

In the Army Now

Overrepresented today, blacks were once denied the right to fight.

As U.S. soldiers were rushed to the Persian Gulf, news began to filter back that African-Americans, Hispanics, and other non-whites were vastly overrepresented. Half of the U.S. women deployed were African-American, and the percentage of black men and women in the Gulf was more than in any previous war, double or perhaps triple their portion of the general population. And then there was the striking symbolism of General Colin Powell, commander of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In the midst of the short gulf ground war, George Bush presided over a White House Black History Month program that proudly pointed to the large numbers of black troops in the Gulf. His nationally televised address claimed General Powell and the overrepresentation as an affirmation that the country's military had become the most reliable equal opportunity employer. Bush also sought to still many in the black community

BY WILLIAM LOREN KATZ

who were deeply troubled by the overrepresentation.

Blacks are more knowledgeable about their past than at any other time, and may be the most historically informed ethnic community in the country. They are conscious that civil rights victories have not been handed down by kind officials but won by slogging through political battlefields against bigotry.

Owners feared to arm their slaves, but African-Americans were military recruits beginning in the colonial era. In the 18th century, South Carolina masters deployed mounted black cowhands to guard Charleston from Indians. This also served to pit two potential allies against one another. In a 1715 war, whites threw blacks against the Yemasee Indians, only to find their forces included black soldiers, former slaves the Yemasee had liberated.

In the Revolution, slaves had to battle for the chance to fight. Though free blacks stood with the minutemen at Concord Bridge, slaves were not recruited by the Continental Army until Lord Dumore offered those reaching his lines freedom and a British musket. Ultimately 5,000 African-Americans served in George Washington's army and John Paul Jones's navy, often on an integrated basis. Since the slaves' aim was liberty, some joined the British. An additional 100,000 slaves used the war to flee.

The Revolution loosened slavery's grip on the North, which completed emancipation in the early 19th century. In the South, the system tightened its hold. But each time European nations clashed, slave plots, insurrections, and escapes increased.

Some blacks continued to seek liberty through soldiering. In the War of 1812, one in six U.S. sailors was black. They won praise from Captain Perry, who had doubted their abilities, and Commodore

Chauncy, who never had. At New Orleans 400 free black volunteers joined Andrew Jackson to drive back the last foreign invasion of the Americas. But slavery did not change. Soon the black heroes of New Orleans were considered too subversive to march in the city's annual victory parades.

In the Civil War, African-Americans turned Lincoln's fight to preserve the Union into what he later would call "a new birth of freedom." Black



MICHAEL PINZO

men and women began the process by escaping to Union lines, offering to build fortifications, serve as spies, or fight.

At first they were returned to their Confederate masters, but in May 1861, at Fort Monroe, Union General Ben Butler refused to return some fugitives, declaring them "contraband of war." By Christmas he had 900 "contrabands" willing to help and interested in fighting. Black efforts for liberty, though rarely encouraged, had put emancipation on the Union agenda.

First, Union commanders in the field accepted the necessity of emancipation, then Congress, and finally the president. Each also responded to the public. In 1862, the slave crew of a Confederate battleship, the *Planter*, delivered the ship to the Union fleet outside Charleston, South Carolina. As losses mounted north and south, and both sides ran out of reserves, such black thrusts for freedom were not lost on northern parents whose sons were dying in great numbers. Blacks were a behind-the-lines force that could undercut the Confederate food chain, disrupt its supply lines, and serve as Union spies and soldiers.

Before Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, black men in Union blue-coats had clashed with their former masters in three southern states. The president ratified steps they had taken.

One in four Navy sailors was black. More than 186,000 ex-slaves served in the Union Army. They did so with less pay, training, medical facilities, and fewer doctors than whites. These soldiers had no black officers and faced reenslavement or death if captured. Equal to the number in uniform were the black men, women, and children who helped around the Union camps—doing the laundry, building fortifications, serving as messengers and spies.

Black bravery astonished those (including Lincoln) who believed former slaves could not fight their masters. By August 1864, Lincoln said that without his black troops "we would be compelled to abandon the war in three weeks." Their battlefield successes helped him carry the close 1864 election.

Union soldiers trapped behind enemy lines or escaping Confederate prisons found slaves to be a useful presence. "To see a black face," said a white escapee, "was to find a true heart."

Black bravery in battle—23 earned the Congressional Medal of Honor—and other contributions to victory guaran-

teed blacks a permanent place in the U.S. Army, but still a rigidly segregated one. Black "Buffalo Soldiers" won glory

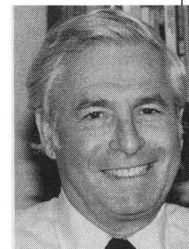
In World War II, blacks again helped save the world in the segregated U.S. Army and Navy. They preferred to fight for the double V—victory over fascism abroad and racism at home. They served with distinction in every theater of operation and in the skies over Europe. Again no blacks were awarded medals of honor and there was only one black general. The war against Nazi racism had failed to end army segregation.

In 1948, when black leaders urged their people to refuse to serve in segregated armed forces, President Truman finally ordered integration. Then came the Korean War. The U.S. government was still playing catch-up with black demands, and the black community still knew that concessions only came through struggle. In Korea black officers were few, but black soldiers earned Congressional Medals of Honor.

As American anti-communism increasingly sent troops into Third World countries, recruitment of blacks rose. By the Vietnam era, whites did not want to fight in jungles and Hispanics and blacks were hired at combat pay. "It's the kind of integration that can kill you," said one soldier. For the first time, minorities were overrepresented on America's battlefields. Army enlistment drives were powered by a kind of negative economic draft—a lack of decent jobs and salaries and not much hope for black high school graduates in civilian life.

This still operates. The black community is painfully aware of the many ironies that surround its heroic effort to participate in the armed forces. Now overrepresented, they ask why their most educated sons and daughters have to risk so much more than other Americans to "be all that you can be."

► **WILLIAM LOREN KATZ**, a 1950 graduate of SU's College of Arts and Sciences, is the author of 24 books on American minorities, including *Breaking the Chains: African American Slave Resistance*, *The Lincoln Brigade*, and *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage* (all from Atheneum Publishers). He is education and books columnist for the *Daily Challenge*, New York City's only daily black newspaper.



The black heroes of New Orleans were considered too subversive to march in the city's annual victory parades.

on the last frontier and black troops in the Spanish American War helped Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders win San Juan Hill. These troopers just never made it into the history books or onto the silver screen.

Of the 20 black cadets at West Point in the 19th century, only three scraped through the racial hazing to graduate. Then the first was driven from service by trumped up charges, the second was pushed out and the last, Major Charles Young, was unceremoniously retired at the outset of World War I so he could not lead men in "the war to make the world safe for democracy."

Black World War I units abroad were placed under French command. Their hosts showered individuals and entire regiments with medals—but no African-American was granted the Congressional Medal of Honor in this effort. These heroes returned home to a summer of 26 race riots and dozens of lynchings, which sometimes took the lives of black men still wearing Army uniforms.

In 1937, a black man, Oliver Law, finally became commander of an American army, but by a strange course. During his six years in the segregated U.S. Army in Texas, Law could not rise above sergeant. But now he was in a very different army, one not in the United States, not even part of the regular U.S. army. Some 2,800 black and white Americans left for Spain to defend its republic from Hitler and Mussolini before World War II. They volunteered for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, which, along with 40,000 volunteers from 52 other countries, hoped to stop Nazi aggression before it led to World War II. In Spain an integrated Lincoln Brigade quietly, naturally selected Oliver Law as its commander.