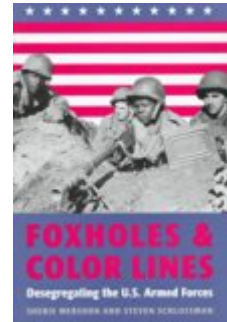


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sherie Mershon, Steven Schlossman. *Foxholes & Color Lines: Desegregating the U.S Armed Forces*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. xiii + 393 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5690-7.

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## Desegregation Reviewed Again

The story of the desegregation of the United States armed forces is recounted in this book by Sherie Mershon and Steven Schlossman. Based upon secondary sources, the authors provide an interesting and detailed account of the process. The authors stress leadership, the relationship between national politics and military decision making, and the barriers that the military culture created to impede the transformation of military policies. The major contribution of this work is in the gathering of materials from previously published works rather than in the use of new sources or new perspectives.

After a brief introductory chapter on both the military and racial segregation policies prior to 1940, the authors begin a detailed account of World War II and the expansion of segregated units in the enlarged armed forces. They note that African-American groups, such as the NAACP and the March on Washington Movement, urged the armed forces to end racial segregation. The War and Navy Departments, however, rejected such a change; they believed that a transformation on this scale would have undermined military effectiveness and that American society did not want a major social experiment begun at that time. As a result, as the war went on the gap between black aspirations and military policies continued to rankle African Americans.

Significant change would occur in the postwar period. More and more civilians, especially national leaders like Harry Truman, began to agree with the black community that segregation in the armed forces was

wrong. On the other hand the armed forces, especially the Marines and the Army, continued to insist that they could not change, that military effectiveness would be impaired by integration, and that the current system was working effectively. Among the forces that led to Executive Order 9981 was Truman's desire for fairness, the pressure generated by the propaganda needs of the Cold War, the growing belief in America that segregation was wrong, and the politics of the 1948 election. A broad consensus in America in favor of racial integration of the armed forces was not one of these forces.

The last half of the book describes the implementation of the integration decision, the different attitudes within the military toward this idea, and the pressures that civilians, especially the black community, exerted on the military. Among the key leaders in this seventeen-year process were Truman, Matthew Ridgway, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Truman gave the initial order. Army Chief of Staff Ridgway showed that integration could work [though he did so for practical reasons]. Finally King helped lead the civil rights movement which in turn increased the pressure on the government to address issues of equality within the armed services. By the 1960s integration had been achieved but equality had not. The Department of Defense created a study commission [the Gesell Committee] which fully explored the remaining issues. Their recommendations, including the suggestion that the military use its economic clout to force off-base non-discrimination, were seen as too advanced.

However, times changed and such plans were implemented in the 1970s. The authors, however, largely end their study with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In the concluding chapter Mershon and Schlossman sketch out four ideas which they feel their presentation has demonstrated: that politics played a major role in decisions involving the status of blacks in the military; that military and civilian leadership was crucial in determining how much and what kind of integration occurred; that concepts of race helped determine how blacks were to be utilized in the military both in a positive and negative way; and that the military tried to change behavior, not attitudes.

This is a book that the general public might find interesting but scholars will find little new in it. On the one hand, it is well written and widely researched in the secondary sources. However, Mershon and Schlossman retell, in only somewhat greater detail, the same narrative that has been presented in the works of Ulysses Lee on World War II and Bernard Nalty on the general his-

tory of race relations and desegregation efforts. The new account has a somewhat different perspective from these earlier works but the analysis is limited in scope.

Given when the book was written, it would have been fascinating if the authors had extrapolated from their conclusions on the race issue to the military's handling of gender and sexual orientation issues that have occurred since the 1970s. Here again the military was forced to handle issues it seemingly did not want to handle, issues where the consensus in society was unclear. The authors could also have interviewed some of the participants in the desegregation process, but they chose instead to write a different kind of book. Overall, this book is a disappointment, not so much for what it is, but because it could have been so much more.

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