
The Buffalo Soldiers:

A Little History and a Little Mythology

The saga of the Buffalo Soldiers, black soldiers in the US Army between the American Civil War of 1861-1865 and World War I, is a mainstream story. Like the white soldiers of their time, they participated in central episodes of the American experience. They fought in wars that have become the stuff of movies and legends and represented a significant portion of the huge public investment in the development of the western American vastness. They also fought in the two foreign wars of the turn of the century, in Cuba against Spain and in the Philippines against a native independence movement, and participated in General John Pershing's punitive expedition into Mexico. Between the Civil War and World War, twenty-three of them received the Medal of Honor for valor. These soldiers, whose lives I have studied for over thirty years, time and the requirements of my employment permitting, made up about twelve per cent of a very small army and participated in about thirteen per cent of that army's Indian engagements. Of course, we know that the Buffalo Soldiers, did more than fight their share of battles. Like other soldiers, they did the other things that were essential to western settlement, making maps, blazing trails, and improving roads; guarding settlements, roads, and stage stations; and providing the reassuring military presence that helped encourage development. Yet, for all they did, they formed only a small fraction of a tiny army. All told, according to an excellent new book, *The Black Regulars* by William Dobak and Thomas Phillips, we are talking about fewer than 20,000 men in four regiments between 1866 and 1898. The central long-term significance of these soldiers had to do with inclusion, inclusion for the first time of black men in the regular army of the United States, and inclusion regarding black participation in mainstream American processes. During the American Civil War of 1861-1865, nearly 200,000 blacks served in the Army that defeated the Confederate rebellion (by the way, 35,000 or so died, mostly of disease, but it was the same among white troops: disease killed many more soldiers on both sides than enemy bullets). Blacks in the Civil War army all served as volunteers, recruited for specific terms of service during the war and not regulars, in an army that expanded dramatically for the war, and contracted just as dramatically afterward to about 25,000. More than two million men, white and black, served, and over one million remained under arms at the end of the war. Think about it! One million men! This was a huge number, when we consider that the United States had a population of about twenty million. Essentially, one out of every twenty Americans was a soldier.

The acceptance of black volunteers for military service was itself a revolutionary act. Frederick Douglass, the most famous black abolitionist and maybe the most famous of all abolitionists, white or black, clearly understood the revolutionary implications of accepting blacks into the Army. Douglass, who was a brilliant writer and orator, wrote, in what is one of his most frequently quoted statements: Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters "US," let him get an eagle on his button and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pockets and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States.

After the war, when this massive force was disbanded, Congress could not ignore the contributions of the large number of black volunteers to the Union victory. So, when the army was reduced and reorganized in 1866, blacks had a place among the regulars for the first time, and the revolution anticipated by Frederick Douglass took another step forward. The act marked the first inclusion of black men in the regular army and recognized the contributions black soldiers had made to preserving the Union. Their officers were all white. It didn't seem like a big step, two infantry regiments out of 25 and two cavalry regiments out of ten, but it was a step, a reward that recognized an undeniably large contribution to the nation's survival. The past is strange territory. It is fraught with ambiguities, and the inclusion of blacks in the regular army had its share. First of all, a place was made only for enlisted soldiers--privates, corporals, and sergeants--and no officers. Over the fifty years between the Civil War and World War I, exactly five black men made their way into the ranks of commissioned regular army officers. Moreover, the creation of this segregated place for black soldiers anticipated by a generation the spread of segregation as the mode of race relations imposed by whites in the South--what we usually call "Jim Crow" --and foreshadowed by two generations the formal segregation of civilian employment in the Federal government by President Woodrow Wilson. So, while inclusion in the army was a step toward equality, setting precedents for segregation --which is inherently unequal--was not. But the positive aspect of the change far outweighed the negative. And here we get back to the original question of why the participation of so few black soldiers in such a small army is important. The spread of the United States across the continent is one of the central acts of the American national drama, one of the processes that Americans consider defining, unquestionably a mainstream development, and these soldiers were participants. This is the most important message of the buffalo soldier: despite obstacles placed in the way of black progress, despite racism and discrimination, blacks participated in the frontier drama. There is nothing more important about their presence in the army--nothing that they did, no battles in which they fought--than that. They were there, and they participated. And they did participate in significant battles. They fought in some major wars against Indians, from the conflicts against the Cheyenne in Kansas just after the Civil War to the last major campaign on the Pine Ridge in South Dakota during 1890-1891. Most notably they were at the center of the brutal campaign against the Apaches Victorio and Nana in 1879-1881. Both cavalry regiments played prominent roles in the Apache wars, suffering more casualties in those campaigns than they did in all of the other frontier campaigns combined. Thirty-seven of the 61 Buffalo Soldiers killed in Indian fighting during the period 1867 to 1890 fell against the Apaches. Eight of the eighteen Medal of Honor recipients earned their recognition for conspicuous bravery in this bitterest of American frontier wars. Sergeant Emanuel Stance of the 9th Cavalry was the first of these, and the award of the medal to Stance in 1870, just

