African American Citizens and U.S Imperialism: The Fight for Black Freedoms

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U.S Intervention

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The period following the Civil War in the United States and Reconstruction left many African Americans in a precarious position. The Freedmen's Bureau had been dismantled in part because of Southern pressure and yet the United States policy on expansion in the hemisphere was sold as their attempt to bring liberty to the region from foreign interference. This left many African Americans unhappy with the contradiction of taking care of the darker skinned population abroad before those at home. Others felt that this overseas expansion would allow them opportunities to take part in the prosperity it may bring. These contradicting viewpoints played out under the rehabilitation of the relationship of white populations of the North and South and pre-existing stereotypes about race and the capabilities racial affiliations implied. This paper will look at the unique position of African Americans on U.S imperialism from 1890 to 1903. The focus will be on the Spanish-American and the Philippine-American wars and the involvement of Black citizens in them.

What is the significance of race to the Philippines, Cuba and the United States and how does it relate to U.S expansion? "Scientific" theories about race had played a prominent role in Anglo-Saxon arguments of superiority well before the U.S expansion into these areas. The view that the Anglo-Saxons were "a superior race, and inferior races were doomed to subordinate status or extinction"[1] was supplemented with "the supposed knowledge and observation of

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[1] Horsman, R. (1986). *Race and manifest destiny: The origins of American racial Anglo-Saxonism, 2.*

Blacks and Indians."[2] Some in the United States thought that "equal rights to all individuals, irrespective of race, religion, gender, ethnicity, or political creed"[3] should be granted. Others advocated for racial nationalism which "expressed a sense of peoplehood grounded in common blood and skin color and an inherited fitness for self-government."[4] Those that favored racial nationalism used stereotypes to further their cause. The image of a Black man as a rapist, or Black male witch stealing children to conduct spells were means of keeping them in their "true place."[5] These depictions allowed Southerners to justify the "over four thousand lynchings"[6] and prevented Afro-Cuban citizens from claiming too much political or economic space. These views were used in the Philippines and Cuba when justifying U.S occupation. These theories about the inabilities of those with darker complexions to behave in a "civil manner" meant their ability to rule their territories independently would need to be evaluated by the United States before ceding power in the region.

African Americans were in favor of these wars for different reasons and to differing degrees. Afro-Cubans higher status than those in the United States lead Black U.S citizens to favor "Cuba libre" with some claiming it could be a "paradise for colored men."[7] Others recognized that the majority status of those of darker complexion could benefit them domestically. As T. Thomas Fortune, a civil rights leader stated, "the more dark peoples that we have under our flag the better it will be for those of us who came out of the forge and fire of

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[2] Horsman, *Race and manifest destiny*, 3.
[3] Gerstle, G. (2006). "Race and Nations in the United States, Mexico and Cuba 1180-1904". (272-304) Doyle and Pamplona, eds. Nationalism in the New World, 272.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid. 585.
[6] Grandin, G. (2019). *The End of Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*. New York: Metropolitan, 130.
[7] Gatewood, W. B. (1975). *Black Americans and the White man's burden, 1898-1903*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 322.

American Slavery."[8] Some saw both wars as a way to increase their standing in the United States. The "need to show that blacks were as courageous, as patriotic, as anyone else"[9] and able to help in "defeating a common enemy as national patriots, rather than as members of a racial group"[10] was meant to "uplift Black Americans, and bridge the gap between Black and White."[11] Of the fifteen regiments sent to Cuba, four of them contained Black soldiers.[12] There were also four Black regiments in the Philippines.[13] A version of Kipling's "White Man's Burden" was even written by Black writers. A clergyman and editor of the Christian Recorder, H.T. Johnson wrote a version in 1899. It reads, "Pile on the Black Man's Burden. 'Tis nearest at your door; why heed long bleeding Cuba, or dark Hawaii's shore? Pile on the Black Man's Burden. His wail with laughter drown[s]. You've sealed the Red Man's problem and will take up the Brown."[14] However, not all African American citizens favored U.S expansion.

Those who opposed these wars also had a range of reasons for doing so. Some strongly felt the similarities between themselves and those they were sent to fight. Others worried that the gains from Reconstruction could be "obliterated altogether" if these campaigns were the focus as they deterred from solving the racial issues at home.[15] By the Philippine war, racial tensions in the U.S had increased despite the participation of Black soldiers in Cuba. Thus some feared the potential place of Filipinos could "outstrip the Negro."[16] In Cuba and the Philippines a

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[8] Gatewood, *Black Americans, and the White Man's Burden*, 294.

[9] Zinn, H.A, *People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper, 2005), Ch. 5: "A Kind of Revolution," 61-77Z, 231.

[10] Dineen-Wimberly, I. (2014). "To carry 'the Black Man's Burden': T. Thomas Fortune's Vision of African American Colonization of the Philippines in 1902 and 1903", 70.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Obejas, A. (1998, Jul 17). "100 Years Ago, Illinois Black Soldiers Went To `Fight' In Cuba: [North Sports Final, Cn Edition]". Chicago Tribune, 4.

[13] Zinn, *People's History of the United States*, 232.

[14] Dineen-Wimberly, "To carry 'the Black Man's Burden,'"69.

[15] Gatewood*, Black Americans and the White man's burden*, 324.

[16] Ibid.

