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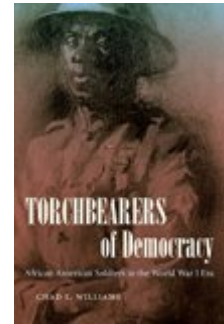
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Chad L. Williams. *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xiii + 452 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3394-0.

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Making America Safe for Democracy for All

In his new book, Chad L. Williams argues that the story of African Americans in World War I is more than just one of white racism or tales of heroic duty by blacks on the frontline. While each of those narratives is important in its own right, Williams, associate professor of history at Williams College, undertakes a different project. The war, proclaimed by Woodrow Wilson as one to “make the world safe for democracy,” challenged and helped define African Americans’ identity as Americans, both at home and abroad. It is this challenge, and African Americans’ responses to it, that drives Williams’s narrative. He argues that blacks “engaged in a fierce struggle to infuse personal and collective meaning into the ideals and everyday realities of democracy” during and after World War I (p. 3). It is a welcome addition to recent scholarship on World War I and the history of citizenship and identity.

Williams’s work on African American soldiers in the World War I era addresses questions about how war, service (military or otherwise), and identity are linked. Like other books on the nature of citizenship and identity during World War I—Christopher Capozzola’s *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (2008) and British historian Nicoletta Gullace’s *“The Blood of Our Sons”: Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War* (2002)—Williams’s study makes the case that the war was also a transformative event for African Americans. It was in this era that black men sought to make the promise of

democracy and equality more of a reality through service to their country. Williams’s work is a strong addition to this historiography, as well as to that of African American history. By looking at African American soldiers, he incorporates race into the historiographical discussions about citizenship in the Allied and Associated nations.

Williams structures his book in two parts: “War” and “Peace?” The four chapters in part 1 examine how African American men became soldiers. Chapter 1 analyzes how black American men dealt with the new Selective Service laws and could “challenge white supremacy and make democracy a reality” (p. 16). In chapter 2, Williams focuses on the racial struggles within the army and stateside training experiences of black Americans. Chapter 3 looks not only at how black American soldiers experienced war, but also at how many used their experience overseas as a way to look for alternative concepts of democracy and citizenship. Chapter 4 may be the most interesting chapter in the book. Here Williams examines black American soldiers in relation to their army service and to white racisms, as well as their encounters with black colonial troops of European powers.

In part 2, Williams shifts his focus to how returning black American soldiers not only experienced their return, but also used their war experience and identity as veterans to advance themselves within the New Negro movement of the 1920s. In chapter 5, Williams discusses black soldiers’ hopes that their service would

be honored beyond the black community once they returned home and that their record of service could allow for “a new era of race relations and democratic reciprocity” (p. 222). In chapter 6, Williams details the difficulty black soldiers had in realizing the equality they had hoped for. Williams tells us that the deeply ingrained social, cultural, and political structure of the United States—especially in the South—was threatened by any equation of black service with that of whites. That reality led many black American soldiers to question the meaning of their own service and realize that the war for democracy Wilson talked about would not be a cure all for their ills. Chapter 7 shows that many black men began to advance themselves within the New Negro movement and chapter 8 focuses on the memory of their service.

Williams uses multi-archival and multinational sources to make his case. These range from personal papers and oral histories of many African American soldiers to the archives of the United States’ military and War Office, to the records of the French Army from repositories in Paris, France. The use of French archives provides a refreshing transnational view to his book. This is best exemplified in the most interesting chapter, “Les Soldats Noir.” In this chapter, Williams looks not only at African American soldiers in relation to the French people and army, but also to French (and other) colonial troops, many of whom were from Africa.

Williams expertly navigates the complicated nature of identity, especially when looking at African American soldiers abroad. Williams states that black American soldiers often felt alienated from their own country and used the military as a way to incorporate themselves into American culture, especially the masculine culture of the military. Often, black soldiers were not seen by their American counterparts as representing established military values. They were more successful with the French, being treated as legitimate soldiers by the French citizenry; “American military racism only served to increase the admiration black soldiers had for the French” (p. 169). Williams also points out that when black American soldiers were confronted with foreign troops, their Americanness became powerfully evident, especially when meeting black colonial troops. “The fact remained,” Williams writes, “that fundamental cultural, social, and political differences existed ... rooted in their particular historical experiences and contemporary realities” (p. 176). Or, to put it more bluntly, “Americanness regularly trumped Africanness” (p. 177).

Williams’s study does an excellent job of weaving these complex ideas in a clear narrative. The narrative is written in a clear and accessible way, making it useful for both graduate seminars and advanced undergraduate classes.

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