From Oppressed Slaves To Champion Soldiers Essay, Research Paper

From Oppressed Slaves to Champion Soldiers

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This is just a small example of the doubt and hatred that was bestowed on the African

American soldiers. However, during the war, they proved themselves to be brave and

courageous men on and off the battlefield on many occasions. Despite deep prejudices

and harsh criticisms from the white society, these men were true champions of

patriotism.

The cause of the Civil War was tension between the North and the South. The

sectional division between the areas began in colonial times, largely resulting from

geographical differences. The South was ideal for growing tobacco due to the warm

climate and the fertile soil. Plantations brought in black slaves from Africa to provide

most of the labor required for growing the crop. In time, other plantation crops such as

cotton, sugar cane, indigo, and sugar beets were to thrive in the South. “By the onset

of the Civil War, 2.4 million slaves were engaged in cotton production” (Long 16). A

rural way of life that supported an agrian economy based on slave labor was quickly

established in the South. The North, however, was a cooler, rockier climate that would

not support the development of plantations. As a result, the North’s economy came to

depend more on trade and industry than on agriculture. This economy supported the

growth of cities, although many lived in rural areas during the colonial period. The

sectional division between North and South had widened enormously by the mid -

1800’s. The United States had expanded all the way to the Pacific Ocean and was

rapidly becoming a major industrial and commercial nation. However, industry and

commerce were centered in the North. The Northerners welcomed modernization and

the constant changes it brought to their way of life. Their ideals included hard work,

education, economic independence, and the belief that the community had the right

and responsibility to decide whether an action was moral or immoral. While Northerners

looked forward to a different and better future, Southerners held the present and past

dear. They enjoyed a prosperous agricultural economy based on slave labor and wished

to keep their old way of life.

By the 1800’s, northerners viewed slavery as wrong and began a movement to end it.

Even though an antislavery minority existed in the South, most Southerners found

slavery to be highly profitable and in time came to consider it a positive good. Such

situations as the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act raised tensions

between the North and the South. The Compromise of 1850 was a group of acts

passed by Congress in the hope of settling the dreaded slavery question by satisfing

both the North and South. The Compromise allowed slavery to continue where it

desired, but the trading of slaves was prohibited in Washington DC. New territories

would have the choice to decide whether to permit slavery or not. This act also

required that the North return escaped slaves to their owners. The Kansas-Nebraska

Act dealt with the problem of Slavery in new territories. This Act allowed slavery in

Nebraska and Kansas. It also provided that when the people of each territory o!

rganized as a state, they could decide by popular vote whether to permit slavery to

continue. The Dred Scott Decision, where a slave claimed freedom because he had

lived in a free state and territory for some time, was denied his freedom. The Supreme

Court declared that no black could be a US citizen. The ruling aroused anger in the

North and showed that the conflict over slavery was beyond judicial solutions. Another

situation was the raid at Harpers Ferry. An abolitionist named John Brown and his

followers attempted to start a slave rebellion by seizing the federal arsenal in Harpers

Ferry, Va. Brown, however, was captured 28 hours later by troops under the command

of Colonel Robert E. Lee. Brown was convicted of treason and hanged two weeks later.

Many Southerners saw the raid as evidence of a Northern plot to end slavery by force.

During the election of 1860, Lincoln was chosen by the Republicans as their party

candidate. The Democrats chose Douglas for their ticket. Lincoln won all electoral votes

of every free state except New Jersey, which awarded him four of its seven votes. He

thus gained a majority of electoral votes and won the election. However, Lincoln

received less than 40 per cent of the popular vote, almost none of which came from

the South. Southerners feared Lincoln would restrict or end slavery.

Before the 1860 presidential election, Southern leaders had urged that the South

secede from the Union if Lincoln should win. Many Southerners favored secession as

part of the idea that the states have rights and powers which the federal government

cannot legally deny. The supporters of states’ rights held that the national government

was a league of independent states, any of which had the right to secede.

