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Abstract

This article concerns itself with the U.S. newspaper coverage given to black soldiers (primarily African-American) in the lead up to the U.S. entry into the First World War, through the war, and into the 1930's. In so doing, it chronicles the divisions that appeared within the black community in America as black Americans debated whether or not to serve a country that did not respect their liberties at home, the portrayal of black soldiers in U.S. newspapers, and the post-war betrayal that saw the rise of a popular silence on the rights of black veterans, and a forced return to the Jim Crow status quo of black life before WW1.

Keywords

First World War, Great War, Black History, African-American History, Social History, Civil Rights History

From Crusaders to Flunkies: American Newspaper Coverage of Black First World War Veterans in American Newspapers between 1915 and 1930

By
Matthew LaRoche



“War is teaching us that we are inseparably linked together here in America,” said Dr. Robert Moton of the Tuskegee Institute, in 1918. “The test of our greatness as a nation is not in the accumulation of wealth, nor in the development of a culture merely. The great test is for the fortunate to reach down and help the less highly favored, the poor, the humble—yes, the black. My race... simply asks an equal chance on equal terms with other Americans.”¹ Black Americans met that test admirably. They bled in opposition to aggressive nations on the Western Front. However, after American newspapers released a slew of encouraging pieces—patriotic war propaganda aimed at convincing black Americans to bleed for President Wilson’s great democratic crusade—the nation and the news quickly forgot the inherent promise in letting black soldiers serve: service must equal citizenship in all its forms. However, with the war won, newspapers no longer championed the capability of and dues due to all black Americans. Less than a decade after the United States entered the First World War, the nation returned to a comfortable

¹ “Dr. Moton Writes of the Colored Man in the World War,” *Washington Bee*, May 18, 1918.

racial status quo that saw blacks as fit to serve, but not to stand shoulder to shoulder with their white comrades in matters of respect, remembrance, and remuneration. The great, resurrected hope in a worldwide democracy, led by an America that proudly brandished equality on the home front as her sacred sword, was betrayed with silence.

As Nina Mjagkij chronicles in *Loyalty in Times of Trial: The African-American Experience During World War One*, throughout the mobilization of the United States leading up to 1917, the black community largely held three distinct views of their place in the World War. One faction, headed by W. E. B. Du Bois and others, including Robert Moton, imagined that the selfless sacrifice of black lives at the front would force a crisis of conscience across America, that at long last, whites would extend the blessings of liberty to their black countrymen.² The second group, disillusioned after decades of Jim Crowe despotism, saw little of benefit in Wilson's hypocritical proclamations of a war to defend and spread democracy worldwide.³ Put simply, if Wilsonian democracy abroad looked the same as democracy at home, nothing substantial would be gained by their deaths. However, the third and perhaps largest group neither dared to hope, nor outright condemned the war—they could only eye developments warily from the sidelines.⁴ Even with the advent of the universal draft for eligible males in May of 1917, supporters of black involvement in the war had to quickly undo centuries of bad blood between black Americans and the reality of America as they

² Nina Mjagkij, *Loyalty in Time of Trial: The African-American Experience During World War I*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), XIX.

³ *Ibid.*, xx.

⁴ *Ibid.*

had suffered it.⁵ In order to call them to the colors, encouragement of all kinds appeared in the public sphere. Perhaps the most widely distributed and noticed encouragements appeared in American newspapers and, largely speaking, in specifically black publications.

Between 1915 and mid-1919, newspaper representations of black soldiers, their accomplishments and those of their predecessors are fairly positive.⁶ For example, in August of 1915 the *Cleveland Gazette*, a black newspaper from Ohio, ran the story of two colored sailors in the war of 1812. John Thompson lost his legs—and his life—aboard a privateer, allegedly shouting “Fire away, boys! Nebber haul de colors down!”⁷ as he passed. Aboard the same warship, John Davis “begged that he might be thrown overboard immediately, lest his mangled remains encumber the working of the guns.”⁸ An Ohio newspaper choosing to resurrect the story of a few long dead black sailors does seem somewhat out

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Searching the database *America’s Historical Newspapers* for headlines pertaining to different permutations of “negro soldiers,” and “colored soldiers,” during “war,” “great war,” or “funerals,” between 1915 and 1930 revealed interesting articles and unexpected patterns in media coverage. Overall, I found perhaps a hundred or so articles that were relevant to the black war effort, or black soldiers post-war. This is a huge dearth of coverage, considering the fifteen-year span of the search, and the fact that *America’s Historical Newspapers* contains over one thousand U.S. newspapers. This is also surprising considering that, according to induction rates supplied in Table 4.1 of Nina Mjagkij’s *Loyalty in Times of Trial*, the 367,656 black soldiers who served in the U.S. armed forces during the Great War constituted about 1/6th of the entire army.

