

The African American's War

American author W.E. Woodward once stated, "The American Negroes are the only people in the history of the world, so far as I know, that ever became free without any effort of their own... [The Civil War] was not their business. They had not started the war nor ended it" (Woodward 372). Though sufficiently stated, Woodward perfectly exemplifies a common misconception in American history. Many people believe that since African Americans did not have rights, they must have been merely obeying their master's orders and slaving the days away during the Civil War. However, what the hoi polloi do not realize is that Negroes- beginning with antebellum riots, and continuing throughout Civil War- played a crucial, if not a leading role, in their emancipation. It is because of the African American insurgence that the war commenced and that their emancipation was achieved.

Although the Civil War has been nicknamed, "The War for State's Rights," "The War of Secession," and even "The War to Suppress Yankee Arrogance" by the Southerners, the war was truly fought over the issue of slavery (Davis 79). Since 1619, when a Dutch vessel brought twenty African Americans to Jamestown, Virginia, there have since been vassals who have attempted to escape the fate of servitude. From jumping off slave ships, hiding in secret compartments of wagons, trying the law through court cases, or even choosing suicide as a fate better than slavery, the African Americans have an extensive and caliginous history of striving to acquire independence; the Civil War has become one of their most famous and most sought after triumph (Kallen 8).

Perhaps one of the earliest examples of African American defiance took place during the making of the Declaration of Independence. Congressmen of the Continental

Congress were bombarded by Northern African Americans in protest and petition over the statement, “all men are created equal”. The African Americans believe that this statement was inclusive of all men, and not the men who fit the elitist definition of the word “men”. Even after the American Colonization Society formed in 1816 to abet the African Americans in returning back to their homeland in Africa, many blacks were adverse to returning to Africa because in their opinion, “They had died in America’s wars, had cleared this country’s land and swamps, and had helped build up its towns [...] They believed they had proven themselves productive, self-sufficient citizens, more so than even the slaveholders” (White 211).

One of the most famous protestors for the programs to return back to Africa was Frederick Douglass. Frederick Douglass believed that through constant preaching, political lobbying, and unyielding persistence African Americans would eventually find liberty in America. “You must be a man here,” he urged, “and force your way to intelligence, wealth and respectability. If you can’t do that here, you can’t do it there” (White 217). However, despite Douglass’s encouraging words, the blacks became a nation within a nation, set apart by both color and class. This separation of classes led to a strengthening of black pride in African American communities. Within these localities, black self-regard swelled and black abolitionist leaders banded together. “Whites may make ‘OUR CAUSE’ their cause all they want,” Phillip A. Bell announced in the black newspaper, the *Weekly Advocate*, but their efforts will be unavailing, ‘without our thinking and acting, as a body for ourselves’” (217).

Additionally, publishing literature became part of the Afro-American Movement towards freedom. Newspapers entitled *The Colored American*, the *Weekly Advocate*, the

New Era, and the *Weekly Anglo-African* were written by the blacks to notify each other of the events occurring in both their community and in America as a whole. However, since only a small percentage of blacks were literate, these newspapers also aided in strengthening the black community as well as bridging the gap between the literate and the illiterate (215). This greatly boosted the unification of the African Americans.

The urgency to attain freedom increased among both the abolitionists and the African Americans and violence soon ensued. Beginning in August of 1831, Nat Turner, a slave living in Virginia, led a twelve-hour slave rebellion of more than seventy slaves that resulted in the death of sixty white people. The slayers brutally murdered families, moving from one slaveholding house to the next, sparing virtually no one. Consequently, this rebellion embedded consternation in the hearts of many white, southern, slave-holding families and the restraints on slavery rose even higher as a result (Tackach 34).

John Brown's raid only made life more hazardous for both whites and blacks. In October of 1859, John Brown, a fanatical white abolitionist, led a group of twenty-two men, including both free and enslaved blacks to Harpers Ferry. The bandits cut telephone lines and abducted Lewis Washington, great-grandnephew of George Washington. As their plan began to unfold to capture Harper Ferry's arsenal and raid it of all its armament, Buchanan sent the U.S. militia to put a halt to Brown's bloody plans. The acts of Nat Turner and John Brown resulted in increased segregation, restrictions, taxes and attempted reenslavement bills for Negroes living in the South (64).