In December 1860, South Carolina became the first state to secede. Five other states

– Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana – followed in January 1861. In

February, representatives from the six states met in Montgomery, Ala., and established

the Confederate States of America. They elected Jefferson Davis of Mississippi as

president and Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia as vice president. In March, Texas

joined the confederacy. Lincoln was inaugurated two days later.

In his inaugural address, Lincoln avoided any threat of immediate force against the

South. But he stated that the Union would last forever and that he would use the

nation’s full power to hold federal possessions in the South. One of the possessions,

the military post of Fort Sumter, lay in the harbor of Charleston, SC. The Confederates

fired on the fort on April 12 and forced its surrender the next day. Following the firing

on Fort Sumter, Fredrick Douglass wrote a fiery editorial Nemesis:

At last our proud Republic is overtaken. Our National Sin has found us out. The National

Head is bowed down, and our face is mantled with shame and confusion. No foreign arm

is made bare for our chastisement. No distant monarch, offended at our freedom and

prosperity, has plotted our destruction no envious tyrant has prepared for our necks his

oppressive yoke. Slavery has done it all. Our enemies are those of our own household.

It is civil war, the worst of all wars, that has unveiled its savage and wrinkled front

among us. During the last twenty years and more, we have as a nation been forging a

bolt for our own national destruction, collecting and augmenting the fuel that now

threatens to wrap the nation in its malignant and furious flames. We have sown the

wind, only to reap the whirlwind. Against argument, against all manner of appeal and

remonstrances coming up from the warm and merciful heart of humanity, we have gone

on like the oppressors of Egypt, hardenin! g our hearts and increasing the burdens of

the American slave, and strengthening the arm of his guilty master, till now, in the pride

of his giant power, that master is emboldened to lift rebellious arms against the very

majesty of the law, and defy the power of the Government itself. In vain have we

plunged our souls into new and unfathomed depths of sin, to conciliate the favor and

secure the loyalty of the slave – holding class. We have hated and persecuted the

Negro we have scourged him out of the temple of justice by the Dred Scott decision we

have shot and hanged his friends at Harper’s Ferry we have enacted laws for his further

degradation, and even to expel him from the borders of some of our States we have

joined in the infernal chase to hunt him down like a beast, and fling him into the hell of

slavery we have repealed and trampled upon laws designed to prevent the spread of

slavery and in a thousand ways given to increase the power and ascendancy of slavery

! over all departments of Government and now, as our reward, this slave-holding power

comes with sword, gun, and cannon to take the life of the nation and overthrow the

great American Government (Long 26). “There is no more moving and telling an

expression of the Black’s view of the Civil War than this” (Long 26).

On April 15, Lincoln called for Union troops to regain the fort. The South regarded the

move as a declaration of war. Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee soon

joined the Confederacy.

Virginia had long been undecided about which side to join. Its decision to join the

Confederacy boosted Southern morale. Richmond, Virginia’s capital, became the capital

of the Confederacy in May.

It is ironic that only a few days before Fort Sumter was attacked, Douglass had agreed

to make a trip to Haiti to investigate the possibility of emigration there by free Blacks

at the invitation of the Haitian government. He had always been a strong foe of

emigration and repatriation schemes, but the increasingly hostile environments for

Blacks in the United States and the growing power of the slave-holders in the

government worried him into exploring the option of emigration. (Long 27).

When the Civil War began, about 22 million people lived in the North. About 9 million

people, including 3.5 million slaves, lived in the South. The North had around 4 million

men from 15 through 40 years old – the approximate age range for combat duty. The

