
Unequal Soldiers: Blacks in the Union Army

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BOOK REVIEWED:

Ira Berlin, ed., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867. Selected From the Holdings of the National Archives of the United States, Series II: The Black Military Experience.*
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

The emancipation of nearly four million Afro-American slaves during the 1860s carried this nation into distinctively turbulent rapids of what had become a worldwide current. Until the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the overwhelming majority of rural peoples in Europe and the western hemisphere labored in some form of personal or hereditary servitude. Thereafter, the bonds of servility steadily unraveled. By the time the United States ratified the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, servile relations had been abolished in continental Europe and Russia and slavery had been abolished in much of the Caribbean and in most of Central and South America. Cuba and Brazil alone held out, albeit for only another two decades. Everywhere the process shook the old order, threatened the foundations of the landed classes, ushered in capitalist social relations, and, at times, prepared the way for the emergence of modern nation-states. For the most part, however, emancipation ultimately came with the grudging consent of landlords and slaveowners, not least because they were able to supervise its implementation and normally won some sort of compensation. In the United States, on the other hand, emancipation came amidst the fires of civil war, with unrivaled swiftness, and against the wishes and determined resistance of the master class.¹ What began as a reactionary slaveholders' rebellion culminated in the most far-reaching of bourgeois-democratic revolutions.

¹ It should be noted that in San Domingue slavery came to an even more violent and radical end, as a consequence of the only successful slave revolt in world history. But it took more than a decade of struggle, against both the French and the British, before liberation was secured. See C.L.R. James's account, *Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1963).

Americans—Southerners included—are no longer accustomed to thinking of the Civil War and Reconstruction as a revolution. After all, postwar Southern society hardly seemed revolutionized: staple agriculture became even more pervasive, black people continued to work as rural laborers, racial oppression and inequality persisted. It would take another century and another violent struggle for Southern blacks to achieve the rights and privileges of citizenship guaranteed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. But if a revolution is defined as the transformation of social relations and property rights and as a sudden and decisive shift in the constellation of class power, then revolution is surely what we are talking about. The Southern planters not only lost, through force of arms, traditional legal prerogatives over their laborers and, by extension, their most valuable form of property; they also lost much of their power nationally and, for quite some time, had to battle in a regional political arena that included their ex-slaves. Indeed, the conferral of civil and political rights upon the freed-people, however equivocal in motivation and commitment, was unprecedented in the history of postemancipation societies and made for a moment when even more radical change loomed as a real possibility. If the moment passed unfulfilled and if the unprecedented advances were soon rolled back, it was a testimony to the limits of the revolution that emancipation brought about.

The Federal government did not wage war against the Southern Confederacy for revolutionary purposes. The intention was to restore the Union; the fate of the slaves was held in abeyance. That the war became a social revolution owed much to the determined efforts of a relatively small group of Northern abolitionists in the Union army and in positions of political influence. And it owed much to the military and diplomatic exigencies of restoring the Union itself. But, as the editors of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, whose marvelous volume is under review, make plain, it owed most to the courage, endeavors, and sensibilities of black people, slave and free. Despite the burdens of more than two centuries of bondage and a racism that knew no sectional boundaries, they pressed the case for emancipation, undermined the slave system in many areas of the South, shored up a flagging Union war effort, and fanned the flickering flames of equality and democracy to their highest intensity in the nineteenth century—and perhaps in our entire history.

The unfolding of emancipation and the role that Afro-Americans played in it have attracted considerable and talented scholarly attention. The literature on this subject ranks, in fact, with the best of American historiography. But never before has the story been told with the breadth, the diversity, and the power of *Freedom*. Six years ago, with a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and with the support of the History Department at the University of Maryland, chief editor Ira Berlin, associate editors Joseph P. Reidy and Leslie S. Rowland, and a staff of research assistants began to prepare a documentary history of emancipation. Drawing upon the vast, and largely un-

tapped, holdings of the National Archives, they selected forty thousand documents from over two million examined and from these will publish five series of one or more volumes each. Ira Berlin, the author of an outstanding study of free blacks in the antebellum South, among other works, is one of the finest historians writing in America today.² Joseph Reidy and Leslie Rowland are fast earning reputations as two of the most promising new historians of the South for their own work on the transition from slavery.³ When completed, the multivolume *Freedom* will cover, along with emancipation, the emergence of new labor and race relations, the struggle for social justice, racial violence, and the development of the black community between 1861 and 1867. This, the second series and the first to be published, explores the black military experience.

