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# ‘The Negro should not be used as a combat soldier’: reconfiguring racial identity in the United States Army, 1890–1918

**BOBBY A. WINTERMUTE**

**ABSTRACT** When the United States entered the First World War, the nation’s Jim Crow politics contributed to the general rejection of African American men for war-time military service. Only after political pressure from black and white progressives threatened to spill over into the public sphere were the 92nd and 93rd Divisions organized and sent to France. This policy has long been studied and criticized by historians, particularly in light of the long service of the United States Army’s four ‘colored regiments’, the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry Regiments. However, in spite of the presence and distinguished service of these four black regiments, the War Department and the army demonstrate a morally ambiguous record of racial tolerance that allowed for the exclusion of Blacks from military service with the American Expeditionary Forces. This record is highlighted in the work of two of the army’s medical officers, Charles Woodruff and Robert Shufeldt, whose work on medical ethnology and racial degeneration reveal critical justifications that were not only used to argue for the exclusion of African Americans from military service, but also, in the post-war period, to marginalize the black soldier’s combat record and support the view that black men were unfit for future military service.

**KEYWORDS** African Americans, American Expeditionary Forces, Army Medical Department, First World War, medical ethnology, medicalization of race, race and war, racial degeneration, scientific racism

*These men had had to fight for the right to fight for their country: overcoming the reluctance of White politicians to authorize a Negro regiment, the violent antagonism of the Jim Crow town in which they had to train, the War Department’s unwillingness to accept them for federal service, and finally the refusal of AEF commanders to use them as anything but labor troops. . . . The French accepted them as Americans, without any marked distinction as to race—in itself a liberating experience.*

—Richard Slotkin, *Lost Battalions: The Great War and the Crisis of American Nationalism*<sup>1</sup>

1 Richard Slotkin, *Lost Battalions: The Great War and the Crisis of American Nationality* (New York: Henry Holt 2005), 5–6.

This passage by Richard Slotkin is an evocative and telling summation of the standard narrative of the African American experience in the First World War. Accordingly, black Americans, denied the chance to defend their citizenship in war-time by a political culture obsessed with race, found their opportunity to serve with the embattled French Third Republic. By fighting with the French army, African American soldiers discovered a sense of pride that sustained them in their own communities in the years of oppression to follow. Slotkin is hardly the only historian to reach this conclusion. Since Emmett J. Scott, former War Department Special Assistant for Negro Affairs, published *The American Negro in the World War* in 1919,<sup>2</sup> a standard narrative has evolved with reference to the participation of African American troops in the Great War. Blocked from participating at the onset of the war, African Americans only entered the military after intense lobbying from the elite, educated black community. Even this service, however, was spoiled by the intrusion of Jim Crow politics into the army, which had sought to retain some distance from the racial controversies of the day. The contributions of African American soldiers in combat were subsequently diminished and obscured by white historians validating the claims made against them by racist critics in and out of uniform.<sup>3</sup>

The story of the evolution of this narrative, let alone of the events it portrays, offers valuable insights into the challenges historians create and address in regard to race and ethnicity in American history. In this particular case, the general narrative crafted for public consumption is simultaneously too generalized and diluted to provide an accurate account of the events surrounding the African American community during the First World War.<sup>4</sup>

2 Emmett J. Scott, *Scott's Official History of the American Negro in the World War* [1919] (New York: Arno Press 1996).

3 This trend began almost immediately after the war's end. The two senior American officers' memoirs—General John J. Pershing, *My Experiences in the World War*, 2 vols (New York: Frederick J. Stokes 1931) and General Robert L. Bullard, *Personalities and Reminiscences of the War* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page 1925)—had little to say about the contributions of the two so-called 'coloured' divisions in France. Indeed, the army's own official histories of the 92nd and 93rd Divisions did not appear in print until 1944; the two volumes are very short on detail, relying primarily on official orders, and make little mention of the challenges the two divisions faced from both the Germans and the American Expeditionary Forces itself: American Battle Monuments Commission, *92nd Division, Summary of Operations in the World War* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office 1944); and American Battle Monuments Commission, *93rd Division, Summary of Operations in the World War* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office 1944). Otherwise, very little was written about African American soldiers in the First World War until the brief flurry of interest in the conflict provoked by its fiftieth anniversary. Laurence Stallings, *The Doughboys: The Story of the AEF, 1917–1918* (New York: Harper and Row 1963) is one of the first popular books to address the issue of American racism and the treatment of the black soldiers in the American Expeditionary Forces, nearly forty-five years after the end of the war.

4 See Arthur E. Barbeau and Florette Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: African-American Troops in World War I* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1974); Bernard C. Nalty,

Some recent works—Adriane Lentz-Smith's *Freedom Struggles* and Chad Williams's *Torchbearers of Democracy*, for example—strive to present a more nuanced portrayal of American society on the eve of the First World War, drawing out the extent to which cultural and institutionalized racism created real obstacles that no amount of lobbying could address.<sup>5</sup> This conflict lasted long after the war's end, as the memory of the war itself became contested terrain between black Americans who recalled the challenges and the sacrifices faced at home and abroad, and a larger white community that permitted its racist culture to rewrite the narrative of the African American soldier as being one of miserable failure.<sup>6</sup> It is crucial, however, that historians of both race and American military history record that the First World War experience did not represent a 'high water mark' of racial violence and oppression against Blacks. Nor should it be viewed as a singular moment of missed opportunity or of hidden triumph for a community long denied its place as a member of the larger American experience. Rather, the entire period between 1917 and 1919 must be taken as part of a greater struggle between an increasingly hostile white Anglo-Saxon majority community—one ever more obsessed with preserving its privileged status as it expanded its power and influence beyond American shores and encountered more peoples of colour—and those communities of 'different' ethnicity and race that challenged the *status quo*.<sup>7</sup> The mistreatment and abuse heaped on African Americans during the First World War was not a new development: it was arguably the culmination of anxiety, fear and jealousy felt by generations of Whites since the colonial era.

This essay focuses on the role of a specific professional cadre, the medical officers of the United States Army, in crafting a narrative ultimately used to deny African Americans access to war-time military service. As the United States entered the First World War, military service was taken not only as a civic obligation but also as a moral and ethical necessity. By donning the uniform of the nation in arms, individual men from a host of European ethnicities—not only white Anglo-Saxons, but also Irish, Italians, Greeks, Jews, Poles and others—proved their loyalty and demonstrated

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*Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York: Free Press 1986); Gerald Astor, *The Right to Fight: A History of African Americans in the Military* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press 2001); Bill Harris, *The Hellfighters of Harlem: African-American Soldiers Who Fought for the Right to Fight for Their Country* (New York: Carroll and Graf 2002); and Stephen L. Harris, *Harlem's Hell Fighters: The African-American 369th Infantry in World War I* (Herndon, VA: Potomac Books 2005).