"consciousness of a brutal war, fought against colored people, a counterpart of the violence committed against black people in the United States"[17] was also pervasive among those who were opposed. They had "misgivings about a war launched in the name of humanity and waged on behalf of `little brown brothers' by a nation so enamored of Anglo-Saxon supremacy."[18] The similarities between the Filipino population and Black U.S citizens were also felt by the treatment of the native population. Black soldiers were "angered by the term [n*****r] used by white troops to describe the Filipinos."[19] Filipinos tried to appeal to these misgivings, with one asking a Black Soldier, "'Why does the American Negro come…to fight us where we are much a friend to him and have not done anything to him. Why don't you fight those people in America who burn Negros?'"[20] Many did recognize that in Cuba and the Philippines natives were "like them, [and] longed for liberty and freedom from white oppression."[21] These conflicting views were compounded by the changing relationship of the North and South's white citizens in the United States.

Cuba was the first time since the Civil War that white soldiers from the North and South fought together. This was detrimental to Black soldiers as it resulted in "accusations emerging from the war itself that black soldiers then serving in the U.S. Army were inferior to white soldiers and should no longer be permitted to represent the United States in combat."[22] Furthermore, in 1898, Norfolk Recorder's Black editor stated, "The closer the North and South get together by this war the harder [the African American] will have to fight to maintain a

[17] Zinn, *People's History of the United States*, 231.
[18] Dineen-Wimberly, "To carry 'the Black Man's Burden,'"69.
[19] Zinn, *People's History of the United States*, 232.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Gatewood *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden*, 321.
[22] Gerstle, G. (2006). "Race and Nations in the United States, Mexico and Cuba 1180-1904". (272-304) Doyle and Pamplona, eds. *Nationalism in the New World*, 278.

footing."[23] Fredrick Douglas echoed this message when he said, "If war among the Whites brought peace and liberty to the Blacks, what will peace among the Whites bring?"[24] These fears would be realized in several ways. One such instance took place in Wilmington, North Carolina, in November 1898. A mob of white men, many of whom had fought in Cuba, "killed between sixty and three hundred African Americans, ransacked African American businesses, and set fire to African American homes."[25] Another iteration of the tension between the white and Black regiments can be seen in Tampa, Florida where they were stationed for the Cuban campaign. "A race riot began when drunken white soldiers used a Negro child as a target to show their marksmanship; Negro soldiers retaliated, and then the streets 'ran red with negro blood,'"[26] These injustices were also exhibited in more subtle ways as can be seen from this quote from a chaplain of one of the Black regiments when he stated, "these black boys, heroes of our country, were not allowed to stand at the counters of restaurants and eat a sandwich and drink a cup of coffee, while the white soldiers were welcomed and invited to sit down at the tables and eat free of cost."[27]

The victories that African Americans won for themselves through military participation in the Spanish-American and the Philippine-American wars were limited and short lived. The military campaigns in the Philippines and Cuba did not present Black citizens with better circumstances at home. Instead, "fear and resentment among whites" towards black soldiers lead to a "tightening of racial lines"[28] both for those that returned and those left behind. In some instances, the military code itself made "the colored officer always junior to the white officer

[23] Grandin, *The End of Myth*, 142-143.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Grandin, *The End of Myth,* 142-143.
[26] Zinn, *People's History of the United States,* 231.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Gatewood, *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden*, 322.

regardless of their relative rank."[29] All Black militias were limited and still faced racial tensions and opposition with many Southerners seeing them as "superfluous."[30] In contrast, Cuban independence fighters were made up of a sixty-percent majority "men of color."[31] Forty percent of these men held "positions as captains, colonels, and generals" and had "authority over men [who] identified as white."[32] These contrasts and the increased racial tensions lead influential Black leaders like Booker T. Washington to recognize that the phrase "Emigration or extermination" was taking on a more prevalent role at the beginning of the 20th century.[33] While the consideration of McKinley and Roosevelt to send Black Americans en masse to its "new island possessions"[34] was abandoned due to pushback on forced emigration form the Black community (despite initial plans by some leaders to export between 5 and 8 million black citizens to the Philippines)[35] many African Americans created ties to these regions because of their similarities. There was an "unusually large number" of black troops that deserted during the Philippines campaign.[36] Members of the 8th Illinois regiment married Cuban women and brought them back to the United States and approximately "200 men -- returned to the island after their discharge, married and stayed there."[37]

Thus, while the United States benefitted from a reconciliation between white citizens in the North and South, the relationship between Black citizens in the United States and the white population remained precarious and contentious. Black citizens unique position due to the racial

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[29] Ibid, 68.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ferrer, "Cuba, 1898: Rethinking Race, Nation, and Empire," 24.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Gatewood, *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden* , 295.
[34] Dineen-Wimberly, "To carry 'the Black Man's Burden,'" 71.
[35] Gatewood, *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden*, 310-317.
[36] Zinn, *People's History of the United States*, 232.
[37] Obejas, "100 Years Ago, Illinois Black Soldiers Went To `Fight' In Cuba," 4.

ideologies that dominated the period brought a different perspective to U.S expansion. There was not a consensus on the wars either opposed or for. In the end, participation did not largely benefit the Black community, in some instances, it increased racial tensions in the United States. These wars are not the last time the role of Black soldiers would be contested. Although participation was difficult and had mixed results, it was at least possible.

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