



Clarence Adams. *An American Dream: The Life of an African American Soldier and POW Who Spent Twelve Years in Communist China.* Carlson. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007. 155 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-595-1; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-594-4.



Reviewed by James Gillam (Department of History, Spelman College)

Published on H-War (May, 2008)

A POW's Return to America

Clarence Adams's *An American Dream* is a relatively short work, yet it contains many different kinds and levels of information that will appeal to a variety of scholarly interests. Anthropologists will appreciate it for its value as an ethnography of the lifestyle of poor, southern, urban youth. African American historians will appreciate it for the portrayal of life in the waning days of the Jim Crow era just before the civil rights movement struck at the heart of that system. Political scientists will appreciate it for its portrayal of the impact of Cold War hysteria, and the personal and direct reach of the House Un-American Activities Committee that grew out of the McCarthy era. Most important, military historians will value this book as a personal and revealing memoir about the racial relations in the United States Army during the Korean War and the conditions of captivity for prisoners of that conflict.

The first chapter of *An American Dream* is the ethnographic study of the lifestyle of poor southern African Americans in the immediate post-World War II era. It is particularly meaningful to those of us who are African American because it recalls the many ways in which the

lives of minorities were restricted. The chapter is also illustrative of the ways we accommodated and adjusted to those restrictions, whether they were legal, extralegal, or just part of the racial culture of America at that time. It is also in that chapter that the audience finds that Adams and his family were both usual and unusual citizens of the African American part of Memphis, Tennessee. They were usual because they were part of the second wave of urban bound, fractured family units and because they were habitually victimized by the racism of that time and place. Adams was unusual because he recognized all that was happening to him, knew that it was unjust, and was able to articulate his dissatisfaction as well as his plans for self improvement.

Chapter 2 is where Adams makes the transition from civilian to soldier. He entered the army on the run from the consequences of an incident in a train yard where black youths entertained themselves with the dangerous sport of train hopping. The place and form of their entertainment is as revealing of their lives as anything in the book. Adams and his friends administered a spontaneous beating to a white transient because of his persis-

tent demand that they provide him with a black woman to gratify his sexual urges. The next day, police arrived at Adams's home ostensibly to arrest him for that transgression, or for defending himself against a neighborhood thug that the police refused to arrest because his victims were all African Americans. So, like many men of his position, Adams joined the army to escape the lower end of the United States.

Chapters 3 through 5 depict the moments in Adams's life when he worked himself into the soon-to-be "integrated" army, learned his Military Occupational Specialty of Infantry machine gunner, and was sent to Korea and Japan. He returned to Korea when the war started in June 1950. The army was officially integrated by Executive Order from President Harry Truman in 1948, one year after Adams enlisted. In practical terms, however, Truman's order made little difference for Adams and others like him. While he was in training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, he found the same level of racism on and off the base that he had run from in the South. Waitresses refused to serve him in a restaurant, and his officers and noncommissioned officers were all white.

The racism followed Adams in his overseas postings as well. When he served his first tour of duty in Korea with the 159th Military Patrol, Adams was confronted by racist treatment or military inefficiency, or both, when he was court-martialed for driving a fire truck through a wall because he had no idea how to drive it. When he went to Japan the next year, he found that there were cities and postings for whites only, and that the racist mythology about black sexuality followed him and his unit. Yet, through both postings, Adams showed the cultural curiosity and adaptability that would help him survive the Korean War and his years as a prisoner; he never shied away from the indigenous population in either country, and unlike most Americans of any color, he was not intimidated by the prospect of learning the local language and culture.

This book becomes a brief monographic treatment of the Korean War in chapter 3. Adams was sent back to Korea in June 1950 instead of receiving his expected discharge from service. He served with Battery A of the 503rd Artillery Regiment, attached to the 2nd Infantry Division. Their officers, with the exception of one, were all white; and from the noncommissioned officers downward, it was an all black unit. Despite misgivings about the face of the so-called newly integrated army, Adams advanced from ammunition bearer to gunner on the base gun, the field gun that shot for accuracy for the entire

battery. He also partook in the strategic counterattack at Inchon that took Douglas McArthur's beleaguered forces from the Pusan Perimeter at the southern end of the peninsula to the fateful Yalu River crossing that brought the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of the People's Republic of China into the war.