South had only about 1 million white men from 15 through 40. The north began to use

black soldiers in 1863. The South did not decide to use blacks as soldiers until the

closing days of the war. From the very beginning of the war, it was obvious that many

would lose their lives. As the war progressed, the death toll drastically increased. At

the close of the year 1862, the military situation was discouraging to the supporters of

the Federal Government. We had been repulsed at Fredericksburg and at Vicksburg, and

at tremendous cost had fought the battle of Stone River. Some sixty-five thousand

troops would be discharged during the ensuing summer and fall. Volunteering was at a

standstill. On the other hand, the Confederates, having filled their ranks, were never

better fitted for conflict. Politically, the opposition had grown formidable, while the

so-called “peace-faction” was strong, and active for meditation. (Emilio 1). It was

evident that more and more men would have to join the draft. But the wives of these

soldiers did not want their husbands running off to war, just to be killed. More soldiers

were need. Lincoln realized this, but did not want to use black soldiers because he did

not want to bring the issue of slavery into the war. The war had began as an effort to

save the union, and that is how Lincoln wanted to keep it.

When the Confederate batteries fired on Fort Sumter early on the morning of April 12,

1861, inaugurating four years of internecine warfare, many Negroes were eager to wear

the Union blue. They found their services were neither wanted at that time nor

contemplated in the future. (Leckie 3). At this time, most of the blacks living in the

South were slaves and wanted to fight for the Union cause. “Many slaves saw their

way to freedom in the armies of the North” (Long 26). Early in the war, Northern blacks

who wanted to fight to end slavery tried to enlist in the Union Army. But the Army

rejected them. Most whites felt the war was a “white man’s war.” Others felt that the

blacks were not able to fight as well as the white soldiers. As Northern armies drove

into Confederate territory, slaves flocked to Union camps. After a period of uncertainty,

the Union government decided to allow them to perform support services for the

Northern war effort. In time, as many as 200,000 blacks worked for Union armies as

cooks, laborers, nurses, scouts, and spies. Black leaders, such as the former slave

Frederick Douglass of New York, saw the Civil War as a road to emancipation for the

slaves. However, the idea of emancipation presented problems in the North. For one

thing, the Constitution recognized slavery. In addition, most Northerners – even though

they may have opposed slavery – were convinced of black inferiority. Many of them

feared the emancipation would cause a mass movement of Southern blacks into the

North, Northerners also worried about losing the border states loyal to the Union

because those states were strongly committed to slavery. Skillful leadership was

needed as the country moved toward black freedom. Lincoln supplied that leadership by

combining a clear sense of purpose with a sensitivity to the concerns of various groups.

On September 22, 1862, Lincoln issued a preliminary order to free the slaves. It

declared that all slaves in the states in rebellion against the Union on January 1, 1863,

would be forever free. It did not include slave states loyal to the Union. On Jan 1,

1863, Lincoln issued the final order as the Emancipation Proclamation. The Emancipation

Proclamation, though legally binding, was a war measure that could be reversed later.

Therefore, in 1865, Lincoln helped push through Congress the 13th Amendment to the

Constitution, which abolished slavery throughout the nation. For his effort in freeing the

slaves, Lincoln is known as the “Great Emancipator.” However, many discredit that title

for Lincoln due to the fact that he too believed that blacks were inferior in battle.

The Emancipation Proclamation also announced Lincoln’s decision to use black troops,

though many whites believed that blacks would make poor soldiers. “They will run at

the first sign of danger!” (Park Net 5). “Approximately 180,000 blacks served in the

Union Army, comprising 163 regiments. Many more African-Americans served in the

Union Navy Both free African-Americans and runaway slaves joined the fight” (Bennett

326). “About two-thirds of them were Southerners who had fled to freedom in the

North” (Bennett 326). “Only about 100 blacks were made officers” (Park Net 2). “After

the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, the Civil War became a war to save the Union

and to more importantly abolish slavery” (Long 27).

The Confederacy objected strongly to the North’s use of black soldiers because they

grew fearful of losing slaves to the Union armies. As slave masters in the South grew

fearful of losing slaves to the Union armies, they implemented harsher restrictions upon

their slaves, often moving the entire plantation further inland to avoid Northern

contact. These changes, however, only caused slaves to flee, and those that did stay

demanded more freedom from their masters. In this way, the slaves gained some power

in the situation, forcing masters to make offerings in exchange for labor. (New York

Public Library 1) .