Black participation in the Union army and navy is not one of the better known aspects of the Civil War.⁴ The producers of the recent television extravaganza, "The Blue and the Gray," did not even see fit to take note of it. Yet, by the war's end almost 200,000 Afro-Americans had served in some capacity, more than 80 percent of whom had been recruited in the slave states. Together they comprised about 10 percent of all those who served in the Northern armed forces. This alone makes the story worthy of attention, for black enlistments came at a time of deepening crisis in Union manpower. But, as *Freedom* demonstrates with care and sensitivity, the black military experience also embodied the revolutionary dynamic that the war unleashed: it challenged and began to redefine the boundaries of white racial attitudes and black social status; it pushed the Federal government toward accepting and advancing emancipation; it raised new hopes, expectations, opportunities, and awareness among black people, while revealing the tensions and legacies of dependency within the black community; it politicized thousands of black soldiers and created a proud and determined black political leadership, thus accelerating the quest for equality both during and after the war; and it revealed the promises and limits of liberation.

For the historian, there is no more urgent or more difficult task than to meditate the diversity and the meaning of events, to weave a variety of scenes, choices,

² See Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); and "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on British Mainland North America," *American Historical Review* 85 (February 1980): 44-78; "The Revolution in Black Life," in Alfred F. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), pp. 349-82.

³ Reidy's work has focused on Georgia and Louisiana; Rowland's on Kentucky and South Carolina.

⁴ Still, there are numerous accounts. The best include Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966); Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953); James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted During the War for the Union* (New York: Random House, 1965).

and encounters into a larger portrait, to see pattern and process amid complexity and contradiction. It is difficult enough to accomplish in our own words, even with judicious use of example and quotation, statistics and accounts. It is all the more difficult and perilous to accomplish largely in the words of the direct participants. But this is what *Freedom* seeks to do—and with remarkable success. There are, of course, the customary and necessary mediations: a valuable overview and interpretation to begin the volume; a series of concise and informative introductions to subtopics. The vast bulk of pages, however, is taken up with over 350 documents, most of which are letters and communiques. With them we are presented with the immense range of actors, settings, and experiences that went into the making of black soldiering and emancipation. We are escorted from the seats of power in Washington, D.C., to rough barracks in Missouri; from the offices of state governors to the tents of field commanders; from the cities of Baltimore, New Orleans, and Louisville to the towns, villages, and crossroads of Upper Marlboro (Maryland), Milliken's Bend (Louisiana), and Henderson (Kentucky); from a black regimental camp in Hilton Head, South Carolina, to a court-martial proceeding in Vicksburg, Mississippi. We are met with the stiff and rather dry language of government officials and bureaucrats, with the morally charged and eloquent prose of abolitionists, with the sneers and diatribes of Northern racists, with the spirited reports of army recruiters, with the angry complaints of Unionist slaveholders, and, most striking of all, with the awkward but heartfelt and moving expressions of black men and women traversing the threshold of modern literacy. Still, out of the many episodes, inquiries, and confrontations, the drama and story emerge. Ideas are tested, policy is formulated, consciousness is born.

Revolutions may be inspired by new visions and aspirations, but they happen in the rush of events, in the cascade of unforeseen developments, stark necessities, and vulgar opportunism. Few Northerners anticipated or desired revolution in 1861; fewer yet imagined a role for blacks—slave or free—in the struggle for the Union. For most, it was a white man's war to determine the fate of the nation. Although black people had participated in previous American wars and some 225,000 resided in the free states, their status was always precarious. They usually faced limited economic prospects, restricted political rights, legal discrimination, and, if they had escaped from bondage, the ever-present fear of reenslavement. And despite the efforts of free black leaders and white sympathizers, calls for black enlistment and slave emancipation were, at the earliest stages of the Civil War, resisted by Federal authorities. To be sure, the Lincoln administration had politically sensitive issues to contend with. Abolishing slavery meant abrogating property rights, a radical step in all of nineteenth-century America and one that could push slaveholders in the strategic loyal and

neutral states of Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri to cast their fortunes with the Confederacy. Enrolling blacks in the Union army meant challenging racial orthodoxy, a move that could stir disaffection among white troops. So the matters stood unaddressed until the actions of the slaves and the exigencies of war tipped the balance.

