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William A. Dobak. *Freedom by the Sword: The U.S. Colored Troops, 1862-1867.* Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2011. xvi + 553 pp. $58.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-16-086695-1.

Barbara A. Gannon. *The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. 288 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3452-7.

Harold Holzer. *Emancipating Lincoln: The Proclamation in Text, Context, and Memory.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012. 256 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-06440-9.

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How Did Freedom Come?

The years 2011 through 2015 mark the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War. Hundreds of books, articles, exhibitions, conferences, seminars, movies, reviews, etc., are commemorating this momentous epoch. In a nation ideologically rooted in the notion of liberty, we should not be surprised that freedom and its origins are a critical aspect of this story. These three books provide contrasting answers to the question of how freedom came as well as different understandings about what freedom means.

Abraham Lincoln has traditionally been seen as the Great Emancipator. His Emancipation Proclamation (EP) liberated the slaves in the American South and served as the precursor to the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution outlawing American bondage. Since at least the 1960s, black and leftist scholars have challenged this view in a variety of ways. Lincoln was either a racist, a colonizer, or largely irrelevant to an emancipation process in which slaves liberated themselves in what one scholar has memorably dubbed "The Great American Slave Rebellion."[1]

Harold Holzer, a senior administrator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the author of more than forty works on Lincoln, seeks to steer between the Great Emancipator myth and its critics who look incorrectly at history "from the comparatively enlightened future backward" (Holzer, p. 125). It is these frameworks he wishes to emancipate Lincoln from–hence the work's title. He seeks to "reintroduce authenticity" in analyzing the EP by refocusing on the wider political, military, legal, and public realities facing Lincoln (Holzer, p. 3). His method is a tripartite division of the EP into context, text, and memory. Chapter 1 argues that "official silence and selected revelations" explain Lincoln's reticence in publicly advocating emancipation (Holzer, p. 72). Chapter 2 attributes the EP's leaden language to the strategic necessity of disarming "domestic foes on the left and right alike, and [to] somehow rally the center" (Holzer, p. 100). Chapter 3 examines changing visual representations of Lincoln, from the making of the Great Emancipator through modern artists' depiction of freedom as America's unfinished work.

We should all be grateful to Mr. Holzer for injecting authenticity into a historical discussion that presupposes a lack of authenticity in the work of previous scholars. It seems a little ambitious, however, to dislodge such a voluminous scholarship with so small a book despite its author's impeccable Lincoln credentials. Moreover, the author never stops to consider that Lincoln might have either co-opted a process of emancipation that was already unfolding before him or simply facilitated a transformation of a war for Unionism into a war for slave abolition by bestowing official legitimacy on a *fait accompli.* Most pointedly, the premise of his argument is unpersuasive. Reducing the EP to a textual and contextual analysis of drafting, vetting, and presenting, ties the origins of freedom to the hallowed halls of public political office in general and the commander-in-chief's brilliance specifically. Rather, these lay in the farms, plantations, towns, cities, and coastal areas of American slavery and Union advancement where the process of freedom ebbed and flowed in a constant river of human struggle.

Between 1862 and 1867, more than 200,000 black men served the Union as soldiers and sailors, most of whom were former slaves. The role of the Union military in general, and black soldiers in particular, has long been argued as the central explanation for why freedom came, by pioneering black authors like William W. Brown, George T. Williams, and Joseph T. Wilson.[2] It is not until fairly recently, however, that the American historical profession has willingly embraced the topic. We now have superb studies of the black military experience on the field, at the campfire, in the regiment, etc., and many others, with more promised.[3]

Freedom by the Sword provides the latest installment of this important link between black troops and the coming of freedom in the field. This massive tome offers a detailed narrative of the formation, training, and operations of black troops from their earliest mobilization in 1862 through their final muster-out in December 1867 in every theater of war in which they served. It is organized around Federal advances into Confederate territory in the South Atlantic coast, southern Louisiana and the Gulf coast, the Mississippi River valley, the territory between Kansas and northwest Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia in 1864-65, and southern Texas between the Confederate surrender and final muster-out. William A. Dobak, former instructor at the U.S. Army Center of Military History and author of two previous studies on the economics of military finance and postbellum black troops, correctly insists on black troops' vital contribution to Union victory as well as their role in self-liberation. The title comes from a motto, *ferro iis libertas pervenier* (freedom attained by the sword), on medals designed by General Benjamin Butler to award black troops whose battlefield exploits were deserving of military recognition but denied.

There are several positives here. It is the first general narrative of black troops' operations in one volume. The focus on the field rather than the office is where discussions of the working out of freedom ought to focus. Contrasting processes of recruitment are also invaluable: in Louisiana, slaves were violently impressed into the Union army; while in the South Atlantic theater, they usually volunteered. The sheer brutality of war and prisoner murders, with Confederates killing black troops, black troops' retaliation while crying out "Fort Pillow," and both sides fearing capture as a consequence, makes for a captivating narrative (Dobak, pp. 351-352). Some of the distinctions between well-performing and poor-performing troops because of the state of weaponry, time for training, poor discipline under fire, and quality of officers, offer a welcome challenge to the heroic narrative that remains embedded in black troops' historiography. It is also a very readable narrative, with arresting illustrations and useful tables and maps.