The PLA counterattack began on November 1, 1950, and Adams wrote that it rolled over his artillery unit on November 29. In chapter 3, Adams also makes the controversial claim that his mostly black unit was left behind without support to provide covering fire for predominantly white units that were retreating. The rest of this chapter, and the following two, are about Adams's capture, his struggle to live long enough to get to the prisoner of war camp, and his attempts to survive the first winter's hardships of weather as well as lack of medical treatment. He also revealed how deeply the racism of the era penetrated even the relations of prisoners and guards. To put it succinctly, it is a story of bravery under fire, physical stamina on long lonely marches in the dead of the Korean winter, and the incredible mental toughness he relied on to amputate three of his toes without anesthesia.

As Adams and his fellow prisoners settled into what would be a three-year incarceration in Korea, first under the Koreans, then under the Chinese, they adapted, survived, and waited anxiously for the end of the war. It was during that time that Adams and other African Americans formed a group called the Progressives to negotiate for better conditions and treatment of all prisoners. From then on, his time as a prisoner was also a period of intellectual growth abetted by the Chinese. He was introduced to literary figures, like Maxim Gorky (the Russian dramatist), Lu Xun (the Chinese literary reformer), and W. E. B. DuBois (the controversial African American scholar of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). In effect, Adams was allowed to acquire the education denied him in the United States because of his race.

As the war drew to a close and the prisoners avidly discussed the conditions of the armistice, Adams and many Progressive members became proactive petitioners and speakers on controversial issues related to the war. They were especially concerned with the issues of repatriation of both themselves and the Chinese who were prisoners of the United States. The approach of the armistice also heightened racial and political controversy in the camp, and a number of threats of violence were directed at Adams. Because of those threats and the life-

long accumulation of racism, he made the decision to go to China when he was released. As he put it, "I had to go to China for the right to create a good life. I should have been able to do this in my own country" (p. 65).

Once Adams and twenty-two others from his camp arrived in China, they stayed for twelve years. It was during that time that he created, with much assistance from the Chinese government, a life that would have been impossible in the United States. He spent two years in Beijing and five years in Wuhan, China, where he received the equivalent of a bachelor's degree in Chinese language and literature. He was posted to the Beijing office of the Foreign Language Press as a translator. Adams also participated in the politics of the era, joining the Xia Fang labor movement. He married Liu Lin Feng, a college student in Beijing, and they had two children, Della and Louis before they left China. In short, Adams finally got to participate in a society as a full citizen with no diminution of his rights, but he had to live in a so-called Communist dictatorship instead of his own country to do those things.

The final third of the book is about the political circumstances attendant to Adams's return to the United States, and it also contains a clear reason why the title of the book includes the words "American Dream." Political scientists will surely appreciate the description of the personal impact that China's Cultural Revolution had on the Adams family. It stressed the relationship between Adams and his wife, estranged him from long-time friends, and even forced him and his wife to make the culturally devastating decision to leave their extended family and move to the United States for their personal safety.

It is also in that last third of the book that Adams's fi-

nal confrontation of political interest took place. He was subpoenaed to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee in Washington, D.C. It was there, before that committee, that Adams once again revealed the courage, intellect, and insightful critique of American society that had been his lifelong habit. The committee wished to question him about radio broadcasts and statements he made from China in opposition to the Vietnam War. However, rather than meekly submit to their charges of treason, Adams insisted on his first amendment rights to freedom of speech. Then, while he had the ear of the public, he once again called the United States to task for the fundamental inconsistency of sending African American soldiers to Vietnam to guarantee freedoms for the Vietnamese that black citizens were routinely denied at home.

As readers move through the concluding pages of the book, they may be so focused on the social and economic adjustment that Adams and his family made to life in America that they may unwittingly overlook the fact that Adams finally achieved the American dream. It is in those pages that Adams and his wife did what so many other immigrants of noncolor have done. They fled violence and oppression for the safer shores of the United States. They even came by boat, but they crossed the Pacific instead of the Atlantic. Once they arrived, they too took employment well below their qualifications just to make ends meet. Then, they pursued the American dream by applying all the values ascribed to immigrant success to their first struggling neighborhood restaurant. Eventually, they were able to turn that first venture into a string of entrepreneurial successes and secured for themselves the American dream, a secure middle-class life. It is a story that should be read avidly by both the idealist and the African American historian, both of whom often look for happy endings and rewards for the underdog.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: James Gillam. Review of Adams, Clarence, *An American Dream: The Life of an African American Soldier and POW Who Spent Twelve Years in Communist China*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14483>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.