



**Donald R. Shaffer.** *After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004. 201 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1328-1.



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## Ambiguous Victory

Bruce Catton ended his masterful *Grant Takes Command* on an elegiac note. He quotes F. Y. Hedley, a white veteran of Sherman's campaigns, who, writing of his victorious comrades at war's end, reflected, "old avenues are closed to them, old ambitions are dead, and they walk as if in a dream—as strangers in a strange land." [1] In quoting this soldier, Catton was foreshadowing the disillusionment of Gilded-Age American life as well as the complexities of Grant's postwar career, but his conclusion also raised a question that went largely unanswered when Catton wrote in the 1960s: what was the fate of the enormous cohort of Union veterans in the years following the Confederate surrender? In the last two decades a number of historians have worked to fill in this historical blank, but this scholarship, including the work of this reviewer, has focused largely on the story of white ex-soldiers. Thus, the publication of Donald R. Shaffer's *After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans* marks an important milestone in our understanding of the long-term impact of the Civil War on American history.

In 1865 black soldiers, as Shaffer makes clear, would

have been astonished at Hedley's melancholy tone. These soldiers, nearly 180,000 in number (another 10,000 to 20,000 blacks served in the Union Navy) ended the war with new avenues open to them, with new ambitions, and keenly aware that their "manly sacrifice" had "helped create a much better nation than had existed before the war" (p. 170). Shaffer's study—based on a random sample of the postwar experience of one thousand "ordinary" black soldiers, a close study of two hundred African-American veterans involved in "notable activities" after 1865, and a special census taken in 1890 of surviving African-American veterans—examines what service in the Union Army offered, and failed to offer, these men in the decades following the Civil War.

His conclusions are both heartening and sobering. For black soldiers who survived the war, military service offered important postwar advantages. These advantages were both economic (eligibility for federal pensions) and symbolic (high status within the African American community, membership in the Grand Army of the Republic), and combined to "mitigate the indignities of black life during the last decades of the nineteenth century and

the first decades of the twentieth” (p. 4). Yet, as Shaffer is careful to show, the destructive effects of American racism dramatically circumscribed the gains made by black veterans after the war. In 1890, over half (54 percent) of white Union veterans were living, while only 30 percent of the Federal Army’s black veterans remained alive. Half of this cohort (compared to 23 percent of white ex-soldiers) worked as unskilled laborers (pp. 54, 55). Government bureaucrats often made it difficult for black veterans to receive federal pensions. African American veterans living in the South suffered from the same humiliations of disfranchisement and Jim Crow as other Southern blacks. By the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the memory of the Civil War as an emancipatory conflict had, much to the anger and gnawing frustration of black ex-soldiers, been usurped by a national remembrance of the conflict as a battle for national unity. By the early-twentieth century, Shaffer concludes, black Union veterans could only claim an “ambiguous victory, in that their lives were better after the Civil War, but not unequivocally so” (p. 195).

Shaffer begins his book with a short prologue summarizing the experience of black soldiers during the Civil War. During the war, African Americans clearly perceived that the royal road to manhood in U.S. society lay through soldiering, and that service in the Union Army offered them an extraordinary double opportunity to destroy slavery and to prove to white America their worth as men. “I was eager to become a soldier,” wrote Robert A. Pinn of Ohio, “in order to prove by feeble efforts the black man’s rights to untrammelled manhood” (p. 11). Black soldiers, of course, did win the admiration and gratitude of many Northern whites for their battlefield exploits. On the whole, Shaffer argues, military service was beneficial to African American troops, especially former slaves. The arming of nearly two hundred thousand African American males, perhaps the most revolutionary event in United States history, “helped many acquire schooling, self-confidence, leadership skills, and other experiences that eroded ignorance and encouraged interest in public affairs” (p. 21). Having proven themselves as warriors and, in the process, having helped save the Union, black soldiers began their long and frustrating struggle to make the nation deliver the full panoply of rights—political, civil, economic—they knew were owed them as men.

