

Buffalo Soldiers at San Juan Hill

by
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Finding the middle, where the truth sometimes rests, requires you to know the edges. When it comes to responsibility for the victory of the United States Army on San Juan Heights, Cuba, on July 1, 1898, the edges are easy to find. On one side, there is the Teddy-centric view, first and most clearly expressed in the writings of Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt of the 1st Volunteer Cavalry Regiment—the legendary Rough Riders. Roosevelt’s memoir of Cuba so emphasized his own role that Mr. Dooley, the bar-room pundit created by humorist Peter Finley Dunne, said the book should have been called “Alone in Cuba.”

Roosevelt augmented his campaign of self-promotion by carrying along his personal publicist. Richard Harding Davis’s dispatches from the front, picked up by many newspapers and magazines, spread the word of TR’s heroics. They also followed a time-honored tradition. George Custer had taken a reporter on the 1874 expedition that discovered gold in the Black Hills, and Nelson Miles had had one along to record his exploits against the tribes of the southern plains.¹ Now Davis, of the New York Herald, did the same, essentially providing TR’s PR.²

The view that Teddy Roosevelt dominated the battle at San Juan Heights still has adherents. I saw first-hand evidence in February 1998, when I made a presentation for African-American History Month at Oyster Bay, New York, the great man’s home. The draft press release announced that I would be talking about Medal-of-Honor heroes among Buffalo Soldiers, the black regulars who had served on the frontier and who also fought in Cuba. The notice went on to assert that these soldiers had “assisted” TR in achieving victory at San Juan Hill. Clearly the text implied that the more than 2,000 black troopers dodging bullets and pushing their

way resolutely forward in the Cuban sun were supporting players. TR still got top billing.

Lately, a competing view has emerged to challenge Teddy-centric claims. This new assertion puts the Buffalo Soldiers at the center of the Cuban fighting, relegating Roosevelt to a supporting role. Most recently this view was stated by Edward Van Zile Scott in his 1996 book, *The Unwept*. According to Scott, “in the Spanish-American War of 1898, veteran black troops...were more responsible than any other group for the United States’ victory.”³

The new interpretation substitutes one extreme position, represented by the emphasis on TR, with another, focusing on the contributions of African-American soldiers. These competing viewpoints represent the edges but don’t help us understand what happened on the battlefield.

For that, we have to look at the order of battle, read the reports of the commanders, and follow the movements of all units on maps of the campaign. And the record shows that about 15,000 American troops of Major General William R. Shafter’s Fifth Army Corps participated in the battles on the high ground near Santiago, Cuba, on July 1, 1898. About 13,000 of them were white; 2,000 or so were black. Of the twenty-six regiments in this force, three were volunteer organizations; the vast majority were regulars. More than 200 soldiers were killed in action, and nearly 30 of those who fell were from the four black regular army regiments, the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry and the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry.⁴

There were two major battles that day, one on El Caney and one on San Juan Heights. Both objectives were east of the city, with El Caney the northernmost of the two. Brigadier General Henry W. Lawton com-

manded the 2nd Division and Independent Brigade, a force of about 6,500, which took El Caney. Lawton's troops included more than 500 men of the black Twenty-fifth Infantry. This regiment was in the thick of the four-hour fight, and one of its members, Private Thomas Butler of Baltimore, was among the first to enter the blockhouse on the hill.⁵

The other key objective, San Juan Heights, was closer to the city and directly east of it by just over one mile. San Juan has historically received more attention than El Caney, and for good reason. It was the main objective, after all, and was attacked by 8,000 troops of Brigadier General Jacob F. Kent's 1st Division and Brigadier General Samuel S. Sumner's Cavalry Division. The heights had two high spots along its north-south axis, one called San Juan Hill and the other later named Kettle Hill by the troops. Both were part of the same objective.

In addition to being more important than El Caney as an objective, San Juan was also Theodore Roosevelt's stage. Roosevelt, of whom it was said that he never attended a wedding without wishing he was the bride or a funeral without wishing he was the corpse, was the unquestioned star of San Juan and by extension of the entire Cuban campaign. The commander of his regiment, Colonel Leonard Wood, had been conveniently promoted out of the way, so Lieutenant Colonel Roosevelt had the Rough Riders all to himself.

But he did not have the battle for San Juan Heights all to himself. There were after all 8,000 men in the operation, a total of thirteen regular Army regiments and two regiments of volunteers, including TR's Rough Riders. The force included about 1,250 black troopers of the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry in Sumner's Cavalry Division and the Twenty-fourth Infantry in Kent's 1st Division.

Critics have complained that Roosevelt erroneously and undeservedly claimed credit for the victory at San Juan Hill, when he in fact was involved in the assault on Kettle Hill. And, in fact, he did play a prominent role in the fight for Kettle Hill. His volunteers, part of Sumner's dismounted cavalry force, reached the top of Kettle Hill alongside black and white regulars. The actions of Color Sergeant George Berry of the Tenth Cavalry, who carried the colors of the white Third up the hill along with his own regiment's standard, reflected the shared nature of the operation, with black and white regulars and Rough Riders fighting side by side, sometimes with one group indistinguishable from the others.

