

H-Net Reviews

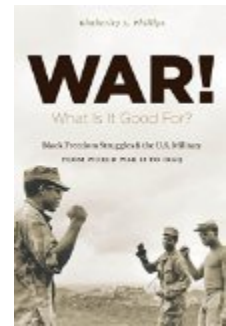
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kimberley L. Phillips. *War! What Is It Good For?: Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. xi + 343 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3502-9.

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Is War Worth It?

In recent years, the University of North Carolina Press, through its John Hope Franklin Series, has produced several works that revise the way historians understand the long history of African American service in the military. Kimberley Phillips's entry into this field, *War! What Is It Good For? Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War I to Iraq*, provides a timely examination of the growing resistance to military service within the African American community. Phillips captures the concerns over the lackluster returns that black families received from their investment, namely the sacrifice of sons, brothers, and fathers in America's wars; and how this concern combined with a growing international awareness about the role their race was playing, as American soldiers, throughout the world.

Throughout American history, African Americans had picked up arms in defense of the republic. Each time they answered the call, they hoped that this endeavor, this cause, and this war would prove to be a worthy sacrifice to the white American majority, who continued to withhold equality from them. It was this continued push for civil rights that emerged during the era of Frederick Douglass and maintained its momentum into the twentieth century that led to the organizing of African Americans into segregated combat units, when most often black soldiers wound up in subordinate military professions, and that even contributed to the gradual integration of the armed forces.

In this sense, war was good for change and served as an avenue to a better way of life for blacks living in a segregated America. Many even believed that the military could serve as a Trojan horse of reform for the nation, a way to sneak integration into American culture and society. The rub, though, was that the integration of the armed forces proved to be painfully slow and inconsistent, and costly for the African American community as black soldiers, during the Vietnam conflict in particular, served in a disproportionate fashion as compared to their white countrymen. Additionally, the wheels fell off the Trojan horse of reform as white Americans, especially those in the South, bucked any attempts to change the racial status quo of the nation.

To be sure, while there remained an ideological strain within the African American community that clung tightly to the belief in the power of military service as a means to thwarting racial segregation, this long-held assumption faced a stiff challenge from returning black veterans, and the families of those who had served, who openly questioned the benefits of war to their cause. The challenge against military service also came from other elements of black culture and society. It came from the electrifying and haunting music of Jimmy Hendrix, who served in the 101st Airborne to escape prison, make a better living, and perhaps someday marry. Hendrix's screaming riffs found their counterpart in the eloquent prose of Langston Hughes, who harnessed the anger, frustration, and humiliation of the African American sol-

dier as he wrestled with “Jim Crow Shock.” Civil rights leaders, who often connected integration with America’s international struggle with communism, criticized the nation’s hypocritical quest for international freedom abroad, while denying African Americans equal rights with whites. Even W. E. B. Dubois, a perennial advocate of black service in the military and for the integration of the armed forces, challenged African Americans to reject service during the Cold War clash unfolding in Korea. Years later, during the conflict in Vietnam, the boisterous and confrontational Black Power rhetoric of Stokely Carmichael and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) joined with the inspirational nonviolent message of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in questioning America’s actions in what appeared to be a progressively vicious racial war in Southeast Asia.

War! What Is It Good For? is a fantastic work that explores the ideological tug-of-war occurring within the African American community over service in the nation’s armed forces. A problem, however, does emerge around an aspect of the work. Project 100,000, a Kennedy-Johnson-era program designed to reclaim one-third of the nation’s poor, appears in this work as a weapon against members of the antiwar black community. In particular, General Lewis Hershey receives top billing for his use of the program in this fashion. Phillips declares, “Hershey had long despised black civil rights activists, and Project 100,000 provided the opportunity to use the draft as ‘punishment’ for men he considered unpatriotic malcontents” (p. 203). There can be no doubt that the director of the Selective Service’s attitudes toward racial reform and black civil rights advocates deserves further study, but to assume that Hershey used the program successfully as a “punishment” for the antiwar black community is questionable.

The ideological foundation for Project 100,000 came from *One-Third of a Nation* (1964), a report prepared by the President’s Task Force on Manpower Conservation. While Hershey was a member of the task force, it was Daniel Patrick Moynihan, contrary to Phillips’s assertion

on page 202, who wrote the document and who some, including myself, consider to be the ideological father of Project 100,000.[1] Moynihan, then, was one of the central figures behind using the military as an instrument of social policy. In the milieu of the Great Society and the War on Poverty, he was not alone. Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara supported this effort and attempted in 1964, before the conflict in Vietnam escalated, to implement a similar, but more modest program known as STEP. The program failed, as Congress refused to raise additional funds to support it.[2]

Once Project 100,000 launched in 1966, the goal was to uplift one-third of the nation’s youth lost to poverty who as a result of their economic circumstances, failed to meet the basic mental and physical qualifications for military induction. Phillips is aware that this was the intention of the program. Her claims about Hershey’s manipulation of the program, however, overshadow the primary purpose of the project, which conversely was its greatest flaw: the belief among Johnson administration officials that a stint in the military could break the cycle of poverty for many of the nation’s youth while at the same time shoring up America’s long-term military manpower needs. As it reads in *War!*, the program seems to have been a tool designed to attack the antiwar members of the civil rights movement. Project 100,000 was an ill-fated idea to be sure, no matter how noble and legitimate its intentions, but not for the reasons given here.

Notes

[1]. On the issue Daniel Patrick Moynihan and his role with *One-Third of a Nation*, see Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 385; indeed, Moynihan takes credit for coming up with basis for the report in 1963, and even questions later his role in the report; for more on this see, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Miles to Go: A Personal History of Social Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 216-218.

[2] Shapley, *Promise and Power*, 385.

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