But there are also problems. While the author's use of the seventy volumes of *The War of the Rebellion* provides remarkable detail, the nature of the source means that rarely do we see black troops outside of the official record. These troops always seem to be acting and reacting within a military framework. But what about dusk to dawn for ex-slave soldiers who either liberated themselves or were militarily liberated? What happened to this part of slave culture or did it just stop? Furthermore, the author makes occasional references to court martial (Dobak, p. 420), but it appears that more black troops suffered this supreme military judgment compared to white troops. Why was this and what does it say about the Union military? But perhaps the greatest oversight is the lack of attention toward freed families of black soldiers promising new research questions around kinship, gender, and community formation.[4]

Between August 1865 and December 1867, black regiments were mustered out, starting with the 54th and ending with the 125th (Dobak, p. 474). In the years after the Civil War, black and white Union soldiers joined the Union army's largest veterans organization. The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), operating between 1866 and the death of the last member in 1956, briefly became the largest social and charitable organization in the United States. Stuart McConnell and Donald Schafer have previously examined GAR, both arguing that black veterans were not treated equally to white veterans and that this reflected the broader movement against racial equality during the late nineteenth century.[5] In opposition to this "segregationist paradigm," Barbara Gannon, assistant professor of military history at the University of Central Florida, argues that GAR was much more open to black veterans as well as more racially equal than previous scholars have maintained (Gannon, p. 3).

The book is divided into two parts around these key points. The first examines more than two hundred black GAR posts located in twenty-four states and the District of Columbia, and how they transformed GAR into an interracial organization through self-organization of posts, support for collective philanthropic efforts for members led by women's auxiliaries, and keeping alive the memory of black soldiers fighting and dying for the Union and slave emancipation. The second section examines hundreds of integrated posts and how their black and white veterans made a world together through "comradeship," reflected in local fraternity, constant recollections of the

"shared experience of suffering," and saving the Union together (Gannon, p. 118). These insights draw from state and local GAR records as well as black newspapers, providing more information on integrated posts and veterans' comradeship than previous national studies. The book's title, *The Won Cause*, is for union and liberty together with the "living legacy of the black and white comrades," a memory more important, according to the author, than scholarly attempts to discredit the Lost Cause as myth (Gannon, p. 195). A lot of the illustrations seem original, and there are two useful appendices on black GAR posts and integrated GAR posts by state, post number, name, and location.

This focus on black veterans by McConnell, Shaffer, Gannon, and others, is a welcome research development in black troop historiography. The point about independent black institution building is an important one. The focus on interracial comradeship of shared struggle is persuasive. The local research is effective and digs deeper than national studies. One of the revelations to this reader was that black troops' operations commemorated at local posts must have been the earliest grassroots work on black troops' historiography. On the other hand, one wonders what barriers such comradeship must have thrown up between those who fought for the Union and those who fought for the Confederacy as well as those who fought and those who did not fight. Moreover, what was the meaning of veteran comradeship in an age of increasing racial segregation and denial of equal opportunity for African American men, women, and children for whom the only alternative was through institution-building along segregated lines? In other words, one is struck by the uniqueness of GAR at the local level compared to the lived reality of American institutions–family, school, church, club, etc.–in which most Americans lived their lives. These were the living and breathing spaces in which black Americans sought to carve out new meanings of freedom in the post-emancipation decades.

There is little doubt that these three books will contribute to ongoing and vigorous debates on how freedom came during and after the American Civil War. Those who think that emancipation was a gift from above will draw sustenance from Holzer's historicity. Those who link freedom with white and black bayonets will be inspired by Dobak's meticulous tome. Those who seek moments of racial equality in America's long tradition of racial exclusion and inequality will appreciate the GAR's history. But reviewing these three randomly selected books together raises a vexing issue. Black troops fought to preserve the Union and abolish slavery. Black veterans promoted an interracial agenda–with all its limitations–far into the postbellum decades. In other words, they were at the very heart of implementing freedom. The message that emancipation was brought by Lincoln, Congress, the generals, abolitionists, etc., however, serves not only to deny the agency of blacks in their own liberation, but to deny them a very place at freedom's table, which was taken by representatives–Christian missionaries, northern business interests, federal employees, etc.–who ended up defining what that freedom would become. The United States continues to frequently foster this misguided understanding of freedom economically and militarily around the globe today.

Notes

[1]. Robert F. Engs, "The Great American Slave Rebellion" (unpublished manuscript, 1988).

[2]. William Wells Brown, *The Negro in the American Rebellion* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1867); George W. Williams, *A History of Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1888); and Joseph T. Wilson, *The Black Phalanx* (Hartford: American Publishing, 1890).

[3]. Ira Berlin et al., eds., *The Black Military Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Keith P. Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom: The Camp Life of Black Soldiers during the Civil War* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2002); Richard M. Reid, *Freedom for Themselves: North Carolina's Black Soldiers in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); and James Elton Johnson, "A History of Camp William Penn and Its Black Troops in the Civil War, 1863-1865," (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1999).

[4]. Reid, "Families of the Soldiers during the War," in *Freedom for Themselves*, 215-254; Patricia C. Click, *Time Full of Trial: The Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony, 1862-1867* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Steven Hahn et al., eds., *Land and Labor, 1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

[5]. Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); and Donald R. Schaffer, *After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

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