four years after the regiment was organized, shows just how far the Ninth had come. It was developing into a worthy outfit, with sergeants who could lead and earn recognition as heroes and soldiers who would obey and provide the support such leaders could depend on. Before the century ended, black regulars also fought in Cuba against Spain in 1898--where five more received the nation's highest award--and then in the ensuing guerilla war in the Philippines, and in Mexican border skirmishes.

Thoughtful, historically minded black Americans have always known about these soldiers and have considered them important. With respectable mainstream employment and status so rare for African Americans in the decades after the Civil War, black newspapers followed the activities of these soldiers with avid interest. These papers, most of which were weeklies, frequently included reports from soldier-correspondents at far off western forts. Readers of the Cleveland (Ohio) Gazette or the Indianapolis (Indiana) Freeman would read eagerly about the dances held by black units at Fort Supply, Indian Territory, or dinners consumed by black soldiers at Fort Robinson, Nebraska. Just how important were these soldiers to black civilians? As Rayford Logan, dean of a generation of black historians--and my undergraduate advisor--later wrote:"Negroes had little, at the turn of the century, to help sustain our faith in ourselves except the pride that we took in the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry, the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry. Many Negro homes had prints of the famous charge of the colored troops up San Juan Hill. They were our Ralph Bunche, Marian Anderson, Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson.

The importance of these soldiers in the black community contrasts starkly to the lack of interest among Americans in general in military affairs and white soldiers in particular. The New York Times, the Chicago Tribune, and such papers were utterly indifferent to the activities of white soldiers, generally poor and working class people, frequently newly arrived immigrants, and would never dream of the kind of reporting that was commonplace in the black press. This led to a delicious irony: it is much easier for the historian today to trace the lives and experiences of black soldiers than it is to document the lives of white soldiers of the same period. We reached a major turning point in awareness of the participation of black soldiers in the westward movement in the 1960s, the period of the civil rights revolution. The process started in 1960, with John Ford's "Sergeant Rutledge," a film of subtlety and insight about a black sergeant accused of rape and murder. The Civil War centennial also helped, joining with the civil rights movement to provoke reconsideration of the Civil War and a new focus on black soldiers. The '60s brought expanded interest in black history in general, the establishment of black studies programs in universities, and an interest in Buffalo Soldiers. William Leckie's book, *The Buffalo Soldiers: a Narrative of the Negro Cavalry in the West*, appeared in 1967. And a song, "The Buffalo Soldiers," recorded by two rhythm-and-blues groups, the Flamingoes and the Persuasions, recalled the soldiers' heroics on the frontier and in the war against Spain in 1898, and asked plaintively of the Buffalo Soldiers, "Will you survive in this new land?" And buffalo soldiers began to enter the mainstream of American consciousness. (This, by the way, marks the time when I started my research on these soldiers, and I did my graduate studies with William Leckie, just after he wrote the book, *The Buffalo Soldiers*.)