⁷ “Heroic Colored Sailors,” *Cleveland Gazette*, August 7, 1915.

⁸ Ibid.

of place, and perhaps even facetious. However, the article speaks with the utmost respect throughout, suggesting that it numbered among the first publications of an entirely new strain of black journalism, one set on resurrecting the will of black men to fight by extolling the successes of their ancestors.

However, the anti-war faction within the black press countered these encouragements by dramatically covering the ways in which the military actively used its black servicemen as fodder. For example, the *Topeka Plaindealer*, another black paper, bristled in reaction to the fighting on the Mexican border in June of 1916. The headline left little room for ambiguity: “In Mexico the Colored Boys are Chucked in Front of Enemy Bullets so that Some White Might Gain the Honor and Obtain Promotion!”⁹ Others in the newspaper business condemned the military less vehemently. This third faction utilized language that acknowledged the injustices suffered by black troops, but still clearly aspired to full respect and citizenship. A day after the *Plaindealer* covered the fighting in Mexico, another black paper, the *Freeman*, asked that “colored Americans hold memorial meetings in honor of the colored cavalymen who were sacrificed in Mexico and died bravely fighting for the flag, which does not protect them at home.”¹⁰ The *Freeman* did not present the abuses on the southern border as symptomatic of an unassailable racial divide—as injustices that would have no solution except for, presumably, separation from the United States, and a total rejection of its hypocritical claims to liberty and equality. Rather, the *Freeman* made an intentional effort to utilize the language of patriotism as a means of shaming the military for not upholding the very standards

⁹ “War Outlook and the Colored Soldier,” *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 30, 1916.

¹⁰ “Honor Colored Soldiers,” *Freeman*, July 1, 1916.

of liberty and equality it claimed to protect. They sought to correct the injustice by drawing wide attention to its inherent contradictions. Whether any of these efforts were particularly successful is unclear. But they do suggest that a lively skepticism posed a real challenge to the pro-war sections of the black press.

Still, pro-war media had other strategies for countering this skepticism. For one, they ran hopeful op-eds that promised black contributions to the allied war effort would be acknowledged and rewarded by war's end. Their first cause for optimism came with the widespread use of colonial troops in the French and British armies. The *Western Outlook*, a black press out of Oakland, California, ran a piece in 1915 assuring its readers that, "employment of colored soldiers upon the continent of Europe deals a shattering blow to race prejudice. After the war is over, the position of the dark people in the political economy in Greater Britain and Greater France will never be the same as it was before the conflict."¹¹ However, this inducement came with a massive drawback—it would only be proven right or wrong at war's end. More persuasive were the incentives that offered immediate payoffs, so pro-war publications naturally stressed these as much as possible.

For example, the *Savannah Tribune*, another black paper, published the letter of a "Satisfied Colored Soldier" in February of 1918, advertising service as a path to good food and travel.¹² Drawing upon a letter that Private Henry Perry's mother had just received, the *Tribune* described army life in beyond idyllic terms. It brought "news that her son is doing splendid... enjoying life and

¹¹ "The War and the Colored Races," *Western Outlook*, May 29, 1915.

¹² "Letter Received from a Satisfied Colored Soldier," *Savannah Tribune*, February 23, 1918.

getting good pay for his services,” to the tune of sending home twenty-five dollars a month.¹³ Indeed, Perry wrote that the army, “give[s] me everything I need. We get plenty to eat. Get up every morning at 5:30 and go to bet [sic] at 9. This is healthy and I like it.”¹⁴ And if the lifestyle and paying work failed to entice black men to enlist, the *Tribune* added comments that applied social pressure to their young black male readers. They seized upon Perry’s passing comment that he felt fortunate to work alongside “lots of colored boys and men.”¹⁵ The *Tribune* turned this personal opinion into a subtle shaming device, writing that letters like Perry’s had already “caused many others at home to enlist.”¹⁶ But perhaps this article’s most surreptitious tactic was its attempt to convince readers that Perry’s experiences were that of a standard, black Doughboy. By giving no details as to the work Perry found himself doing, the *Tribune* deemphasized the fact that Perry was a member of “Stevedore Regiment 303, at Newport News, VA,” and as such was relegated to dock work.¹⁷ A casual reader might be drawn in by the reports of travel, pay, and camaraderie, might skip past the word “stevedore,” and forget the indignity of being consigned to manual labor until he had already signed enlistment papers.