5 Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African-Americans and World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2009). See also Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2010).

6 Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy*, 300–1.

7 Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2001), 21–4, 104–9.

their assimilation. Even other non-white groups—Amerindians, Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Mexicans and other Latinos, who had been labelled and categorized as inferior to the dominant white Europeans in the American racial hierarchy—were enjoined to prove they too were capable of becoming ‘true’ Americans. The only ethnic group actively denied a role in the national crisis was African Americans.

Army medical officers are critically overlooked figures in the history of American medicine and culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From the moment the Army Medical Department was established in 1818, scientific observation and data collection were considered to be among its primary duties in the field, equal to safeguarding the health and well-being of the military personnel under its charge. By the end of the century, however, the army medical officer had become simultaneously an eager and ready participant in the American imperial project. By dint of their prestige and education, medical officers became the chief arbiters of whiteness in the American imperial periphery. Not only did they establish the parameters of ethnicity and race in the Philippines and Caribbean, they also identified the conditions that most ‘threatened whiteness’, in essence validating centuries-old misconceptions about racial degeneration in the tropical sphere.

Race and identity became even more important areas of concern for the army medical officers as the nation entered the period historians identify as the Progressive Era. Decades before the First World War, several army officers exercised their role as the gatekeepers of American whiteness by drawing up a schema of racial exclusion that denied Blacks participation in the military. Greeted with scepticism, their initial efforts were rejected by the War Department. But, as Jim Crow attitudes spread deeper into American society, the ideas promoted by these racialsists gained greater appeal and support, becoming part of the mainstream of racial thought by 1917. This essay attempts to locate this group of medical officers in the larger narrative of race and military service in the United States during the Progressive Era. First, it will review the conventional narrative of the army’s pre-war position on race by examining the four so-called ‘coloured regiments’—the Buffalo Soldiers of the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry—and the War Department’s policy towards the war-time recruitment and conscription of African Americans. It will then examine in greater detail the different schemas proposed by two medical officers, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Woodruff and Major Robert Wilson Shufeldt, and how they differed from and complemented each other. The essay will conclude by examining how the dual doctrines of medical ethnology and racial degeneration promoted by these two physicians were used as justification by the War Department, initially to reject black recruits and conscripts and then, later, as far as possible, to restrict them to service as manual labourers.

## Confronting racism: the black soldier in the army, 1869–1918

From the moment of entering the First World War, a concerted effort was made to restrict African American participation. The army's highest ranking African American officer, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Young, was compelled to accept a medical furlough after being diagnosed with hypertension. Despite undertaking a horseback ride from his home in Wilberforce, Ohio to Washington, D.C. to prove his fitness, he was denied command, and was relegated to desk duty until after the war. Meanwhile, the 24th and 25th Infantry and the 9th and 10th Cavalry regiments were deployed to new stations across the Southwest and the Philippines, ostensibly to guard against border incidents or tribal unrest, but in reality languishing there in quietude for the duration of the war.

Relegating the army's four 'coloured regiments' to garrison duty was only one aspect of the racist policies undertaken by President Woodrow Wilson's administration in the First World War. On the whole, the Southern Democratic president preferred to wage war against Germany with minimal black participation. Influenced by other white Southern Democrats like Mississippi Senator James K. Vardaman, Wilson sought to restrict black induction to the bare minimum, both to deny Blacks any claim to legitimacy as equal citizens and to avoid disrupting southern agricultural production.<sup>8</sup> Only after intense lobbying from black civic leaders and white reformers and philanthropists did the War Department agree to extend the draft to black men, and to accept black militia and National Guard units. Yet even here the extent of participation was limited. The overwhelming majority of the 367,000 conscripted Blacks were dispatched to labour battalions, where they were put to work building camps, railroads and supply depots across France.<sup>9</sup> Only 43,000 men, a mix of National Guard and conscripts, saw combat in France in the 92nd and 93rd Divisions. In both cases, even after arriving in France, the individual black soldier was subject to brutal racist attack by white Americans. Shunted off to the French army until the war's end, the performance in combat by African Americans was not only generally ignored, it was distorted and twisted to match the general perceptions of a Jim Crow society.

Even their own white officers participated in this distortion, rewriting the immediate past to restrict further future combat service by black soldiers. Typical was the observation made by Colonel Frederick Brown, commander of the 368th Infantry regiment reporting to the general staff after the war: 'I consider the Negro should not be used as a combat soldier', he asserted, citing the unit's late September 1918 action at Binarville, where the regiment broke during the poorly planned attack.<sup>10</sup> Others were less forthright.

8 See John Whiteclay Chambers II, *To Raise an Army: The Draft Comes to Modern America* (New York: Free Press 1987), 156–7.

9 Scott, *Scott's Official History of the American Negro in the World War*.

10 Colonel Frederick Brown, quoted in Bryan D. Booker, *African Americans in the United States Army in World War II* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland 2008), 34. See also Ulysses Lee,

A War Department memorandum of 28 April 1919 by the commander of the 365th Infantry regiment agreed with the French assessment that black troops were 'fitted for shock action only', and rejected outright the prospect of black officers, even in the face of individual acts of heroism and leadership. Not only were black officers possessed of little initiative or aggressiveness, the memorandum reported, even 'the colored soldier prefers the white man as his leader'.<sup>11</sup>

On the surface, this exclusion of African Americans from combat service in the First World War ran counter to the black soldier's experience in the post-Civil War army. Since 1866 the Buffalo Soldiers had served with distinction in virtually every single campaign on the western frontier against various Native American tribes. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, black soldiers served within an environment of both formal, institutional racism—expressed in their segregation into all-black regiments under white officers—and informal, personal racism, expressed by white soldiers, officers and society. Indeed, segregation was introduced in the army a generation before it became codified in local and state laws. And black soldiers were subjected to a harsher form of discipline than their white peers, regularly receiving punishment details, confinements, fines and dishonourable discharges for minor offences.<sup>12</sup> And, yet, the 'coloured regiments' continued to serve with distinction across the Arizona Territory in the 1870s and 1880s, and later in Cuba and the Philippines. While reports of their initiative and bravery under fire in the Spanish-American War were actively suppressed by the American press, within the army their conduct and discipline were openly praised. As one account reprinted in the *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* noted: 'Their valorous conduct at Santiago was but a repetition of Civil War and Indian campaign achievements, even when their beloved white officers were shot down and they went ahead under their sturdy sergeants—with their eyes to the front.'<sup>13</sup>

In the North, the army's four 'coloured regiments' were generally accepted by civilians living near garrisons. When the units were mobilized for the 1898 invasion of Cuba, they were given fond send-offs by locals in Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska and Utah. These should not be taken as a

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*The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, United States Army 1966), 15–16; and Bobby A. Wintermute, 'The African-American experience in World War I', in Timothy C. Dowling, *Personal Perspectives: World War I* (Santa Barbara, CA, Denver, CO and London: ABC-CLIO 2005), 1–28 (17–19).