The struggle against slavery took on more momentum after the Civil War had begun and the Emancipation Proclamation was delivered. Former slaves began running from their owners to the approaching Union's soldiers, leaving the Union army with the

problem of what to do with the growing number of Negroes. One military chaplain of the Union described the African American's flight as, "illustrat[ing] what the history of the world has rarely seen- a slave population [...] leaving its bondage of centuries" (Frankel 231). The Union army began placing the refugees in territories known as contraband camps which were nearby Union encampments, as shown in Fig. 1. The living conditions here were unsanitary, overcrowded, and were vulnerable to Confederate raids. When the soldiers moved on to fight another battle, their departure jeopardized the safety of the freed people living in the camps. When this occurred, white Southerners raided the camps or recaptured former slaves. Despite the danger, in these contraband camps the Union army utilized men to work as drivers, cooks, blacksmiths, and construction workers, as portrayed in Fig. 1. The able African Americans were eventually allowed to enlist in the Union army after much protesting and lobbying from abolitionists and African Americans. "We beg that you will receive one or more regiments (of companies) of the colored of the free States," as one man from Ohio wrote to the Secretary of War, "We are partly drilled and would wish to enter active service immediately [...] To prove our attachment and our will to defend the government we only ask a trial" (231).

As for the remaining women, children, and elders, the U.S. officials decided to remove them from the contraband camps and into abandoned plantations. Here, the African Americans worked for very low wages or for no compensation at all under Northern white men or Southern planters who had taken a loyalty oath to the Union. Both the contraband camps and the abandoned plantations were subject to Confederate raids during the war. Sometimes the Confederates would come in and raid the plantations and reenslave the African workers.



Fig. 1. A picture of a group of contrabands from the Civil War (Gibson)

Government officials were originally worried about enlisting African Americans into the Union army; they feared that the presence of blacks would cause whites to abandon the army. However, as the war progressed, as the Union army suffered higher casualties, and as the African Americans and abolitionists continued to protest, the volunteering enlistments had slackened so much so that the government instituted a draft in 1863. The Northern whites greatly condemned the draft and eventually rioted against it in New York City. The white rioters claimed that the Africans Americans were the cause of the war and proceeded to murder blacks and burned down an African American orphanage and church. Therefore, since the volunteering enlistments had slacked and the whites refused to join the draft, the government was forced to allow the enlistment of African Americans because of the lack of soldiers.

Despite the fact that Lincoln originally was also opposed to enlisting African Americans, the Negroes continued to fight for their right to enlist in the Union army. By the time the Emancipation Proclamation was delivered, Lincoln in his address stated:

And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free [...] will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts,

position, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service (Lincoln).

As a result, within the next two years, nearly two hundred thousand African Americans took advantage of their freedom and joined the Union army and navy. By the Civil War's end, the African Americans had made up nearly ten percent of the army's infantry, cavalry, and artillery forces (Catton 379). The African American's performances during the war undermined any misconceptions about Negroes to the Northerners (Tackach 75). One newspaper even raved, "It is useless to talk any more about negro courage. The men fought like tigers, each and everyone one of them" (Frankel 233).



Fig. 2. A black soldier works as a cook in City Point, Virginia (City Point).

By the end of the Civil War, the African Americans showed that not only was the war fought over slavery, but that they had an equal if not more important role in their own emancipation. Through their use of print, reoccurring protest, and petition, and even

direct enrollment in the war, blacks had proved themselves worthy of discrediting the misconception that the African Americans did not lend themselves to the result of the Civil War. Martin R. Delany, the first black staff officer in the U.S. Military, would have strongly disagreed with Woodmore when he commented on the war on 1865 by saying, “Do you know that if it was not for the black men this war never would have been brought to a close with success to the Union, and the liberty of your race if it had not been for the Negro? I want you to understand that” (Catton 379). Rather than being merely a product of the “white man’s war,” these colored men and women were living proof of their own liberation (Glatthaar 11).

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