By the end of the 1990s the Buffalo Soldier was a well-known, widely familiar cultural icon. There were more than 300 books and articles, tee shirts, refrigerator magnets, phone cards, jigsaw puzzles, coffee mugs, a postage stamp, and even a necktie. Buffalo soldiers became the subjects of romance novels, children's books, plays, bad movies, and popular songs. There were also statues at five western forts (Huachuca, Leavenworth, Bayard, Selden, and Bliss). General Colin Powell was instrumental in promoting this knowledge. At Fort Leavenworth Kansas on July 25, 1992, he dedicated a larger-than-life statue of a mounted trooper by sculptor Eddie Dixon. Powell, a black four-star Army general, served as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the military advisor to the President of the United States, between 1989 and 1993. Deeply interested in the history of black participation in the armed forces, Powell considered himself "the descendent of those Buffalo Soldiers...and all the black men and women who have served the nation in uniform." When he spoke at the dedication in 1992, to an audience in which black veterans of the segregated army and uniformed buffalo-soldier reenactors were clearly visible, major television networks carried the ceremony. Powell reminded the nation of the tradition of black military service. "From the beginning of our nation," he said, "African Americans answered the call to arms in defense of America whenever that call came." Moreover, from the establishment of the regiments of black regulars after the Civil War, "African Americans would henceforth always be in uniform, challenging the conscience of the nation, posing the question, 'How could they be allowed to defend the cause of freedom, to defend the nation, if they, themselves, were to be denied the benefits of being American?'" He acknowledged that he, the highest ranking officer in the armed forces and in the eyes of many a hero of the 1991 war against Iraq, owed a debt to the black soldiers who had gone before him, and he challenged young people not to forget the soldiers' sacrifice and their service. The well publicized ceremony, the declarations by both houses of Congress that July 28, 1992 was "Buffalo Soldiers Day," and the imposing permanent presence of the statue itself unleashed what historian James Leiker called "a veritable explosion of Buffalo Soldiers commemorations including museum displays, documentaries, newspaper and journal articles, and reenactment societies." The anonymity of the Buffalo Soldiers in the United States ended in the summer of 1992. With wider knowledge of the buffalo soldiers came the beginnings of a buffalo-soldier myth. Leckie popularized the term "buffalo soldiers," claiming that the Indians gave the name to the black soldiers of the 10th Cavalry because they saw some resemblance between these brown-skinned men, some of whom had woolly looking hair and who sometimes wore buffalo hide coats in the winter, and the buffalo that were so important to the plains Indians cultures. There is nothing unexceptional in this, so far, but Leckie went from there to assert that the name might have reflected the Indians' respect for the soldiers because the buffalo was so important to their culture and they would not have made the comparison if it had not been a respectful one. In a footnote, Leckie wrote: "The origin of the term

'buffalo soldier' is uncertain, although the common explanation is that the Indian saw a similarity between the hair of the Negro soldier and that of the buffalo. The buffalo was a sacred animal to the Indian, and it is unlikely that he would so name an enemy if respect were lacking. It is a fair guess that the Negro trooper understood this and thus his willingness to accept the title."

Over the years since Leckie offered this cautious explanation, we have moved to the point where many people regard the nickname "buffalo soldiers" as an honorific that shows that the Indians considered the black troopers to be exceptional, perhaps the best soldiers that the army had. This notion that the buffalo soldiers represented the army's best, embellished as time went on to include the assertion that they fought in a disproportionately large number of Indian battles, has taken hold in the society at large. The most serious challenge to the emerging myth has come from Indians themselves, who were especially angered over the publicity that attended the issue of a buffalo-soldier postage stamp in 1994 and resented the suggestion that there was some special bond between the soldiers and their warrior ancestors. The first salvo of dissent came from Vernon Bellecourt of the American Indian Movement. Writing in *Indian Country Today*, a reliable forum for objections to glorification of Buffalo Soldiers, Bellecourt denied that the name reflected any "endearment or respect." As far as he was concerned, plains Indians only applied the term Buffalo Soldier to "these marauding murderous cavalry units" because of "their dark skin and texture of their hair." Such angry outbursts continued through the 1990s, as did demonstrations at museum exhibits on Buffalo Soldier history and other public observances. Just as the Leavenworth statue catalyzed public awareness of the Buffalo Soldier, so the stamp provoked substantial Indian resentment of the favorable publicity given the troopers. The Indian anger surprised and shocked those who thought that the mere fact of non-whiteness, now as well as during the frontier period, should constitute the prima facie basis for an alliance or common cause among people of color against a white oppressor. This is a conventional Rainbow Coalition expectation in the United States these days, and the advertising copy in *Wild West* magazine of August 2001 for a new painting by Don Stivers, one of the most prolific depictees of Buffalo Soldiers, tries to encompass it all, acknowledging that the soldiers and warriors were enemies, but asserting that they were fighting for the same thing. So "There seemed an unspoken bond between these two groups of Americans that forged a mutual respect and helped them understand the ferocity with which each fought." Of course, an "unspoken bond" is easy to assert but conveniently impossible to prove. The expectation that there was a bond, unspoken or otherwise, between the soldiers and the Indians, just does not fit this strange past of ours (and as we see from the Indian annoyance with the publicity given to buffalo soldiers, it doesn't always fit our present either). As far as the buffalo soldiers were concerned, it can not be overemphasized that the soldiers were Anglophones: they spoke English. They also came from a monotheistic agrarian-industrial culture. The Indians, on the other hand, were semi-nomadic warrior-hunters. They spoke many languages, none of them English, and their religious practices--shamanism, supernatural visions, self-mutilation, and even human sacrifice--were unfamiliar, even repellent, to the soldiers. The black soldiers' reactions to the Indians mirrored the prevailing white racism. Black soldiers used the same dismissive epithets--"hostile tribes," "naked savages," and "redskins"; they also indulged in the same racist caricatures employed by whites. Reminiscent of the use among whites of "blackface" to denigrate and stereotype African-Americans, a black private named Robinson went to a masquerade ball at Fort Bayard in 1894 mockingly dressed as "an idiotic Indian squaw." The response of black soldiers to Indians, by the way, should be interpreted with care. Black soldiers in the generation after slavery longed for inclusion in the society at large. That society was certainly racist, and soldier use of bigoted terms and stereotypes may show no more than their acquiescence in the larger cultural order, a phenomenon that Joel Kovel calls "metaracism." So, when a black soldier called a plains Indian in 1890 "a voodoo nigger," he not only repeated the voice of a white soldier who called the plains Indians in 1873 "red niggers." He also reflected the overall values of the culture in which he struggled for a place. By such usages, he hoped to ally himself with the dominant group. Many former slaves were eager to validate their claims on citizenship by wearing the uniform of the United States Army. Very few looked across the cultural gap between them and the semi-nomadic warrior-hunters against whom they fought and perceived any similarity in their respective conditions. Culture created a gap that was virtually unbridgeable. This fundamental opposition may be frustrating and even seem incomprehensible to people seeking to impose a Rainbow Coalition frame of reference on the past, but it existed all the same. A sergeant who looked like Danny Glover and an Apache chief named Victorio could not have come to an understanding of their mutual grievances in a chat by a fire. As historian Bill Gwaltney, a descendent of buffalo soldiers, said, "Buffalo Soldiers fought for recognition as citizens in a racist country and...American Indian people fought to hold on to their traditions, their land, and their lives." These were not compatible, harmonious goals that could provide the basis for coalition building.