The first part of this volume of *Freedom* is devoted to the onset of black enlistment and its relation to the collapse of slavery. Here the editors show how the unexpected course of events helped to join the forces of idealism and expediency in the drive for social change. For as the Union army established footholds in the slave states in 1861 and 1862, it was greeted by growing numbers of slaves who had fled their plantation and farms to seek refuge—and, they hoped, freedom—behind Union lines. With no set policy to deal with the situation, field commanders had to take the initiative. They began by declaring such fugitive slaves “contrabands of war” and putting them to work on fortifications. But soon, Union officers such as David Hunter in South Carolina and John W. Phelps in Louisiana seized the chance to advance the cause of emancipation and arm the slaves against their former masters. Although this unauthorized action met with rebuke higher up, it paved the way for a shift in policy once manpower demands became pressing and white inductions ebbed. By the fall of 1862, a slave regiment had been organized in South Carolina, and by early 1863 black recruitment started spreading North and South. Northern opposition quickly eroded as political officials came to see black enlistment as a convenient means of filling conscription quotas without imposing greater burdens on whites. High-mindedness certainly did not prompt Governor Samuel Kirkwood of Iowa to write, “When this war is over & we have summed up the entire loss of life it has imposed on the country I shall not have any regrets if it is found that a part of the dead are *niggers* and that *all* are not white men.”

The progress of black involvement in the war effort and of emancipation went hand-in-glove. The Second Confiscation Act and the Militia Act, both passed in the summer of 1862, freed all captured and fugitive slaves owned by rebels and provided for their mobilization in military service. Lincoln’s final Emancipation Proclamation prescribed the acceptance of liberated slaves for garrison duty. And in those slave states unaffected by the Proclamation, enlistment acted as the wedge that undermined the chattel institution between 1863 and 1865. At the same time, the enthusiastic response of free and enslaved blacks alike to the prospect of military participation shook racist stereotypes in the North and bolstered black claims to equality. The sentiments of a Governor Kirkwood notwithstanding, *Freedom* highlights the dawning of new possibilities in racial attitudes. A white Philadelphian could marvel in July of 1863 at “the great change which the events of the past two years have wrought in the public mind.” “In every respect,” he observed, “there is not only no repugnance on the part of white soldiers to colored soldiers but a positive disposition to fraternize

with them." A Northern official believed that "in organization, drill, discipline, and morale," a black regiment from South Carolina was "not surpassed by any white regiment." A black regiment formed in Tennessee "receive[d] three hearty cheers from a regiment of white men" after displaying bravery in battle. "One year ago the regiment was unknown, and it was considered . . . very doubtful whether Negroes would make good soldiers," the white commander noted. "Today the regiment is known throughout the army and the North and is honored."

The dialectic of possibilities and limits, of opportunities and hardships, is woven skillfully through the next three parts of the volume, which focus more directly on the black experience in the army. Indeed, in these sections *Freedom* offers an unmatched view of military life through the eyes of black soldiers and their families, tapping as it does "the richest known record of any subordinate class at its moment of liberation." On the one hand, military service opened new avenues for self-improvement and responsibility, while boosting pride, morale, and sense of purpose. Scattered regimental schools enabled hundreds of black recruits to learn the rudiments of reading and writing. The elevation of many to the status of noncommissioned officers added to discipline and self-respect in the ranks and to the rise of a black political leadership. Fighting against the Confederates helped to dispel white myths of black cowardice and confirm black notions that they had rescued the Union in its darkest hour. And, perhaps most important, marching through the South in Yankee blue cast black soldiers in the role of their own people's liberators.

Yet, it came at a heavy and painful price—a price that makes the determination and achievements even more impressive. In some respects, the trials and tribulations faced by blacks were common to soldiering at that time: poor conditions of army life, high mortality from disease, trying separations from family. However, the black ordeal was inordinately harsh. Often in relatively weak physical condition to begin with, black troops died from sickness at more than twice the rate of their white counterparts. Their wives and children, moreover, not only had few resources with which to fend, but frequently remained in bondage and subject to special abuse from masters enraged by slave enlistments in the Union army. "You do not know how bad I am treated. . . . Send me some money as soon as you can for me and my child are almost naked," a slave woman from Missouri wrote her soldier husband. "Do the best you can and do not fret . . . for it wont be long before I will be free and then all we make will be ours." *Freedom* contains many such letters written by soldiers' kin, wrenching testimony to the suffering and strain that were part of emancipation.