11 'Memorandum on use of Colored Troops in U.S. Mil. Establishment', 28 April 1919, from Colonel George H. McMaster to Colonel Allen J. Greer: National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD (NARA II), RG120, Entry 6, Box 11440, A251–A275.

12 Kevin Adams, *Class and Race in the Frontier Army: Military Life in the West, 1870–1890* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 2009), 164, 171–2.

13 'The Negro as soldier and officer', *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States*, vol. 29, no. 113, September 1901, 286–8 (288).

sign of greater racial enlightenment: the white populations of these towns were all intellectually and philosophically steeped in the doctrines of racial segregation and white supremacy that governed Gilded Age and Progressive American society. If anything, the four 'coloured regiments' were valued because they validated the doctrines of both white supremacy and black deference. Northerners and Westerners welcomed black troops so long as they exhibited the high standards of discipline and order that were their hallmark. Indeed, the Buffalo Soldiers were often preferred over white regiments: they were generally better behaved and less prone to drunkenness.<sup>14</sup> The closer the four regiments came to the Mason-Dixon line, however, the cooler was their reception. Indeed, when they arrived in the South proper, they were attacked on all sides as an affront to common decency and a potential threat to stability. Of course, at issue was the risk uniformed and disciplined black men in arms posed to the Jim Crow order. The mere presence of armed black men undermined the system of white supremacy and black subjugation that existed in the American South. Many southern Whites took the arrival of the black regiments in their own towns as a direct provocation to be met head-on with lynch-mob violence.<sup>15</sup>

After the Spanish-American War, concerns and reservations over the deployment of black troops in the Philippines and Caribbean grew more pronounced in the War Department. Some feared black American soldiers would find they had more in common with the local inhabitants than with their white superiors. Compounding matters was the rising cultural tide of racial prejudice in the United States. Across the nation, Jim Crow racism was predicated on the idea that Blacks were not only inferior to Whites, but that they represented an imminent danger to a society based on white supremacy. Kept in check only by the threat of immediate physical punishment if they dared cross the colour line that separated the cultures, black men were viewed as pliant, yet unpredictable, actors. By their supposed nature, they were eager and willing physical labourers, and at the mercy of their own childlike, yet potent, sexuality. Given too much latitude, white racists argued, black men would consume white society like the predatory animals of their native Africa. Ergo, the obligation of Whites across the nation to control African Americans through the most regressive and violent means.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, white Americans increasingly adopted the paranoid perspectives of the southern states with regard to the inherent dangers of black military service. No doubt responding to deeply suppressed fears of a collective

14 William A. Dobak and Thomas D. Phillips, *The Black Regulars, 1866–1898* (Normal: University of Oklahoma Press 2001), 110, 163–4, 264.

15 Michael Lee Lanning, *The African-American Soldier: From Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing 1997), 83–5.

16 See, for example, Oscar Dowling, 'The Negro as a health factor', *Texas State Journal of Medicine*, vol. 11, no. 9, January 1916, 470–3.



retaliation against two centuries of enslavement, and decades of social and economic marginalization, white Southerners imagined Blacks harboured a desire for revenge. The War Department's policy of arming and training 'Negro soldiers'—even if it were only in the small numbers required for the four 'coloured regiments'—established a precedent that could embolden the larger black population across the South. As Adriane Lentz-Smith states in her recent study of African Americans in the First World War:

Military service had the potential to legitimize black men as agents of violence. Bloodshed birthed Jim Crow, and segregationists sustained it through viciousness. Keeping up white supremacy's 'social argument' required preserving the fiction that white folks alone could deploy mass violence, even as maintaining discipline within white supremacy's political program required the threat that some day African Americans might break out.<sup>17</sup>

Universal military service for Blacks during the First World War not only threatened the immediate social order, it also challenged the basic premises of Jim Crow. While they had served since the Civil War, the number of black soldiers on active duty was small enough to be considered inconsequential in the larger social order. The 'coloured regiments' represented on average 10 per cent of the army's total strength from 1869 to 1898, although it is important to note that the army's average strength over this thirty-year period was only 25,000 officers and enlisted men.<sup>18</sup> And, since many black recruits came from northern cities or border states like Kentucky and Maryland, the concept of 'coloured soldiers' remained both an alien notion and an affront to the social order throughout most of the South.

The War Department responded in kind to these concerns, taking measures to limit the public acclaim and reputation of its black soldiers. Official and popular accounts of the Spanish-American War quickly rewrote the performance of the army's four 'coloured regiments' in Cuba and the Philippines. The fact that Spanish blockhouses atop San Juan Hill were stormed by Buffalo Soldiers from the 10th Cavalry, for example, was replaced by the half-truth of Colonel Theodore Roosevelt rallying white soldiers to win the day. In the Philippines, black regular and volunteer units disappeared from dispatches to major news houses, appearing only in the much smaller black press.<sup>19</sup> When the newly promoted Major General John J. Pershing—himself a one-time commander of the 10th Cavalry regiment in the Philippines—launched the so-called 'Punitive Expedition' into Mexico

17 Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles*, 8.

18 Edward M. Coffman, *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784–1898* (New York: Oxford University Press 1988), 365.

19 See Willard B. Gatewood, Jr. (ed.), *'Smoked Yankees' and the Struggle for Empire: Letters from Negro Soldiers, 1898–1902* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1972).

following the 9 March 1916 raid by Pancho Villa's forces on Columbus, New Mexico, the successful exploits of the black units attached to the expeditionary division—the 10th Cavalry and 24th Infantry regiments—were generally ignored. The only times that black soldiers made headlines were in moments of shame and ignominy, such as in the 1906 trial of three companies of the 25th Infantry regiment stationed in Brownsville, Texas. Here, 167 enlisted men were dishonourably discharged by President Theodore Roosevelt after a grand jury failed to indict anyone for shooting up the downtown area, charges that were later proven false.<sup>20</sup> No matter; in the case of Brownsville, the lie proved stronger than the truth in the public's view.