By mid-1917, with the U.S. finally in the war, it was too late for many black men to debate the pros and cons of service. By May 18th, the Selective Service Act had been passed, and hundreds of thousands of African-Americans dutifully registered for the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

draft.¹⁸ They suffered overt discrimination from military authorities. Draft board officials tore off the lower left-hand corner of black registrant's forms to better mark them out for segregated units.¹⁹ Naval policy relegated African-Americans to menial roles, and the Marine Corps barred them entirely.²⁰ Worse, after the Houston Riot in August of 1917 saw armed black soldiers scuffling with aggressive, local whites, the military doubled down on its estimation that black soldiers were more a liability than an advantage.²¹ For the rest of the war, the majority of African-American servicemen would work logistics and construction jobs—only two units, the 92nd and 93rd infantry divisions, ever saw combat.²²

Despite these ill omens, pro-war papers continued to publish and republish assurances that victory in Europe would lead to a proper appreciation of blacks at home. But none, perhaps, summed up the black community's lingering hope as they endured the First World War than a Mr. William T. Fergusson of Washington, D.C. As a man well past the age of eligibility for the draft, Mr. Fergusson nonetheless wanted to be seen doing his part to defeat “an enemy whose success means a slavery many times worse than the one from which Lincoln emancipated us.”²³ He wrote to the *Washington Bee* with a different approach in mind than most—something which the pro-war papers may not have

¹⁸ Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African-American Soldiers in the World War I Era*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), p. 53.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 2.

²³ “Our Country At War—Will the Colored Soldier Do His Duty?” *Washington Bee*, April 13, 1918.

fully anticipated, but surely welcomed. As he saw it, “We have given our men and our money to help the cause of democracy. Now, let us... enlist in that cause for which we can fight—producing bigger crops.”²⁴ Viewing this as a natural way for civilians to keep faith with their sons, fathers, and brothers overseas, Fergusson threw his heart into his plea. However, his zeal and optimism took a surprising turn as he fully embraced the tenets of the pro-war faction. He chides his fellow black civilians who have yet to find ways to support the war effort from home, “the rewards for being a patriotic citizen is a thousandfold greater than a few dollars ready cash.”²⁵ But he rounds out his plea with a resounding faith that “When the war is over, and various men are called to the White House to be congratulated... some colored man will be among the number.”²⁶ And not only will he be invited and recognized, but President Wilson “will say: Well done, faithful American. Enter thou into the joys of democracy.”²⁷

Mr. Fergusson could hardly have been more wrong. While black soldiers served with *extreme* distinction, one of the first acts by the U.S. military in the post-war environment was to exclude blacks from officially partaking in the fruits of victory.²⁸ As the triumphal Allies in all their diversity, “the British and their colonial servicemen, the Italians, the Japanese, the Portuguese, and others,”²⁹ passed under the Arc de Triomphe, the American soldiers displayed were decidedly monochromatic

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.,

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy*, 299.

²⁹ Ibid.

“By the time of the victory parade, the Ninety-second and Ninety-third divisions had been hastily shipped home, leaving no black combat troops in France. Thousands of black stevedores, pioneer infantrymen, and other service troops still remained for Pershing to include in the representative assemblage of American’s forces.... The marginalization of African American troops spoke volumes to how Woodrow Wilson, the War Department, and much of white America envisioned a similarly Jim Crowed historical memory of the war and black participation in it.”³⁰

From the first moment of the cease-fire, white Americans began the work of returning black soldiers to civilian life, to another strict racial hierarchy that would not afford them any kindness based on their sacrifices. They were to accept that, as a white speaker in New Orleans said, “you are going to be treated exactly like you were before the war; this is a white man’s country and we expect to rule it.”³¹ American newspapers watched the enforcement of this home order throughout the demobilization period of 1919, when outbursts of violence throughout that “Red Summer,” disproportionately targeted returning black veterans.³² While papers typically denounced the violence, few made the black soldier their main concern.

