to shoot them" [Wiley, p. 54]. Most disturbingly, a Massachusetts soldier wrote the following:

"As I was going along this afternoon, a little black baby that could just walk got under my feet and it looked so much like a worm that I wanted to step on it and crush it, the nasty, greasy little vermin was the best that could be said of it" [Wiley, p. 55].

This exemplifies how remarkably irrational and thoroughly disgusting the racism that black soldiers battled was; one can imagine that this fight was perhaps as harrowing for them as the one they engaged in against the Confederate forces. This irrationality is doubly apparent when one considers that racism among enlisted men actually became more egregious as the conflict wore on, because, as truly outlandish as it sounds, whites perceived a pro-black bias from their commanding officers (the same officers who were torturing African Americans, as described above). Wiley writes that one soldier "lamented" that "Each one of the officers is having a Negro servant...whom they generally feed out of our rations, it is a well known fact that they are treated better than we are" [Wiley, p. 58]. A soldier from New Hampshire wrote that,

“Some of the boys say that the new Army motto is “First the Negro, then the mule, then the white man”[Wiley, p. 58]. It seems as though white soldiers would only be happy if their officers matched the intensity of their hatred for black soldiers.

The ways that some officers and enlisted men differed in their views of African American soldiers speaks volumes about the way that socioeconomic position informed views on race, even in the 1860s. Better educated, higher class officers were more likely to accept African Americans into their ranks because they were good soldiers, as evidenced by their successes at Fort Wagner and Millikens Bend [Wiley, p. 104], while lower class, uneducated, white, Union enlistees were much more likely to have any interactions with black soldiers crippled by their cruel prejudice. Sometimes, the distinction between the two dichotomous camps was not so cut and dry. Some wealthy officers like Colonel Charles Frances Adams Jr. (a descendent of the original Adams family), were classists who deeply resented white poor people, and couldn't imagine any blacks being any different from them [Wilson, p. 27].

War is many things. Whether it be Civil or Cold, “Splendid and Little” or 150 years old, it involves old men sending young men to die. It involves clashes, crashes, things exploding, innocence imploding, winning, losing, retreating, beating, and, eventually, with any luck, leaving, ideally not in a body bag. War is shocking and dramatic. However, the tale of the African American men who courageously preserved a Union that would not preserve their inalienable rights as humans is as shocking and dramatic as any one battle ever could be. Every last one of them won. Tell someone about it.

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