Maintaining the illusion of white supremacy extended to presenting the black man as a childlike agent of ignorance and cowardice. Demonstrations of bravery or duty, or heroic deeds performed by black soldiers undermined the logic that bolstered Jim Crow as a necessary evil to save white-dominated society from ultimate degeneration in the event of racial equality. In peace-time, the War Department considered the need for manpower to fill the ranks strong enough to outweigh social objections to fielding black troops. But, even then, there were limits to their employment. A new measure of identity emerged during the decade bracketing the Spanish-American War. Accordingly, black soldiers were valued on the basis of their purported fighting nature and their reputation among Indian tribes. Trained in following white authority figures, they were otherwise infantilized as being incapable of taking command themselves. Writing in 1891, Colonel Guy V. Henry proclaimed Blacks as first-rate Indian fighters, singling out their 'bullying instincts . . . their natural air of braggadocio and swagger' as assets.<sup>21</sup> A few years later he expanded on this early appraisal.

If properly led will fight well; otherwise, owing to his habit of dependence upon a superior, he is more liable to be stampeded than the Caucasian; nor has he, as with the white, except in exceptional cases, the same individuality or self-dependence—he goes rather in a crowd, and you seldom see a negro himself. He is generous, to a fault, and has but little regard for the care of United States property, for which neglect he pays, but in this respect he is much improved over former years. He is like a child, and has to be looked after by his officers; but will repay such interest by a devoted following and implicit obedience.<sup>22</sup>

Captain Robert L. Bullard, writing in July 1901, echoed Henry's sentiments. On the whole, Bullard observed, Blacks possessed the temperament that

20 Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy*, 31.

21 Guy V. Henry, 'Characteristics of Negro soldiers', *Army and Navy Register*, vol. 12, no. 24, 14 June 1891, 382.

22 Guy V. Henry, 'A Sioux Indian episode', *Harper's Weekly*, 26 December 1896, 1273–5 (1275).

would make them good soldiers: 'good natured, happy person[s] who [are] not worried by climatic discomforts or the irregularities of the soldier's life'. But Bullard considered black soldiers to be as much a challenge as an asset. Too dependent on the whims of their immediate commanders, Bullard considered them too readily distracted by trivialities. Likewise Bullard claimed they suffered from 'a certain common lack of honor' that undermined their effectiveness and trustworthiness.<sup>23</sup>

The social construction of a pliant, simple black soldier had its overtly negative side as well. Just as black soldiers were supposed to be highly receptive to orders from white officers, they were at the same time meant to be incapable of self-direction and discipline. The general lack of black officers—aside from Charles Young, only one other was commissioned in the nineteenth century—was twisted into being evidence that African Americans were unwilling to follow orders from black officers, who were also portrayed as incompetents presuming to perform a role beyond their means. One observer looked on the experiences of the few black state volunteer battalions that were raised during the Spanish-American War and commented 'there is no burlesque upon organization so utterly complete as a negro regiment with negro officers'.<sup>24</sup> Without white leadership and moral direction, such accounts held, all discipline and order disappeared, leaving behind insubordination, ineptitude and immorality. Accordingly, Blacks could only become soldiers under white direction, a scheme of things that validated segregationists and reformers alike. For the former, black soldiers would exist in a separate sphere within the army, in which they were generally denied the opportunity of command or self-determination. And yet, for the latter, by their uniformed service, the Buffalo Soldiers fulfilled a role that pointed towards the ultimate future reform of their race. As a result, a tenuous compromise on the issue of black military service was reached that would survive until 1917. So long as recruitment was limited to the four regular regiments, commissions were withheld as much as possible from aspiring applicants, and units be deployed outside of the American South, then the black soldier was tolerated. America's entrance into the First World War overturned the conditions sustaining this compromise. The wholesale recruitment and conscription of the nation's young men eliminated the need for Blacks in uniform, racist opponents claimed. All that remained was discovering the proper justification for the exclusion.

23 Robert L. Bullard, 'The Negro volunteer: some characteristics', *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States*, vol. 29, July 1901, 29–39 (37).

24 P. B. Barringer, *The American Negro: His Past and Future* [1900], in John David Smith (ed.), *Racial Determinism and the Fear of Miscegenation, Pre-1900* (New York: Garland Publishing 1993), 435–57 (446).

## The army medical officer and race: Charles Woodruff and medical ethnology

Since the Army Medical Department was established in 1818, its officers grew more proficient in new techniques and theories related to infectious diseases and treatments. Yet the application of scientific medicine and public health measures was not the limit of medical officer activity after 1898. In America's far-flung imperial outposts, medical officers became the nation's chief arbiters of racial identity. From the Philippines to Puerto Rico, regular army physicians constructed racial hierarchies and established new parameters of racial identity. Over the course of the two decades between the war with Spain in 1898 and America's entry into the First World War, a select group of army medical officers reinterpreted the confusing hodgepodge of racial assumptions and theories into a single narrative that validated the doctrine of white supremacy at home and abroad. A corollary to this reinvented racial hierarchy was the extension of Jim Crow assumptions of colour-based racial inferiority, and the need to dehumanize America's black community and relegate consideration of it to the realm of scientific discourse. Medical officers were not only part of this transition; they helped to popularize new racial constructions to facilitate the formal isolation of African Americans in war-time. On the western frontier, medical officers routinely labelled black soldiers reporting ill as 'malingerers', and threatened them with confinement and court martial if they didn't return to duty. The Surgeon General's office issued two sets of medical statistics, one for Blacks and one for Whites, following the premise that black soldiers were both more and less susceptible to different conditions—pneumonia, syphilis, yellow fever, malaria—on the basis of their biology. Likewise black troops were assumed to respond to climate differently than white soldiers, tolerating the hot temperatures of the Southwest and the Plains in summer more readily than Whites.<sup>25</sup> Even after the experience of the Spanish-American War in Cuba revealed no difference in immunity to yellow fever between black and white soldiers, such beliefs persisted, and helped determine the posting of 'coloured regiments' to tropical locations. As soon as hostilities ceased in Cuba, for example, volunteer regiments of black 'immunes'—soldiers with a presumed immunity to yellow fever—were sent to occupy the island. And, by 1901, all four regular 'coloured regiments', and an additional two volunteer 'coloured regiments', were engaged in the Philippines. Empire, it seemed, provided, if only for a short time, the rationale for retaining black troops in a white supremacist society.