Even today, the huge gap between the soldiers and the warrior tribes of the west sometimes influences perceptions. I once spent three days trying to explain to a busload of vacationers on a buffalo-soldier tour that the past was strange territory, that history did not always validate current views, and that buffalo soldiers and Indians did not achieve some empathy based on color. I cited the writings of Kenneth Porter, a pioneer in the study of relations between Texan tribes and blacks, and I quoted the buffalo soldiers themselves, who used the same dismissive epithets that were employed by whites. I still did not get through to all of them, notably a young black reporter who wore a pith helmet and John Lennon shades and who persisted in the view that soldiers and warriors must have seen some commonality in their condition. Enlightenment came on the fourth day out. We were on the Pine Ridge reservation in Shannon County, South Dakota, the poorest county in the United States, heading for Drexel Mission and the site of a battle in which William Wilson of the 9th Cavalry earned a Medal of Honor. On the way, we made the obligatory stop at Wounded Knee Creek to see the site of the massacre and visit the cemetery. And there is no more dramatic illustration of the tragedy of Indian life than that burial ground on the wind-swept hill. There you can see the mass grave, with about 150 victims of the 7th

Cavalry, but there are also the 20th-century graves, those of the children--life expectancy is very short on the Pine Ridge--and those of the soldiers--killed on hills in Korea or in paddies in Vietnam--who, like black troopers of an earlier generation, probably hoped that military service would validate their claim on citizenship. At the base of the hill on which sits the Wounded Knee cemetery, a Sioux woman stopped her car and asked my journalist friend, who was walking with my wife, what he was doing at Wounded Knee. When he said, a little proudly, that he was on a buffalo soldier tour, she replied: "Buffalo Soldiers and the white man killed my people. My ancestors are up there. And I don't appreciate you being here. Why don't you go visit Abraham Lincoln's grave?" Then she sped off. The reporter went back to the bus looking as if he had been hit over the head with a brick and with a new appreciation for what historian Simon Schama calls "the strangeness of the past." Unfortunately, enlightenment seems to come one person at a time, while wrong-headedness spreads by the thousands. So we have a movie in which buffalo soldiers surround Apaches, let them keep their weapons, have a talk by the fire, establish a rapport with their nominal enemy, and look the other way as they escape to the mountains. This rainbow-coalition fantasy insults all of the participants. The Apaches, who were among the most astute of trackers, trailers, and scouts, would never have allowed themselves to be surrounded by a patrol of American soldiers, white or black. The buffalo soldiers, had they been adept enough and lucky enough to have bagged Victorio, would never have let their enemy go. The producers of the film, hell-bent to validate their own notions of race relations, showed the greatest disrespect for "the strangeness of the past" in coming up with a story that may provide consolation but does not reflect reality. History is messy--complicated, ambivalent, paradoxical, and as confusing as can be--and we have to approach the past with respect for its strangeness, if we are to understand it on its own terms. So, okay, the movie distorts the past. What's the big deal? It's a movie, right? And what are the obligations of a producer and director? They are to entertain an audience and make money by doing so. So why fuss about this film? Sure, it panders to current perceptions. We know that. But we're just a bunch of cranky historians, not film critics or even just citizens who go to the movies. Why get excited? There are two reasons. First, people get their history from the movies instead of from books these days. They do not understand that what they are seeing may be fun but the content may be rubbish. Second, Turner Broadcasting intended that we take this movie seriously. They published a so-called educator's guide, posted it on the worldwide web, and encouraged teachers to use the film in the classroom. They wanted the film to be seen as history and to be used in teaching. This is where the filmmakers went beyond their usual charter of entertaining people and making money, and this is why our critique of this film is necessary.