In the immediate postwar period, African American veterans played a central role in the struggle for voting rights in the states of the ex-Confederacy. Colored Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Leagues sprang up throughout the

South and issued petition after petition articulating justifications for extending the vote to black men. What ultimately galvanized Congress to extend suffrage to Southern blacks, however, were the 1866 atrocities in Memphis and New Orleans. In each of these cities, white violence specifically targeted black veterans. Fourteen out of the forty-six African Americans murdered by white mobs in Memphis were veterans. In New Orleans a convention assembled, in part, to enfranchise Louisiana’s black males, came under attack by a white mob, and many of the thirty-eight men killed in the ensuing massacre were African American veterans. These and other attacks directed against black ex-soldiers, Shaffer argues, caught the attention of the white public in the North, and Northern “gratitude for their wartime sacrifice and sympathy for their postwar suffering at the hands of white Southern mobs played an important role in swinging enough support for black voting rights” (p. 73).

The influence of black Civil War veterans in shaping Southern politics, however, proved short-lived. Shaffer concludes that “with their victory in the battle for suffrage, black Civil War veterans reached the peak of their influence as a political force” (p. 74). Only 10 percent of the South’s black officeholders were black, and the majority of those elected politicians came from the states where wartime recruitment of slaves had been the heaviest: Louisiana, Mississippi, and North and South Carolina. By the early 1870s, the Colored Soldiers’ and Sailors’ League had disbanded, and group action by black veterans had given way to personal ambition and intra-party rivalry. In the last two decades of the century, African-American veterans, along with the rest of the black community, watched helplessly as the rising tide of Jim Crow, lynching and disfranchisement swept the states of the ex-Confederacy. Individual veterans such as Louisiana’s P. B. S. Pinchback and Maryland’s John B. Anderson fought in the nation’s courts to overturn this social and political discrimination, while still others, such as Robert Smalls of South Carolina, remained active recipients of Republican Party patronage. Yet, faced by the implacable hostility of the region’s white population, African American veterans proved unable to preserve the basic citizenship rights of Southern blacks that they had fought so long and hard to secure.

One important contribution of Shaffer’s book, then, is his discussion of the significant role played by black veterans in the expansion and (to a much less extent) the evaporation of the rights of citizenship won by Southern blacks during and after Reconstruction. Yet an equally important contribution of *After the Glory* is its discus-

sion of the relative ability of African American veterans, as compared to non-veterans in the nation's black community, to define the contours of their individual lives in postwar America. Ex-soldiers, he argued, constituted an "elite group in postwar African American society, enjoying the respect and even the envy of their peers" (p. 46). Shaffer notes that the African American press routinely paid homage to the wartime exploits of black veterans. The relationship between the black church and veterans was especially tight. Churches made a point of inviting ex-soldiers to special services and commemorative events, and by far the largest percentage of black veterans listed as skilled workers in 1890 worked as ministers, a highly prestigious and well-paid occupation within the African American community.

The 1890 special census also reported that at a time when 7 percent of the nation's black population lived north of the Mason-Dixon line, over one-quarter (27 percent) of the surviving cohort of black veterans lived in Northern states. The explanation for this figure is due, in part, to the geography of enlistment patterns for African Americans during the Civil War. A significant percentage of the Union's black soldiers (16 percent) enlisted in the Army from Northern states, and most of these troops returned to their homes after the war. Yet the North also proved a magnet for many ex-soldiers born in slavery. Shaffer argues that the "warmer opinion" towards black veterans in the North was "authentic," and that these men and their families were "relatively freer than other African-Americans from the racial repression and poverty of the postwar South" (p. 47). Most importantly, blacks in this region never lost the political and civil rights awarded African Americans in the Reconstruction North. Although he never explicitly makes this link, Shaffer's discussion of the movement of black veterans to Northern states deepens our understanding of the origins of the Great Migration. Generally interpreted as a twentieth-century phenomenon, it is clear that the historic movement of African Americans from South to North began in post-Civil War America, and commenced with black Union veterans marching in the vanguard.