This attitude is not surprising, considering that only for a brief period in 1918 did white newspapers take a positive interest

³⁰ Ibid, 300.

³¹ Arthur E Barbeau and Florette Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: African-American Troops in World War I*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 175.

³² *Torchbearers of Democracy*, 223-225.

in the accomplishments of black soldiers in France. For the majority of the war, black servicemen were functionally invisible. However, in May of 1918, the *Grand Forks Herald* cited “a notable instance of bravery and devotion by two soldiers of an American colored regiment operating in a French sector.”³³ In a remarkable act of soldiering, Private Henry Johnson and Private Roberts “continued fighting after receiving wounds and despite the use of grenades by a superior force. They should be given credit for preventing, by their bravery, the capture of any of our men.”³⁴ The *Fort Wayne News Sentinel* echoed this as the “best story, so far, of the valor of Americans on the battlefields of France.”³⁵ The *Duluth News Tribune* concurred, and even took this event as proof positive of “a spirit of democracy which knows no race nor color.”³⁶ However, this enthusiasm for rallying around universal democracy was short-lived, both in the headlines and in the national sentiment. As soon as there was no more news of heroic deeds coming from the front, fault lines quickly reemerged between the white public and the returning black veteran.

Most notably, perhaps, was the coverage given to promises of war risk insurance for black soldiers and their families, and to provide hospitals for black as well as white veterans in need of long-term care. In December of 1917, with the war far from decided, the *Savannah Tribune* published an article relaying Secretary of War Newton D. Baker’s desire to overcome the “many difficulties” of mobilizing blacks for war while taking “the

³³ “Two Colored Soldiers Keep Off Hun Raid,” *Grand Forks Herald*, May 21, 1918.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “Pershing Puts Thrills in Official Communique,” *Fort Wayne News Sentinel*, May 20, 1918.

³⁶ “Lufbery’s Death is Announced in Communique,” *Duluth News Tribune*, May 21, 1918.

peculiar southern situation,” namely the explosive bigotry unleashed whenever southern whites encountered blacks in uniform, into account.”³⁷ Reporting, in full, an official statement by the Secretary of War, they distributed proof of his promise that at war’s end, “all will be alike entitled to the gratitude of their country”—or, as the paper put it, that the “Negro Must Get [a] Square Deal.”³⁸ In March of 1918, the *Tribune* announced that the Secretary of War had unveiled legislation “provided by the Government for the protection of the soldier and his family, in addition to the soldier’s monthly allotment and in addition to the Government’s compensation for the soldier’s death or disability.”³⁹ Such insurance was surely badly needed after the war had claimed or crippled many black soldiers, leaving many veterans and families short on income.

However, regardless of Baker’s attempts to remunerate black war veterans as he would white veterans, by 1920 the *Savannah Tribune* had declared him guilty of blatantly discriminating against the future black servicemen of the post-war army. Citing military policy

“to assign national guard units recruited from colored men to duty that will not incorporate them in a division composed of white organizations.... it has been decided that colored troops... shall be organized into pioneer infantry units that can be

³⁷ “Says All Soldiers Treated Fairly,” *Savannah Tribune*, December 8, 1917.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ “Secretary of War: Negro Soldiers to Insure,” *Savannah Tribune*, March 16, 1918.

assigned to duty under command of corps headquarters.”⁴⁰

He cites “considerations bearing upon military efficiency”⁴¹ as the sole reason behind relegating all black servicemen to labor battalions in the future. However, as the *Tribune* notes, the absence of any other minorities from exclusive service in the “drudgery corps” makes it clear that any lack of efficiency surrounding black troops, in light of their established competence in combat, must come from white discrimination.⁴² Baker seemed unwilling to rescind his position on the issue, considering it born of solid, “dispassionate thought.”⁴³