Other problems stemmed more explicitly from racial discrimination and from the nature of the war being waged. If Northern whites came to accept the necessity—and perhaps the desirability—of black enlistment and if some came to admire the contributions and courage of black troops, the burdens of race and enslavement nonetheless haunted black soldiers virtually every step of the way.

Segregated within camps, assigned the most degrading and menial of duties, and often scorned by fellow whites, blacks were distinctively second-class citizens in an army whose fortunes they had so brightened. For every group of whites willing to offer blacks "three hearty cheers," many more tendered their contempt. There was deep and widespread opposition to black engagement in the heat of battle, as many Northern military officials thought that fighting was "the white man's business." "[W]e are treated in a Different maner to what others Rigiments is," a black recruit told Abraham Lincoln. "Instead of the musket It is the spad and the Whelbarrow and the Axe." Even the battlefield proved no equalizer, for when finally sent into the fray, black soldiers confronted special dangers. Deeming them little more than cannonfodder, some Union commanders ordered blacks into difficult, if not hopeless, encounters. On occasion, black troops were used primarily to humiliate Confederate soldiers. And if captured, blacks risked summary retribution at the hands of Confederates who normally considered them slaves in rebellion rather than prisoners of war.

Such conditions heightened the awareness and sensitivity of black troops to discriminatory practices, but, as the editors of *Freedom* show, none provoked more protest or served a more politicizing function than the inequalities of pay and the exclusion of blacks from the ranks of commissioned officers. In these, the limitations of the Union commitment to emancipation and racial justice became starkly apparent. Although at the outset of hostilities it seemed that black soldiers would have the same privileges and protections of white ones, a backlash soon commenced. Those blacks—for the most part freemen from the Louisiana Native Guards—who had been received into the army at the commissioned level were generally purged from the service, and, save for surgeons and chaplains who had little authority, no more won elevation from the enlisted ranks until the very end of the war. With a profound bitterness and sense of betrayal, black officers submitted their resignations. "This treatment has sunk deep Into our hearts," sixteen of them from a Louisiana regiment protested, "we did not expect It and therefore It is intolerable. we cannot serve a country In which we have no more rights and Privileges given us." A storm of controversy brewed throughout the war, culminating in a handful of promotions that failed to salve the wounds of dismissed officers or to create a black officer corps. Black outfits fell under the command of white superiors.

Of greater consequence for the mass of black soliders was the Union policy of paying them less than half of what was paid to whites. Not only did the policy give added institutional expression to racial inequality, it also rendered most blacks incapable of providing for their families. So strong was the outcry that mutiny bubbled in the ranks, for if the issue of pay set black troops apart from white, it encouraged blacks "to make common cause among themselves." Protest centered in the regiments organized earliest and under promise of equal treatment. Freeborn and more literate blacks penned stinging complaints to Union

authorities and often refused to accept any compensation until amends were made. Others took direct action. In one instance, a black company in South Carolina, led by black Sergeant William Walker, stacked arms in front of the white commander's tent and balked at further duty until the question of pay was settled. Despite the commander's warnings, the soldiers held their ground and were charged with mutiny. Shortly thereafter, the company had to witness Walker's execution by firing squad. In one stirring document after another, *Freedom* brilliantly captures the black soldiers' emerging realization that theirs was a struggle on two fronts: against Southern slavery and against Northern discrimination. Thus the proud, angry, and moving words of a black corporal to President Lincoln:

The patient Trusting Decendants of Africs Clime, have dyed the ground with blood, in defense of the Union, and Democracy. Men too your Excellency who know . . . the cruelties of the Iron heel of oppression. . . . But When the war trumpet sounded o'er the land, when men knew not the Friend from the Traitor, the Black man laid his life at the Altar of the Nation,—and he was refused. . . . And now, he is in the War: and how has he conducted himself? Let their dusky forms, rise up, out of the mires of James Island, and give the answer. Let the rich mould around Wagners parapets be upturned, and there will be found an Eloquent answer. Obedient and patient, and Solid as a wall are they. all we lack is a paler hue, and a better acquaintance with the Alphabet. Now Your Excellency, We have done a Soldiers Duty. Why cant we have a Soldiers pay?