This aspect of the medical officer's work is often overlooked by historians, who focus on the Army Medical Department's scientific or administrative

25 Adams, *Class and Race in the Frontier Army*, 180; Arlen L. Fowler, *The Black Infantry in the West, 1869–1891* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing 1971), 132–3.

accomplishments.<sup>26</sup> Yet it is in this area that the medical officer had the greatest influence, and exercised absolute power as an agent for American-style 'progress' outside the country's borders. While line officers and civilian agents of the War Department's Insular Bureau had direct control over the administration of the American colonies, the army medical officer defined the parameters of whiteness with regard to the indigenous peoples there. His determination would establish the degree of political agency and economic status that they would be accorded.

The greatest challenge for American medical officers in the early twentieth century was in crafting a schema that validated control over the new imperial periphery while preserving the contours of whiteness in the tropical environment. Even as American soldiers were posted abroad in greater numbers, white line and staff officers expressed concerns over the hazards of tropical climates. One was the perceived effect of tropical service on the long-term physiology of race. A key advocate of whiteness and the hazards of tropical climates on racial identity was the Army Medical Department's Lieutenant Colonel Charles E. Woodruff. A forty-five-year veteran, Woodruff's initial expertise was in what became known after 1905 as *sanitary tactics*, the employment of sanitation and public health practices to preserve the viability of a military force in the field.<sup>27</sup> After a brief stint in the Philippines, Woodruff became a self-taught expert on climatology and race, motivated by his concerns over the effects of tropical climates on the white Americans sent there as soldiers, administrators and labourers. While much of his work was focused on the actinic effect of the tropical sun on the constitutions of Whites, his definition of a 'tropical climate' extended to social interactions—work, leisure and so on—undertaken in a tropical environment.

Woodruff's focus, however, was not determined by any consideration of the moral superiority of whiteness over other races. Instead he argued for recognizing the constant pressure of Darwinian natural selection on humanity, even as western civilization was spreading its influence globally and asserting an illusory superiority of whiteness. Woodruff's concept of *medical ethnology* was predicated on the biological response of humanity to long-term exposure to a prevalent regional climate. As he explained: 'The new idea, and the only new idea concerned in medical ethnology, is the fact that the process is still going on, and that migrants, if unfit for the new environment, have higher morbidity and mortality rates than the fittest.'<sup>28</sup>

26 See Vincent J. Cirillo, *Bullets and Bacilli: The Spanish-American War and Military Medicine* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 2004), and Mary C. Gillett, *The Army Medical Department, 1865–1917* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History 1995).

27 Charles E. Woodruff and Frank T. Woodbury, 'The prevention of disease in the army and the best method of accomplishing that result', *Journal of the Association of Military Surgeons of the United States*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1906, 1–37.

28 Charles E. Woodruff, 'Medical ethnology', *Military Surgeon*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1914, 31–48 (32).

Northern Europeans, for example, with their fair skin and light-coloured or red hair, thrived only in cool temperate regions similar to their ancestral place of origin. Likewise, sub-Saharan Africans were best suited to hot, torrid climates. Woodruff believed this intersection of climate and race continued to exert an influence on human natural selection. Dividing the globe into a series of isothermal sectors, he applied the relationship between climate and natural selection to all living species. Individual species had specific ranges within which they lived and prospered. If they ventured outside of their climatic boundaries, the individual plants and animals would eventually degenerate and die out.<sup>29</sup> Like so many other naturalists active at the turn of the century, Woodruff extended his biological determinism to humanity. Different races, he argued, evolved from their original anthropoid branches in response to a variety of factors, including climate, topography and the availability of food, into their recognizable ethnic and racial types. Accordingly, each racial type and ethnic subtype was attuned to a specific global region—blond, pale Caucasians to the Northern European or Russian isothermal zone, dark-haired, swarthy Caucasians to the Southern European/Mediterranean isothermal zone, and jet black Africans to equatorial sub-Saharan Africa—and there prospered.

What distinguished humanity from other animals, however, was its ability to transform and recreate environments to serve their own needs. Thus humans could travel across isothermal zones with seeming impunity, and take up residence in areas otherwise hostile to their biology.<sup>30</sup> Despite this, however, natural selection would not be denied. Woodruff believed all races settling outside of their isothermal zone would in time either degenerate, transform into a new racial type suited to the new area or die out entirely. This fate awaited Nordic blondes and African transplants alike outside of their isothermal zones, even though it might take centuries. Woodruff presented a grim outlook for both groups:

As both negroes and blonds have survived many generations already in the United States the decay is so gradual, and extinction is so far off, that we need not worry over the matter in the least. It will do no harm if the present blonds do die out in a few centuries, for they will be replaced by others. . . . The negro, on the other hand, in spite of a present numerical increase must deteriorate and disappear, as he always has in Egypt, for there is no stream of immigrants from Africa to replace the families becoming extinct.<sup>31</sup>

Extinction was acceptable, if not normal. The greater hazard, Woodruff argued, was racial assimilation between the dominant Nordic types residing

29 Charles E. Woodruff, *Medical Ethnology* (New York: Rebman Company 1915), 3–4.

30 *Ibid.*, 7–9.

31 Charles E. Woodruff, *The Effects of Tropical Light on White Men* (Rebman Company 1905), 300–1.

outside of their native zones in the United States or elsewhere, and other lesser racial types native to the region. The very process of cultural expansion that had made whiteness the archetype of racial development globally threatened to degenerate and ultimately eliminate it altogether. Where some saw a 'melting pot' creating a new vibrant American race, Woodruff saw only degradation and race suicide. In describing the outcome of racial assimilation, he wrote:

The hybrids could not breed true to type anyhow, and if they could it is evident that even if they were adapted to one place they would not be to any other. Types unfit for the environment must disappear, and as elsewhere explained, though we might develop as diverse types as in Europe, there cannot possibly be an American type fit for every place.<sup>32</sup>