Even more blatantly biased policy neglected the needs of black victims of shell-shock, gas, and other lingering wounds. The *Washington Bee* reported in 1921 on the decision by the Alabama Chamber of Commerce to stonewall the construction of two hospitals in Montgomery for colored Great War veterans, “one for tubercular and one for shell-shocked soldiers.”⁴⁴ According to the *Bee*, “the board, unaware at first that the hospitals were for Colored Americans made every effort to secure them through Congressman J. R. Tyson.”⁴⁵ Unsurprisingly, as soon as “Tyson informed the board that the two hospitals were for Colored soldiers,” the board “emphatically and unanimously rejected the idea.”⁴⁶ Blistering at the injustice of the decision, the *Bee* protested

⁴⁰ “Secretary of War Taken to Task,” *Savannah Tribune*, August 14, 1920.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ “Oppose Erection of Hospital for Colored American World War Heroes,” *Washington Bee*, July 9, 1921.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

the horror that black soldiers were left “alive but in such a condition that they are not able to take advantage of the opportunities in life. They must now take as their reward such conditions that are now facing them.”⁴⁷ Sadly, except for independent philanthropy, there were few ways to overcome such vindictive obstacles placed before the black veteran.

Similarly, dissenting media as a whole seemingly found it difficult to shout above the comfortable silence that the nation wrapped itself in. It seems that black soldiers had become a liability—a nuisance, even—as their existence clashed with the national desire for a “Jim Crowed” memory, as Chad L. Williams recounts.⁴⁸ After 1920, even the *Savannah Tribune* focuses almost solely on the economic effects of the war on black workers, not soldiers, with the exception of a 1921 article on, again, Captain Needham Roberts, “one of the two Negro soldiers of the New York 15th who had the distinction of being the first American soldiers to be decorated in France.”⁴⁹ By 1927, only one rather unsettling article on black soldiers, from the *Topeka Plaindealer*, appears, one that encapsulates how little had come of black hopes in the Great War.

Whether or not the posting was strictly racially motivated or not, the condition of the 10th U.S. Cavalry Regiment (Colored) as of August 1927 offers a further poignant visage of the black soldier, so successful in war, losing the peace and returning to his “proper” place in American society. A decade after the U.S.’s

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *Torchbearers of Democracy*, p. 300.

⁴⁹ “Great Negro Hero of World War,” *Savannah Tribune*, August 4, 1921. The other two articles from 1921 on that pertain to the war at all are “The Coming of War Meant New Day for Negro Labor,” Feb. 5, 1921 and “Negro Workers During the World War,” March 12, 1921.

entry into the First World War, as “Uncle Sam’s only cavalry division” marched out of Ft. Bliss, E Troop of the “famous 10th Cavalry Colored” regiment left Ft. Huachua to escort them en route.”⁵⁰ By “escort” the Army meant “look after [dignitaries and military officials], care for their horses, etc.” After yet again answering the call of their country—and, indeed, of the budding Free World—colored soldiers of the United States were still singled out for use as “flunkies,” as manservants and horse handlers.⁵¹ Serving in segregated units, and serving as literal servants was customary long after the sacrifices of the Argonne Forest, to say nothing of Yorktown, New Orleans, or Ft. Wagner.

American newspapers apparently saw nothing to criticize in that; the headlines stayed silent on the matter, even amongst black newspapers. By 1927, the black soldier had again been reduced to a caricature, something that could be “famous” while still consigned to holding horses for white superiors, be they officers or rank-and-file soldiers.⁵² While the war was afoot, this caricature was arguably manipulated and romanticized for propaganda purposes, as with the tale of privates Johnson and Roberts. Those taken in by the image of a son of slaves liberating the downtrodden of France and Belgium seemingly ignored the hypocrisy of returning such a man to Jim Crow and further decades of socially abided racial violence. With the peace, the names of colored soldiers on monuments across France were left to molder on the edge of national memory, sustained by fewer and fewer voices with each passing year. Even the tradition of dissent set forth by a core of black newspapers could not sustain the outcry for

⁵⁰ “Colored Troop Attend Cavalry Division Maneuvers—As Flunkies,” *Topeka Plaindealer*, August 30, 1927.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

recognition. The promise of citizenship, although written with blood, was thought certain to invigorate the black “menace of degeneracy” in countless imagined forms.⁵³ For most, the uncertainty of equality was too dangerous for interwar America to deliver—so America did not deliver.

⁵³ Nina Mjagkij, *Loyalty in Times of Trial*, p. 176.

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