Black veterans, Shaffer demonstrates, were also at the forefront of another historic shift, namely the movement of African Americans from rural to urban America. This cohort was far more urbanized than the African American community as a whole and, interestingly, more metropolitan than white veterans, both Union and Confederate. In 1890, nearly 1 out of 4 (23 percent) black soldiers lived in cities of 25,000 or more. In comparison, only 11 percent of the total African American community

lived in metropolitan areas of that size, while the figure for Union and Confederate veterans was 18 percent and 5 percent respectively (pp. 45, 50). The relative urbanization of black veterans was no doubt due in part to the high percentage of these men living in the states of the North, but black veterans also relocated to metropolitan areas in the South as well. This pattern, Shaffer argues, can be explained in large part by wartime enlistment practices. For administrative reasons the Army preferred to muster black troops in cities. For many slaves, most of whom had never set foot in a city before joining the Civil War, the relative autonomy offered by urban life was a revelation. After the war, a significant portion of these ex-soldiers settled in cities, where they found, in the words of one ex-slave, "freedom was free-er." Eric Foner has noted that between 1865-70 the black population of the South's ten largest cities doubled, while the number of whites moving into cities during this period grew only 10 percent. With Shaffer's book we now have a much clearer idea of the manner in which African American veterans drove the growing urbanization of the postwar black community in both the Northern and Southern regions of the United States.[2]

One of the book's most intriguing conclusions is that the psychological boost gained by black soldiers as a result of the wartime recognition of their masculinity often lasted a lifetime. Service in the Civil War, in other words, seems to have served as a self-actualizing experience for black soldiers, most of whom, until they joined the army, had been explicitly denied any opportunity to prove their manhood. Black veterans, to be sure, faced countless struggles unfamiliar to their white comrades-in-arms. But they seemed to have possessed an enhanced capacity, in comparison to the rest of the African American community, to create their own luck. More sought the opportunities available in urban settings, and a significant portion were able to escape the brutal racism of the post-Reconstruction South. Shaffer concludes that black ex-soldiers tended to be "more prosperous than black men who had not served" and that "anecdotal evidence suggests veterans may have tried harder to better themselves" (p. 56).

Shaffer is convincing when he argues that service in the Union Army offered many black veterans inner resources they could call upon when attempting to better themselves after their return to civilian life. And he suggests that developments after the war reinforced this hard-won pride. Leading institutions in the black community embraced and celebrated veterans. In addition, despite a number of frustrations with the GAR leader-

ship, the ability to join with their white comrades as members of this powerful national organization during a time when African Americans were finding “increasingly little acceptance or esteem in mainstream society” carried tremendous meaning for black veterans (p. 143). Yet the self-actualized behavior of this cohort was also buttressed economically by a more tangible long-term benefit of military service, the access of many of its members to the welfare system created by Washington to assist Union veterans. Historians have long wondered about the impact of the pension system on black veterans, and Shaffer’s groundbreaking book offers some fascinating answers.

Black veterans did gain access to federal pensions but, as Shaffer notes, in comparison to white ex-soldiers this access was limited. Pensions were not granted automatically; Union veterans had to prove to Pension Bureau bureaucrats that they met the various and shifting eligibility criteria before receiving a check from Washington. Over nine out of ten of the white veterans (92 percent) who applied for a military pension successfully met these criteria, while the 75 percent success rate among black applicants was noticeably lower (p. 119). There were a number of reasons for this disparity. Black veterans may have been relatively well-off compared to the rest of the African American community, but many were still poor, and proving pension eligibility cost money: applicants had to pay a variety of legal fees in negotiating the system’s bureaucratic labyrinth, and most applicants had to travel to be examined by Pension Bureau medical examiners. The legacy of slavery and emancipation also weighed heavily on black applicants. Many ex-slaves did not know the exact date of their birth, and upon gaining freedom many abandoned their slave surname in favor of their father’s last name. As most ex-slaves were illiterate, misspellings were common on legal documents, which further confused federal bureaucrats. In one sample cited by Shaffer, only thirteen out of fifty white applicants came under the intense scrutiny of a Pension Bureau special examiner, while fully one half of the black applicants in this sample came under this same scrutiny. (One advantage of membership in the GAR was that white members often vouched for their black comrades, as well as helping them navigate the paperwork necessary to gain a pension.) Despite the obstacles they faced, 82,320 black ex-soldiers received pension checks from Washington in the decades following the Civil War. The black veterans in Shaffer’s sample received government payments amounting to \$3,759 over two decades, and he calculates that, conservatively, the amount paid

by Washington to African American veterans and their dependents was an extraordinary \$313 million dollars.