For white Americans pursuing their new imperial obligations, Woodruff cautioned protection and restraint. Dark clothing, hats, a strict diet and great moral resistance against the venal pleasures of the tropics were the order of the day. While imperial service should be restricted only to Whites, where possible, only dark-haired Mediterranean types should be sent abroad, as the blonde Anglo-Saxon type would experience rapid physical and moral collapse. And the length of service should be limited to no more than two years abroad, lest the individual succumb to the constant barrage of environmental and moral factors.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the hazards, Woodruff believed Whites alone were fit for colonial administration and defence. His opinion appears to have been shaped by physiological concerns rather than any moral or ideological bias. He acknowledged, for example, that black soldiers appeared to be well suited for service in the Philippines, noting the general perception that they were 'so much more comfortable than at home that large numbers of them preferred to stay where their black pigmented armor was an advantage'.<sup>34</sup> Yet he dismissed such views as an over-simplification of the connections between biology and climatology. Noting that black and dark colours absorbed heat more readily than lighter colours, Woodruff reasoned that even the darkest African American soldiers were limited in the amount of time they could spend in the direct tropical sun, as the absorption of ultraviolet rays and other solar radiation was exponentially greater for them than Whites.<sup>35</sup> Woodruff also thought that the long-term biological damage of having lived in the United States outside of their isothermal zone for generations was too great to overcome, and that Blacks were thereby no

32 Woodruff, *Medical Ethnology*, 244.

33 *Ibid.*, 301–2.

34 Woodruff, *The Effects of Tropical Light on White Men*, 298.

35 Charles E. Woodruff, 'Blonds and brunettes in the tropics', *New York Medical Journal*, vol. 96, no. 14, 12 October 1912, 721–9 (723).

more fit for long-term tropical service than blond Nordic types. He thought this particularly true for mulatto Blacks, who were 'actually people without a place on earth suited to their physique':<sup>36</sup> too light-skinned for the tropics, and too frail and physiologically ill-suited for life in more temperate zones. Woodruff concluded that black soldiers were more susceptible to rheumatic tuberculosis, sun stroke and other conditions exacerbated by tropical service.<sup>37</sup> To his credit, he reached a similar conclusion with regard to fair-haired and fair-skinned Whites: 'If we ignore the use of pigment, the government will continue to lose many thousands of dollars yearly through sending unfit types to the tropics—not to mention avoidable pensions to unfit men.'<sup>38</sup> Hence, for Woodruff, race was an outcome of climate and nature, rendering mankind just as subject to natural selection as any other species. Black men were unsuited for military service due to a combination of a variety of natural factors, even if tradition, experience and conventional wisdom held otherwise.

Woodruff's ideas were attacked by his peers in the Army Medical Department. Colonel Louis Mervin Maus, Deputy Surgeon General and former health administrator in the Philippines, derided his colleague's conclusions regarding the destructive effect of the tropical climate on white Americans. Writing in 1909, Maus noted that thousands of Americans had visited, worked and lived in the Philippines for the last decade. They all

have enjoyed the very best of health, and indeed many of them, delicate upon arrival, have become strong and robust. There can be no question but that the seasoning or acclimatizing process has promoted this adaptability to life in the Philippines, as it does, within certain limitations, to any climate or zone.<sup>39</sup>

Likewise others cautioned against accepting Woodruff's arguments on the basis that, while perhaps relevant during the early days of the Philippine Insurrection when American troops chased insurrectionists across the archipelago, more recent experiences indicated all American-born troops, black or white, could live and work there without penalty. In response Woodruff considered such critiques ill-informed, 'flippant' and irresponsible. Indeed, he considered much criticism to be the result of 'increased normal suggestibility . . . another of the effects of light on blonds'.<sup>40</sup>

In the end, Woodruff viewed race primarily as an aspect of human physiology connected directly to natural selection based on climatic and

36 Woodruff, *The Effects of Tropical Light on White Men*, 267.

37 *Ibid.*, 268–70; Woodruff, 'Blonds and brunettes in the tropics', 725.

38 Charles E. Woodruff, 'Blonds and brunettes in the tropics (continued)', *New York Medical Journal*, vol. 96, no. 15, 19 October 1912, 785–90 (790).

39 Louis Mervin Maus, 'Military sanitary problems in the Philippine Islands', *Military Surgeon*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1909, 1–32 (11).

40 Woodruff, 'Blonds and brunettes in the tropics (continued)', 789.



isothermic specificity. While he welcomed the global expansion of whiteness associated with imperialism—going so far as to rate the so-called ‘conquest of the tropics’ as an essential humanitarian mission—Woodruff also recognized that the tropics could—and often did—strike back. The greater hazard, in his view, was the long-term effects of climate on races existing outside of their normal zone, including racial intermingling. But, even in expressing his concerns, Woodruff remained markedly divorced from the social rhetoric that defined Jim Crow in American culture. For him, racial segregation was a matter of scientific and social necessity, nothing more. If only the same could be said for other medical officers who were proponents of whiteness.

### **The Army Medical Department and race: Robert Shufeldt and race degeneration**

Woodruff was not the sole voice of the medical department on race and military effectiveness. The most vocal—and, by present-day standards, perhaps the most abhorrent—proponent of white superiority was Major Robert Wilson Shufeldt. Shufeldt was one of the most prolific writers on avian biology in the early twentieth century and he was recognized as an expert ornithologist. At the same time, Shufeldt also wrote extensively on sexual pathology, female sexuality and the role of the psychiatrist in legal settings. In addition, he was a tireless advocate of a white supremacist social order in the United States, dehumanizing African Americans to an extent rarely seen outside of the American South. To Shufeldt, born in New York City in 1850, black Americans were not only less equal in status and identity, they were ‘a veritable menace to our much boasted-of civilization’, once and future biological enemies who threatened to overwhelm whiteness if allowed even a semblance of normalcy and equality.<sup>41</sup>

To his peers, Shufeldt was an eccentric sort, out of his element in the Army Medical Department. A member of one of the nation’s elite families, his namesake father was a rear admiral in the navy, one-time consul general to Havana and the chief negotiator of the 1882 trade agreement with Korea. After graduating from the medical school at George Washington University in 1876, Shufeldt entered the Army Medical Department as an assistant surgeon. Within a few years, he gained a reputation as a troublesome officer, and controversy continued to dog Shufeldt throughout his military career.

41 For a partial bibliography of Shufeldt’s writings, see his entry in the *Index-Catalogue of the Library of the Surgeon-General’s Office, United States Army*, Second Series, vol. 15 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office 1910), 609–10. See also Robert W. Shufeldt, *America’s Greatest Problem: The Negro* (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company 1915), 1.