The Confederate government threatened to kill or enslave any captured officers or

enlisted men of black regiments. Lincoln replied by promising to treat Confederate

prisoners of war the same way. Neither side carried out its threats, but the exchange

of prisoners broke down mainly over the issue of black prisoners.

The North’s success in using black soldiers slowly led Southerners to consider doing the

same. In the spring of 1865 following a strong demand by General Lee, the Confederate

Congress narrowly approved the use of black soldiers. However, the war ended soon

thereafter.

Official Recruiting for black regiments started in September of 1862. “In consequence to

the situation, the arming of Negroes, first determined upon in October, 1862, was fully

adopted as a military measure” (Emilio 1). Although this allowed blacks to enlist in the

army, many viewed this as only a scheme to save lives of white soldiers. The blacks

were not allowed to fight until needed. They were offered the same rights as the white

soldiers, but discrimination always interfered. Most black soldiers did not receive equal

pay and benefits.

The hesitating policy of our government permitted the Rebels to confront every black

soldier with the threat of death or slavery if he were taken prisoner. If he escaped the

bullet and the knife, he came back to camp to learn that the country for which he had

braved that double peril intended to cheat him out of pay on which his wife and

children depended for support. (Emilio 18). Even whites who supported the idea of

blacks in army were harassed. While recruiting, Lieutenant Grace was often insulted by

such remarks as, “There goes the captain of the Negro Company! He thinks the Negroes

can fight! They will turn and run at the first sight of the enemy! His little son was

scoffed at in school because his father was raising a Negro Company to fight the white

men. (Emilio 10).

The decision to use the blacks as soldiers was by no means universally popular and was

also selfishly motivated. The decision to use the Negro as a soldier did not necessarily

grow out of any broad humanitarian resolve it seems to have come more largely out of

the dawning realization that, since the Confederates were going to kill a great many

more Union soldiers before the war was over, a good many white men would escape

death if a considerable percentage of those soldiers were colored. (Leckie 4). “Blacks

sought refuge behind the Union lines in greater and greater numbers throughout the

war” (Long 26). So why would blacks still want to fight for the country that did not

want them, but needed them to fight? Runaway slaves from the South joined the Union

army for two reasons: They wanted to protect themselves and escape the grasp of the

South, and they wanted to fight the evils of slavery. Frederick Douglas encouraged

blacks to join the Union cause. The first black regiment to be formed was the 1st

Kansas Colored Volunteers in October, 1862. There were doubts against this group from

their very beginning. In general, white soldiers and officers believed that black men

lacked the courage to fight and fight well. In October, 1862, African-American soldiers

of the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteers silenced their critics by repulsing attacking

Confederates at the battle of Island Mound, Missouri. (Park Net 1) At the battle of Port

Hudson, Louisiana, May 27, 1863, the African-American soldiers bravely advanced over

open ground in the face of deadly artillery fire. Although the attack failed, the black

soldiers proved their capability to withstand the heat of battle.

On July 17, 1863, at Honey Springs, Indian Territory, now Oklahoma, the 1st Kansas

Colored fought with courage once again. Union troops under General James Blunt ran

into a strong Confederate force under General Douglas Cooper. After a two-hour bloody

engagement, Cooper’s soldiers retreated. The 1st Kansas, which had held the center of

the Union line, advanced to within fifty paces of the Confederate line and exchanged

fire for some twenty minutes until the Confederates broke and ran. General Blunt wrote

after the battle, “I never saw such fighting as was done by the Negro regiment. The

question if Negroes will fight is settled besides they make better soldiers in every

respect than any other troops I have ever had under my command.” After this battle,

black soldiers began to receive some respect. (Park Net 1). Even though the 1st

Kansas regiment and other colored groups were beginning to win many battles,

discrimination in pay and other areas remained widespread. “According to the Militia Act

of 1862, soldiers of African descent were to receive $10.00 a month, plus a clothing

allowance of $3.50. Many regiments struggled for equal pay, some refusing any money.