Once Roosevelt reached the top of Kettle Hill, he watched Kent's troops begin to overrun their objective on San Juan Hill. Still eager for a fight, he urged the men around him to follow him into the fray on San

Juan. That's when he found out what happened when you sound a charge and nobody comes. Only a handful of soldiers heard the great man, and he found himself at the head of an assault that consisted of five soldiers. Roosevelt retreated, regrouped, and assembled a more respectable force that reached the Spanish trenches in time to participate in the last of the fight. "There was," he said, "very great confusion at this time, the different regiments being completely intermingled—white regulars, colored regulars, and Rough Riders."⁶

Roosevelt's observation accurately characterized the mix of troops in the battle for the heights. Overall, the great majority of these soldiers were regulars, the rest were volunteers. "Their battles," Timothy Egan wrote in an article entitled "The American Century's Opening Shot," in the *New York Times* of June 6, 1998, "were sharp, vicious crawls through jungle terrain in killing heat."⁷ Regulars and volunteers, blacks and whites, fought side by side, endured the blistering heat and driving rain, and shared food and drink as well as peril and discomfort. They forged a victory that did not belong primarily to TR, nor did it belong mainly to the Buffalo Soldiers. It belonged to all of them.

But, despite the fact that these groups shared the victory and despite the attention that gravitated toward TR, the post-battle spotlight shined brightly on the Buffalo Soldiers. Their regiments had served, mainly in the remotest corners of the West, since the reorganization act of 1866. They had fought against the Comanches and Kiowa in the 1860's and 1870s, the Apaches between 1877 and 1886, and seen service in the Pine Ridge campaign of 1890-1891. Most of this service had been performed in obscurity.⁸

But Cuba was different. All eyes that were not on TR seemed to focus on the Buffalo Soldiers. For the first time they stood front and center on the national stage. A number of mainstream (that is, white) periodicals recounted their exploits, as nurses in the yellow fever hospital at Siboney as well as on the battlefield, and reviewed their history, mostly favorably.⁹ Books by black authors recounted the regiments' service in Cuba and in previous wars and reminded those who cared to pay attention that the war with Spain did not represent the first instance in which black soldiers answered the nation's call to arms.¹⁰ In an age of increasing racism that was hardening into institutionalized segregation throughout the South and affecting the lives of black Americans everywhere, the Buffalo Soldiers were race heroes. Black newspapers and magazines tracked their movements and reported their activities. Poetry, dramas, and songs all celebrated their service and valor.¹¹ 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.*¹²

Almost one hundred years passed before the nation rediscovered the Buffalo Soldiers. The process started with the 1967 publication of William Leckie's *The Buffalo Soldiers* and culminated in 1992, with the dedication by General Colin Powell of the buffalo soldier statue at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. For the Buffalo Soldiers, "the American century" ended the way it had started. In a period of increasing informal segregation, growing dissatisfaction with affirmative action, and the spreading emphasis on a separate African-American minority culture, books, plays, movies, and even phone cards celebrate the service of these troopers. In a disconcertingly similar setting of deteriorating race relations, the Buffalo Soldiers have returned to take their place among America's heroes.

Notes:

¹ Jeffrey D. Wert, *Custer: the Controversial Life of George Armstrong Custer* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 313; Robert Wooster, *Nelson A. Miles and the Twilight of the Frontier Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, c. 1993), p. 74.

² Mitchell Yockelson, "I Am Entitled to the Medal of Honor and I Want It': Theodore Roosevelt and His Quest for Glory," *Prologue* 30 (Spring 1998), 12.

³ Edward Van Zile Scott, *The Unwept: Black American Soldiers and the Spanish-American War* (Montgomery: The Black Belt Press, 1966), p. 13.

⁴ Order-of-battle information comes from Albert A. Nofi, *The Spanish-American War, 1898* (Conshohocken, PA: Combined Books, 1996) p. 331.

⁵ Frank N. Schubert, *Black Valor: Buffalo Soldiers and the Medal of Honor, 1870-1898* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1997), p. 109.

⁶ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899, 1920), p. 139.

⁷ *New York Times*, Saturday, June 6, 1998, pp. A17, A19.

⁸ For the campaign history of the four regiments, see Arlen L. Fowler, *The Black Infantry in the West* (Wesport, CT: Greenwood, 1971); William H. Leckie, *The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Negro Cavalry in the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967)

⁹ See Stephen Bonsal, "The Negro Soldier in War and Peace," *North American Review* 185 (June 7, 1907), 321-327; James Cleland Hamilton, "The Negro as a Modern Soldier," *The Anglo-American Magazine* 2 (August 1899), 113-124; William H. Head, "The Negro as an American Soldier," *World Today* 12 (March 1907), 322-324; W. Thornton Parker, "The Evolution of the Colored Soldier," *North American Review* 168 (February 1899), 222-228; Oswald G. Villard, "The Negro in the Regular Army," *The Atlantic Monthly* 91 (June 1903), 721-729; "The Negro as Soldier and Officer," *The Nation* 73 (August 1, 1901), 85.

¹⁰ The best of these are Herschel V. Cashin, Charles Alexander, William T. Anderson, Arthur M. Brown, and Horace W. Bivins, *Under Fire with the Tenth Cavalry* (London: F. Tennyson Neely, 1899), and Theophilus G. Steward, *The Colored Regulars in the United States Army* (Philadelphia: A.M.E. Book Concern, 1904). Also see James M. Guthrie, *Camp-Fires of the Afro-American, or, the Colored Man as a Patriot* (Philadelphia: Afro-American Publishing Cp., 1899); Edward A. Johnson, *A History of Negro Soldiers in the Spanish-American War* (Raleigh: Capital Printing Company, 1899); Hiram Thweatt, *What the Newspapers Say of the Negro Soldier in the Spanish-American War* (Thomasville, GA: N.p., n.d.).

¹¹ See James Robert Payne, "Afro-American Literature of the Spanish-American War," *Melus* 10 (Fall 1983), 19-32.

¹² Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro, from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), p. 335.