On 14 January 1889, he was ordered to appear before a retirement board and was mustered out of service, with the rank of major.<sup>42</sup>

He was, at the time, already acknowledged as the nation's chief expert on migratory birds. By the time of his death on 21 January 1934, he would have authored over 1,800 books, essays, articles and commentaries on many subjects,<sup>43</sup> including several books and tracts devoted to the so-called 'problem of the Negro' in American society. After leaving the army, he moved to New York City, where he immersed himself in studies of sexuality, miscegenation and prostitution, all purportedly to advance his own understanding of these practices and their potential effect on the racial health of the white Anglo-Saxon population.<sup>44</sup> While his methods were considered suspect—he was investigated by detectives employed by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice—his interests were not at all unique. Race degeneration was a signal obsession throughout western society, particularly as white European states extended their imperial reach across Asia and Africa. According to the prevalent ideology, European global dominance was pre-ordained; but, alongside its promises, the imperial project contained within it the seeds of its own destruction. Whiteness abroad would be under constant attack, not only by the recalcitrant indigene, but by nature itself. And part of this nature was the frailty and weakness of human beings in the face of venal temptation, which could undermine even the most determined of men far from home.<sup>45</sup>

In the United States, the issue of race degeneration took on even greater significance for a society subjected to repeated waves of immigrants not of Anglo-Saxon 'stock'. In 1887 the future president Theodore Roosevelt made the case for a 'new race' being forged on the American continent, in part due to the transformative influence of nature in the New World, but as a result of the intermingling of Germans, Irish, English, Dutch and Scandinavian migrants in the nation's formative years. However, as Roosevelt, Shufeldt and others also argued, such assimilation was a risky project. While their

42 See Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Personal Papers of Medical Officers and Physicians: National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. (NARA), RG94, Box 521; and papers relating to the medical history of Fort Wingate, February 1876–June 1889, 1 volume: NARA, RG4, Entry 547, Volume 820.

43 Edgar Erskine Hume, *Ornithologists of the United States Army Medical Corps* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1942), 290–401.

44 See Robert W. Shufeldt, 'Complete list of my published writings, with brief biographical notes (fifth instalment)', *Medical Review of Reviews*, vol. 26, no. 5, 1920, 249–57 (251).

45 Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1995), 88, 117–20; Bobby A. Wintermute, 'The watchword was "cleanliness": Americans as endangered outsiders in the age of empire, 1898–1920', in Will Wright and Steven Kaplan (eds), *The Image of the Outsider II in Literature, Media, and Society: Proceedings of the 2008 Conference, Society for the Interdisciplinary Study of Social Imagery* (Pueblo: Colorado State University 2008), 399–404.

racial hierarchies recognized various gradations of whiteness, they also acknowledged the potential degenerative effects of mixing with purportedly debased white ethnicities and non-Whites. Latinos, Asians, Native Americans and Blacks would never assimilate; indeed, any efforts to do so would only debase American whiteness, and lead to its eclipse.<sup>46</sup>

This is the context in which Shufeldt wrote his 1915 book *America's Greatest Problem: The Negro*. Despite his claims that 'I have no color-prejudice against the negro ...', Shufeldt delivered a scurrilous racist screed that not only sought to validate white supremacy, but that made a case for excluding Blacks from participating in any level of American civil society on specious biological and moral grounds.<sup>47</sup> Without total segregation, Shufeldt argued, the only natural eventuality was a long and ultimately devastating course of racial assimilation, which would create a new hybrid 'improved Afro-American' who would grow more prevalent, replacing Anglo-Saxon Whites as the nation's dominant type.

The time is certain to come ... when the admixture will result in the complete rotting of the old Anglo-Saxon stock in this country, and when no one of our descendants can trace an unsullied pedigree back to the grand old civilizations of the Old World, with all that that means and all that that has accomplished.<sup>48</sup>

In making his judgements on African Americans, Shufeldt claimed a double authority. First, he called attention to his experience as a medical officer in the army, which, along with a few years residing in Haiti as a child, gave him 'intimate knowledge of the employment of negroes in the army and navy and many other government departments'.<sup>49</sup> The inference of course was that Shufeldt 'knew' his subject population better than many of his civilian peers, even those from the American South. Shufeldt also claimed professional legitimacy on the basis of his scientific work. He refers to his biological and anatomical studies, and points to his understanding of natural selection in birds and other animals as the foundation for his continual comparisons of Blacks with various primates, including chimpanzees and orangutans. 'In his internal anatomy the negro exhibits a much closer approach to the anthropoid apes than does any other race of the genus *Homo*', Shufeldt wrote. 'Perhaps it would be nearer the truth to say that he has not been so completely differentiated from the simian stock as have the other races of mankind.'<sup>50</sup>

46 Thomas G. Dyer, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1992), 131; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876–1917* (New York: Hill and Wang 2000), 179–82.

47 Shufeldt, *America's Greatest Problem*, 2.

48 *Ibid.*, 6–7.

49 *Ibid.*, 4.

50 *Ibid.*, 30–1.

Shufeldt followed his crude physiological representations with an even cruder moral indictment. Simply put, he believed Blacks were incapable of exercising moral restraint. It was not a question of immorality however: 'The negro has, in fact, no morals, and it is therefore out of the question for him to be immoral; in other words, he is non-moral rather than immoral.'<sup>51</sup> Borrowing heavily from southern writers, Shufeldt constructed a distorted image of the African American as beset by physical and psychological decay. Beneath the surface of their seemingly well-constructed, muscular bodies was a restive vector of crippling disease: syphilis, insanity, tuberculosis, heart disease and other lethal conditions were so prevalent among Blacks as to single them out as potential carriers. In addition, a predisposition towards these diseases was combined with a complete absence of sexual restraint leading to their rapid spread. According to Shufeldt, the greatest danger to white society was the failure to understand that black males were physically incapable of controlling their atavistic urges. Shufeldt's description of what followed was half horror story, half titillating pornography, with black men indulging in a sexual free-for-all with white women, 'completely submerged by a sex madness', with 'all the active symptoms of animalism'.<sup>52</sup> The only preventive was total segregation—enforced if necessary by violence, and preferably implemented by the state in accordance with the rule of law—and the withdrawal of all pretence of social elevation through cultural education.<sup>53</sup>

### **The role of military medicine in Progressive Era racism and Jim Crow**

Woodruff's doctrine of medical ethnology, combined with Shufeldt's conceptualization of racial degeneration, while abhorrent to later readers, was not only in line with other contemporary writers but was in fact quite mainstream. The European war brought a renewed sense of urgency to eugenicists fearful for the future prospects of whiteness. War eroded the vitality and strength of a race and, by targeting a nation's youth, it cut at the core of the population's future. 'Almost every man lost from this group is a eugenic loss to the population', wrote American eugenicist Vernon Lyman Kellogg.