In addition to pensions, blacks veterans were also eligible for admission into the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, the federal system of hospital and domiciliary care created for the Union veterans. Relatively few disabled and elderly African American veterans took advantage of this federal benefit—in the 1890s only 1 percent of the Home’s residents were African American—and whenever possible black veterans chose to remain under the care of their families and communities rather than enter into an institution. Despite their under-utilization of the National Home, which seems to have been due to personal choice and not to institutional racism, Shaffer emphasizes, correctly I think, that during a time of increasing legal separation between whites and African Americans, “what is remarkable is that black veterans were accepted into the same homes as white soldiers as all” (p. 140). Given the profoundly and increasingly racist context of late-nineteenth-century America, the infusion by Washington of over three hundred million dollars into the African American community is even more remarkable. Federal pension checks offered individual recipients “more choices and empowering opportunities,” Shaffer concludes, and powerfully symbolized to the entire African American community “a form of inclusion ... in an era when exclusion and discrimination were common” (pp. 142, 136). Another significant contribution of Shaffer’s pioneering scholarship, then, is that it illustrates the longitudinal impact of the unprecedented flow of cash assistance offered by the American state to over eighty thousand African American veterans in gratitude for their service on behalf of the Union.

The enduring nature of the federal assistance offered to black veterans assumes even greater significance when one considers the evanescent nature of many of the victories gained by African Americans in the post-Reconstruction United States. By 1900, for instance, as tens of thousands of black ex-soldiers continued to receive federal pension checks in their mailboxes, the voting rights of African Americans in the states of the ex-Confederacy had virtually disappeared. By the end of the century, black veterans were also deeply frustrated and alarmed by the displacement of the national remembrance of the Civil War as an emancipatory conflict in favor of memory of the war as a battle to preserve the Union. Their wartime comrades in the white community were the leading proponents of this view. As Shaffer nicely puts it, for the North’s white veterans, including the leadership of the GAR, the emancipation of the na-

tion's slave population was "an agreeable outcome" of the Civil War, but "not as significant to them as keeping the Union intact" (p. 170). To add injury to insult, the important role played by black soldiers in the defeat of the Confederacy had largely disappeared down the memory hole of white America. For black writers such as Christian A. Fleetwood, the historical devaluation of the efforts of African American soldiers was nothing new. In 1895 he wrote bitterly, "after each war, of 1776, of 1812, and of 1861, history repeats itself in the absolute effacement of remembrance of the gallant deeds done for the country by its brave black defenders and their relegation to outer darkness" (p. 186).

Shaffer ends his book with the death, in 1951, of Joseph Clovese, the last known black Union veteran. Shaffer points out that in the half-century since the passing of Clovese, historians such as Dudley Taylor Cornish and Joe Glatthaar, as well as the many scholars involved in the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, have re-

covered and retold to contemporary Americans the story of African American soldiers during the Civil War. Perhaps more than anything else, the movie *Glory*, which will be screened by history teachers to their students for years to come, has resurrected in American popular culture the "gallant deeds done for the country by its brave black defenders." With the publication of Shaffer's important and groundbreaking book, Civil War historians now have the opportunity to look beyond 1865 and ponder more deeply the nation that black Union soldiers helped create, with all of the promise its new birth of freedom held for these brave men, and all of the peril.

#### Notes

[1]. Bruce Catton, *Grant Takes Command* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1969), pp. 491-492.

[2]. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 81-82.

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