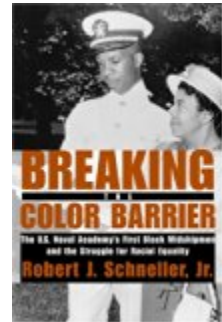


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert J. Schneller, Jr. *Breaking the Color Barrier: The U.S. Naval Academy's First Black Midshipmen and the Struggle for Racial Equality*. New York: New York University Press, 2005. xii + 331 pp. \$34.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-4013-2.

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The Sixth Wave: Black Integration in the U.S. Naval Academy

In a well-written and researched monograph, Robert Schneller reviews the fight of African Americans to integrate the U. S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Using a wide range of military, political, and oral sources, Schneller documents a struggle that ebbed and flowed throughout post-Civil War America. It is no coincidence that the fight for inclusion began in the 1870s, just a few years after the bloodiest war in American history. During the Reconstruction era, the nation sought to deal with the unresolved question of the place of the newly freed slaves in American society. The fourteenth amendment, ratified in 1868, promised among other things social equality to all citizens of the United States. It is here that Schneller starts his tale.

During Reconstruction, blacks sought to test this principle of equality in part by applying to become commissioned officers in the armed forces. In order to receive an appointment, a young man had to be nominated by a member of Congress and then pass a rigorous academic and physical examination. In the decade after the Civil War, over a dozen African Americans were elected to Congress from the South. It was from this newly created political elite, between Reconstruction and the Great Depression, that four out of the five black men appointed received their nominations for admittance to the Naval Academy. As the author carefully notes, none of the five made it past their first year of a four-year commission.

Black society viewed entry and completion at the Naval Academy as proof of their intellectual capability, demonstrating that they were fully deserving of equal rights as established in the fourteenth amendment. How-

ever, white society had a completely different mindset. It is this interposition that Schneller weaves wonderfully. What the reader is struck by are the immense hurdles that any new recruit (plebe) would encounter. All plebes coming into the academy had to face a harrowing first year of initiation rites, including being questioned at any on time any number of items of naval history, rules, and trivia by upperclassmen. These same upperclassmen could also inspect the plebe's room, clothes, and could review their demeanor at will. Any faults could then be written up as a demerit, of which only a certain amount could be amassed for the year before the plebe could be dismissed from the Academy. All of this does not include the actual classes, drills, and official instructions that all students had to complete each day. As the author notes, what a plebe needed more than anything else his first year was to blend into the background as much as possible and to have a social network of fellow students with which he could learn from and commiserate. This, decidedly, was not what the first set of black plebes faced.

The initial wave of African-American underclassmen faced a torrent of racism, ostracism, and physical brutality from their fellow classmates. In addition, the naval administration and political elites did little to shield the plebes from the daily onslaught. The official policy of the academy, outside of a brief few years during Reconstruction, was one of contempt and collusion in the attempts to run the African American plebes out of the Naval Academy. Schneller does a fine job of demonstrating the many dubious demerits that upperclassmen piled on the recruits, the fact that the Academy refused to give African Americans roommates, and the glaring social ostracism that they faced, especially from Southern white students. Other students viewed any attempt by a black

plebe to stand up for himself as being “uppity,” incurring wrath from classmates and disfavor from the naval administration. Schneller also notes that many of the first African-American plebes did have academic deficiencies in certain areas, caused largely by lack of educational opportunities for African Americans at the time, which lent cause to their dismissal.

An example of this was the case of James Conyers, who became the first black naval cadet in September 1872. Hailing from South Carolina, Conyers received nomination from Robert Elliot, a South Carolina congressman. Conyers’s first year at the academy was marked by unceasing verbal torment, seclusion, beatings and an attempted drowning by his classmates, among other abuses. Conyers yielded to the academic, physical, and psychic pressures and resigned by October 1873. Over the years, the next four African-American cadets faced parallel pressure and similarly bowed out after their freshman year. Altering this environment took many years and came from several different directions.

Many changes occurred before the Naval Academy’s first successful black midshipman, Wesley Brown. One was ongoing pressure by African-American political figures in the 1930s and 1940s. The increased social and ethnic diversity of incoming classes during the same time period also allowed for more tolerance and acceptance. As Schneller argues though, nothing made a bigger impact than the fundamental shift in official naval policy required by the demands of World War II. The vast increase in demand for manpower that the navy needed to fight in Europe and the Pacific called for a much more inclusive policy, one that would accept all recruits regardless of race. Wesley Brown, a Washington D.C. native, came into the Naval Academy in 1945 on a nomination by Adam Clayton Powell Jr., a congressman from Harlem, who was perhaps the most powerful and influential African-American politician of the twentieth century. Bright, athletic, likable, and deeply driven, Brown went to Annapolis in the summer of 1945 knowing he would face major obstacles but determined to overcome them. At the academy, he found that several dozen upperclassmen were bent on driving him out by giving him an overload of demerits. What the book shows is that unlike previous black plebes, he not only had administra-

tive support, but more directly the support of a number of fellow white plebes and upperclassmen, including a future president of the United States, Jimmy Carter. Once he survived his plebe year, Brown found that his next three years, although extremely challenging, were comparatively easy and relatively quick. By the time he graduated in 1949, becoming the first commissioned black officer in the Navy, Brown’s stature within his community rivaled that of Joe Louis and Jesse Owens. African Americans had broken through another barrier and, though the author does not state it, one could almost hear the Civil Rights movement marching around the corner.

Schneller displays a good grasp of the histories and subtleties of both naval and African-American history in his telling of the battle for Naval Academy integration. His style is authoritative yet warm, with a nice eye for the nuances of racism, burgeoning black pride, and the evolution of the Naval Academy in living up to the ideals on which the country was based. There are but a few critiques of the book. While Schneller is thorough in covering Brown’s first year at the Academy, the next three years are reviewed far too quickly. One is left wondering how white plebes reacted to taking orders from a black upperclassman or whether Brown, following Academy tradition, hazed those under him. Like previous black recruits, Brown did not have a roommate his first year. Was this true for the next three years as well? Did any of Brown’s former classmates who participated in his harassment ever come to regret their behavior? The assertion that the armed forces needed ever increasing numbers of men through 1945 is questionable as by this time the military had already started demobilizing. In his book, Schneller also makes some comparisons between the fight to integrate the Naval Academy and West Point. The author notes that West Point was more adept in graduating minorities than the Navy but one never fully understands why. What made the Army more successful than the Navy and what lessons could the Academy have learned from them? Despite these unanswered questions, this is a fine social history of the struggle to make America live up to its creed of equality for all. It is a recommended read for those interested in the intersection of African-American and military history.

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