It is a weakening of that part or element of the population on which the race particularly depends for vigour and physical well-being. It is a happening which gives special opportunity to a weaker element in the population to reproduce

51 Ibid., 37.

52 Ibid., 105.

53 Ibid., 101, 105–6.

itself, and thus to increase its proportion within the race, and to give the race a stamp more like itself.<sup>54</sup>

But the violence of war was but only a part of the larger issue. Large-scale military mobilization traditionally was the harbinger of outbreaks of disease, with camp illnesses like typhoid culling not only society's weakest individuals but often targeting disproportionately the nation's young and healthy men essential for the survival and future vitality of the race. Moreover, war offered new opportunities for syphilitic infection. Considered the 'soldier's disease' due to its high rate of infection among military personnel, syphilis was especially feared for its long-term degenerative effects. Syphilis, Kellogg wrote, was 'wholly a contaminating disease. It does not select by death. It is a disease of great possibilities and importance in relation to racial deterioration.'<sup>55</sup> Thus war presented a dual threat to society, by directly cutting into the future vitality of the people through its violence, and also by establishing a disease that would consume the race from within, creating the conditions for its degeneration and decay.

Accordingly, the military medical establishment warned that the nation's black population, while no less eager and patriotic than Whites, was nevertheless trapped by the circumstance of its history and race. Programmes to 'uplift' the 'American Negro' through public education were a wasted effort, decried as 'theoretically unphilosophical and practically worse than useless'.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, employing African Americans in roles beyond their capacity, it was argued, would both constitute a betrayal of black people and squander precious resources in pursuit of an unobtainable goal. Thus the military medical establishment proposed restricting their access to military service, save for the most menial tasks suited to their allegedly primitive intellectual/emotional/physiological states.<sup>57</sup>

Racial physiology was also cited as a factor in the overall health of African American recruits in the regular army. When Lieutenant Colonel Weston P. Chamberlain examined morbidity and mortality rates of 'coloured' soldiers and white soldiers between 1905 and 1914, he determined that, while hospital admissions and disability discharge rates were virtually the same in the two groups, the corresponding death rates were higher for Blacks, an average of 5.5 deaths per thousand compared to 3.2 deaths for Whites. After comparing this rate with that in southern civilian communities, where black deaths occurred on a rate nearly double that of Whites in some areas, Chamberlain accepted the premise of southern white physicians:

54 Vernon Lyman Kellogg, *Military Selection and Race Deterioration: A Preliminary Report and Discussion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1916), 157–202 (186).

55 *Ibid.*, 194, see also 187.

56 'Editorial: The physician and the Negro problem', *Military Surgeon* (supplement to *National Medical Review*), vol. 9, no. 4, 1899, 195–6.

57 *Ibid.*, 196.

The difference between white and black mortality is due more largely to race degeneration than to the factor of sanitation. An opinion that the higher mortality among negroes is in part, at least, a purely racial difference, and not due entirely to unfavorable sanitary conditions, appears to be supported by the experience of the last ten years in our Army where the housing, clothing, feeding, and most other hygienic factors are identical for the white and colored soldiers.<sup>58</sup>

As he looked more closely into the mortality rates for black soldiers, Chamberlain determined that as a group they were more likely to enter the service with tuberculosis, heart disease and nephritis, all conditions that in the context of the early twentieth century were identified as targeting the black community throughout the United States. Likewise, Chamberlain felt earlier claims of easy acclimatization by black soldiers in the Philippines and other tropical stations were in error.<sup>59</sup>

Official statistics maintained by the Army Medical Department seemed to support Chamberlain's conclusions. The 1918 Surgeon General's report identified a higher mortality rate among black soldiers in the regular army—9.02 per cent of a mean strength of 5,577—compared with a 5.44 per cent mortality rate among 130,660 white soldiers between 1908 and 1917. This high mortality rate was matched by a similarly high illness rate of 949 per 1,000 per year.<sup>60</sup> Respiratory ailments, heart disease and tuberculosis lead the list of physical conditions, but venereal disease was an object of special concern. According to the reports for 1917, African American soldiers stationed in the continental United States were nearly four times more likely to manifest symptoms of syphilis than Whites, and over four times more likely to report at sick call exhibiting chancroids.<sup>61</sup> Such statistics were used in a backhanded way to highlight the relative safety of military life for young white recruits after the United States entered the First World War. Great attention was lavished on 'Army ideals and restraint', 'Army medical prophylaxis' and the general decline of venereal disease among white conscripts and recruits as the nation mobilized for war with Germany. Indeed, according to the report, the army was cleaner and safer now, with regard to venereal disease, than it had been for decades.<sup>62</sup>

Woodruff's and Shufeldt's concerns dovetailed intimately, representing the extent to which Progressive Era discourses on racial integrity and vitality informed Jim Crow racism across the country. Yet the dilemma was not one of political identity or expediency: by 1910 Progressivism *and* racism cut

58 Weston P. Chamberlain, 'Demography in so far as it relates to the vital statistics of armies', *Military Surgeon*, vol. 39. no. 6, December 1916, 583–90 (587, see also 586–7).

59 *Ibid.*, 584.

60 *Report of the Surgeon General, 1918* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office 1918), 34.

61 *Ibid.*, 191–2.

62 *Ibid.*, 196–7.

equally across white American society. Their combination not only informed and directed the course of black military service in the First World War, they also established the contours of 'safe' and 'unsafe' black identity in the United States. Regardless of the size of their population, or their emotive appeals to prove their loyalty and equality to Whites, Blacks were cut off from military service on purportedly 'scientific' grounds. The question was not *if* black men could serve loyally, but what effect service would have on their collective psyche, which white America deemed to be damaged and hyper-savage. In the end, army medical officers like Lieutenant Colonel Woodruff and Major Shufeldt constructed a view of race they claimed was 'scientific', but which actually relied on stereotype, misinformation and their own obsessions and fears.

Yet one cannot help but consider the two as representative of a trend among other American elite professionals with regard to early twentieth-century racial ideology. Segregation, lynching and race hatred were not just aspects of regional ignorance, nor were they restricted to the lower class in American society on the eve of the First World War. Woodruff and Shufeldt represent how deeply ingrained racial ideology was in American self-identity during the Progressive Era. While they thought they were acting in the interest of 'science', they in fact legitimized the political and social inequalities that underpinned Jim Crow, and provided the intellectual foundation for the Wilson administration's rejection of the African American as an equal participant in the nation's crisis.

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