A wellspring of support from Union army officials, Northern abolitionists, and free black communities helped stave off the prosecution of many black protesters and, by June of 1864, helped bring about the equalization of pay. Black troops could only feel a new sense of strength and moral virtue. And they could only recognize how long and arduous the fight for freedom would be.

The experience, the resolve, the pride, and the political awareness that blacks had gained in military service were, in very significant ways, brought to bear on the postwar South. And it is with this subject that the present volume of *Freedom* concludes. Over 80,000 blacks remained in the army of occupation, and although the majority were stationed in Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Kentucky, black soldiers could be found throughout the Southern states. Their impact, for thousands of ex-slaves and thousands of ex-slaveholders, far outweighed their numbers. In countless settings, the editors write, black troops "communicated to freedmen and freedwomen the meaning of the war, the role black people played in defeating the Confederacy and destroying slavery, the new rights liberty allowed, and the new responsibilities it demanded." As the

documents demonstrate, they took a hand in organizing schools, churches, and other institutions, encouraged freedpeople to expand the spheres of their freedom, and stood ready to ward off retaliation from Southern whites. "[T]he freedpeople," a Northern officer observed in Georgetown, South Carolina, "were looking forward to the arrival of Colored Troops with the expectation that their advent would enlarge their privileges." The sight of black soldiers who eagerly "fraternize[d] . . . with the laboring population" struck terror into the hearts of the old masters, suggesting as it did that emancipation began rather than completed a revolution in Southern society. Growing white pressure hastened the Federal government's decision to demobilize black regiments and remove black soldiers from trouble spots. By the fall of 1867, black volunteers no longer served in the South.

Yet, the discharge of black soldiers did not terminate their role in protecting and advancing the gains of newly liberated slaves. Prominent among the participants in black conventions that pressed, in 1865 and 1866, for the extension of full citizenship rights were Union army veterans. And most prominent among the arguments in support of such rights was the black contribution to winning the war and saving the nation. "[W]hat higher order of citizen is there than the soldier?" a group of Nashville blacks queried rhetorically in early 1865. "The Government has asked the colored man to fight for its preservation and gladly has he done it. It can afford to trust him with a vote as safely as it trusted him with a bayonet." With the advent of radical Reconstruction, former black soldiers often emerged as state and local political leaders, mobilizing the freedpeople and moving "to the front ranks in the struggle for land, economic autonomy, and racial justice"—a struggle they continued to wage even as the federal government increasingly abandoned them.

Indeed, as *Freedom* suggests, black troops may have understood best of all the significance of the war and emancipation for the nation as a whole. They knew the "Iron heel of oppression" that was slavery and the tendencies and temperaments of the master class. They knew that the country could not survive half slave and half free, that the treatment of "a numerous, law-abiding, industrious, and useful class of citizens . . . as aliens and enemies, as an inferior degraded class, who must have no voice in the Government which they support, protect and defend" was not the mark of "a Democratic Government." They knew the perils of compromise or military failure. They knew that so long as basic rights and privileges were denied to a minority those rights and privileges could be denied to the majority, that prejudice and discrimination gnawed ceaselessly at the fabric of freedom. On so many occasions, in war and in peace, they exposed the deepest contradictions of American society and demanded that the nation live up to its highest ideals. They glimpsed, quite profoundly, their dual roles as liberators of their people and conscience of American democracy.

There is much more here than I have been able to mention, including a

short chapter on the Confederate debate and deadlock over slave recruitment. It is, in fact, difficult not to feel a bit overwhelmed by this large, ambitious, and sweeping book. But the size and scope are virtues as well. Historians and students will find an astonishing and unrivaled account of the black military experience, an indispensable guide to the immense collections of the National Archives, and an essential archival source in its own right. The general public can read with enormous pleasure and discovery of the triumphs and tragedies, the fortitude and frailty, the spirit and suffering that went into the making of a watershed in the nation's history. If this volume is any indication of what lies ahead, *Freedom* should assume a place as one of the great scholarly and literary achievements of our time.