However, Congress granted equal pay for all black soldiers in June of 1864. The most

famous black regiment would have to be the 54th Massachusetts. On February 16,

1863, a call for black soldiers was published in the columns of the Boston Journal. In

five days, twenty-five men were secured. Much of the larger number of recruits were

obtained through black organizations in the Boston area. This regiment was to be lead

by Colonel Robert Shaw. This regiment has gained great popularity over the last decade

with the release of the Oscar-winning film Glory.

The most widely known battle fought by African-Americans was the assault on Fort

Wagner, South Carolina, by the 54th Massachusetts on July 18, 1863. The 54th

volunteered to lead the assault on the strongly-fortified Confederate positions. It was a

suicide mission from the start. But if the black soldiers had any success in the attack,

all doubts would be lifted for they would have defeated all odds. “To this

Massachusetts Fifty-fourth was set the stupendous task to convince the white race

that colored troops would fight, and not only would they fight, but that they could be

made, in every sense of the word, soldiers” (Emilio 17).

Your success hangs on the general success. If the Union lives, it will live with equal

races. If divided, and you have done your duty, then you will stand upon the same

platform with the white race. Then make use of the offers Government has made you

for if you are not willing to fight your way up to office, you are not worthy of it. Put

yourselves under the starts and stripes, and fight yourselves to the marquee of a

general, and you shall come out with a sword! (Emilio 14).

The soldiers of the 54th scaled the fort’s parapet, and were only driven back after

brutal hand-to-hand combat. A monument of the 54th and its slain leader Colonel

Robert Shaw was installed in Boston May 31st, 1897. Black soldiers participated in

every major campaign of 1864-1865 except Sherman’s invasion of Georgia. The year

1864 was especially eventful for black troops.

On April 12, 1864, at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, Confederate General Nathan Bedford

Forrest led his 2,500 men against the Union-held fortification, occupied by 292 black

and 285 white soldiers. After driving the Union pickets and giving the garrison an

opportunity to surrender, Forrest’s men swarmed into the fort with little difficulty and

drove the Federals down the river’s bluff into a deadly crossfire. Casualties were high

and only sixty-two of the US Color Troops survived the fight. Many accused the

Confederates of perpetuating a massacre of black troops, and the controversy

continues to this day. “The battle cry for the Negro soldier east of the Mississippi River

became ‘Remember Fort Pillow!’” (Park Net 5).

The Confederate army did not consider the usage of slaves throughout the war.

However, near the end when the future looked dismal, the South decided to use blacks

for the Confederate cause. “Leaders of the Confederacy considered schemes for the

enlistment of blacks in the armies and for their eventual freedom” (Long 26). However,

those who did serve in the Confederate army were not given their freedom by the

Confederate government, but rather by the North after the war had ended.

The United States Civil War began as an effort to save the Union, and ended in a fight

to abolish slavery. This battle for emancipation, some would argue, was won by the

slaves themselves. While this remains a debate, it is clear that the slaves did

contribute significantly to their own freedom. By running from masters to become

contrabands for the Union, laboring behind the scenes for the Northern armies, and

risking their lives on the battlefront, the slaves centralized the issue of freedom and

played a key role in the North’s victory. (New York Public Library 1).

In actual numbers, African-American soldiers comprised 10% of the entire Union Army.

Losses among African-Americans were high, and from all reported casualties,

approximately one-third of all African-Americans enrolled in the military lost their lives

during the Civil war. (Park Net 5). African-American soldiers, despite doubt and

prejudice by society, proved themselves to be formidable warriors on the battlefield.

They were just as deadly, if not deadlier, that their white counterparts. They won

many of the Civil War battles, and in doing so, won their independence. “Once let the

black man get upon his person the brass letters, US, let him get an eagle on his button,

and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pockets, and there is no power on earth

which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States” (Park

Net 1).