Essentially, whenever film makers hire historians, especially prominent ones, and publicize their employment, they imply that their products should be taken seriously as history. The involvement of Shelby Foote, Brian Pohanka, and other historians, reenactors, and artists transforms the 2003 film "Cold Mountain" into something more than a fictional film based on a fictional narrative. Similarly, when producers display prominently in the credits that roll after their work the names of reputable historical museums, as the makers of "The Patriot" did with the Smithsonian Institution, they suggest the same thing. In all of these cases the review of films by professional historians for historical veracity and integrity is legitimate and reasonable. Anyway, to sum up the buffalo soldier story, I would like to remind you that the saga of the buffalo soldiers is a mainstream story. Buffalo soldiers participated in central episodes of the American experience. Like the white soldiers of their time, they fought in wars that are the stuff of movies and legends. They built infrastructure--roads and telegraph lines, wrested the country from the Native Americans, and represented a substantial portion of the huge public investment in the development of the vast west. They also fought in two foreign wars of the turn of the century, in Cuba against Spain and in the Philippines against a native independence movement, and participated in General John Pershing's punitive expedition into Mexico. They did all of this despite having to deal with the racism that was prevalent at the time. The facts of prejudice and bigotry gave their story a singular quality. They regularly faced hostility, occasionally confronted violence, and served in an Army that made it extremely difficult for them to advance above non-commissioned rank. Even without the embellishments of the myth-makers, their story is part of the national epic and should be treated as such. It is not just black history. It is American history. This talk has blended a discussion of that history with some modern perceptions that try to bend the past to suit some current purposes, to validate some of today's beliefs or values, to make some of us feel good about who we are. History is used for that purpose, rest assured, everywhere and in all times. We call such uses "heritage" sometimes, selective forays into the past that explain or support our current self-image, as opposed to "history," a broad, encompassing effort to understand the past, whether it reflects well, poorly, or not at all on ourselves. So, for example, we have the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804-1806, whose bicentennial we are now observing. We don't say "celebrating," by the way, because it offends some Indian groups, who are definitely not celebrating. President Thomas Jefferson sent these intrepid army officers across the continent to see what they could see. With comprehensive orders to assess the fauna and flora, the transportation routes, and the native residents, Lewis and Clark conducted a sweeping resource survey, oriented toward commerce with the Indians and with the rest of the world via the Pacific ocean. By the time of the centennial in 1905, in a period of territorial acquisition and booming industry, they were hailed at a huge exposition in Portland, Oregon, as representing "the spirit of progress," and as "champions of industrial growth and resource exploitation." Now, at the bicentennial, they have become the friends of bugs and bunnies and exemplary models of multiculturalism. traveling with an Indian woman (the intrepid Sacagawea, whose face is now on a dollar coin even though we don't know what she looked like) and an African-American sidekick (York, who was a slave), befriending the natives along the way (prudently, since there were only 28 members of the expedition), basically a couple of culturally sensitive proto-environmentalist outdoor guys who wore buckskin instead of Gore-Tex. The whole spectrum of Western American history is full of episodes that are ripe for competing mythmakers. Take the Alamo, the March 1836 battle in the war for Texas independence. Was it the defiant stand of freedom-loving Americans or the slaveocracy's rebellion against abolitionist Mexico? What about Custer? Was he a martyr for advancing civilization, an arrogant racist who got what he deserved, or just an impetuous commander

who underestimated his enemy? The buffalo-soldier story, which now blends "history" with "heritage", fact and myth, has entered the mainstream with these other iconic western sagas--Lewis and Clark, Custer, and the Alamo. Now, I think it is safe to say, it is not just American history, but American mythology.

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