Text #2

Black Participation in The Spanish-American War

The sinking of the U.S. Navy battleship MAINE, in Havana harbor, February 15, 1898, and the resulting loss of American lives gave all the cause needed to commence the war Americans, both civilian and military, seemed to want. The suddenness of the event, however, revealed a shortcoming in military preparedness for a nation with expansionist intentions.

The army totaled little more than 26,000 men and 2,000 officers. And the mass of experienced combat troops were garrisoned at numerous forts throughout the west. It was no surprise, under the circumstances, that among the first units ordered to Cuba were the four black regiments. They were selected primarily on the basis of recent experience and their record on the Plains, but there was also the judgment of the War Department that blacks were immune to the diseases of the tropics and capable of more activity in high, humid temperatures. This erroneous thinking resulted in a concerted effort to recruit blacks for the formation of more "immune" troops. Whatever the motives for mobilizing black regulars, the soldiers themselves welcomed the opportunity to demonstrate their "soldierly qualities" and win respect for their race.

Black soldiers may have had little hesitation in whole-heartedly joining the Cuban expedition, but a large segment of the black community felt differently. The anti-imperialist element was concerned about the War's impact on black Americans. Many members of this group were sympathetic with the plight of Cuba and especially with black Cubans. "Talk about fighting and freeing poor Cuba and of Spain's brutality; of Cuba's murdered thousands, and starving reconcentradoes. Is America any better than Spain? Has she not subjects in her very midst who are murdered daily without a trial of judge or jury? Has she not subjects in her borders whose children are half-fed and half-clothed, because their father's skin is black."

The anti-imperialists envisioned a war that would extend the Jim Crow empire, leaving black Americans as well as the colored population of the Spanish colonies in the same oppressed condition or worse. Only when the American government guaranteed its own minority citizens full constitutional rights, they contended, could it sincerely undertake a crusade to free oppressed people from tyranny.

The advocates of the war maintained that the black man's participation in the military effort would win respect from whites and therefore enhance his status at home. They also hoped that the islands coming under American influence would open economic opportunities for blacks and bring them into contact with predominately "colored" cultures. "Will Cuba be a Negro republic? Decidedly so, because the greater portion of the insurgents are Negroes and they are politically ambitious. In Cuba the colored man may engage in business and make a great success. Puerto Rico is another field for Negro colonization and they should not fail to grasp this great opportunity."

The extreme positions of the anti and pro-war leaders did not, however, characterize the response of blacks in general. Their attitude was clearly ambivalent. A majority seemed to consider participation in the military struggle an obligation of citizenship which they would gladly fulfill if they could do so in a way that would enhance rather than degrade their manhood. They hoped that a display of patriotism would help dissipate racial prejudice against them. Unfortunately, they were never free of misgivings about a war launched in the name of humanity and waged in behalf of "little brown brothers" by a nation enamored with Anglo-Saxon supremacy.

http://www.spanamwar.com/AfroAmericans.htm