

Fighting for Citizenship: Black Northerners and the Debate over Military Service in the Civil War

Jonathan Lande
Purdue University, jlande@purdue.edu

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Review

Lande, Jonathan

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Taylor, Brian. *Fighting for Citizenship: Black Northerners and the Debate over Military Service in the Civil War.* University of North Carolina Press, 2020. PAPERBACK. \$29.95 ISBNB 9781469659770 pp. 248.

William Cooper Nell penned *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855) because so few Americans remembered Black soldiers' part in the nation's founding. As a gifted historian, Nell dedicated his activist spirit to liberating Black Americans by recrafting the narrative of Black involvement in the Revolution. Yet when the Civil War broke out in 1861, many white Americans still degraded and enslaved Black men and women. White Americans also ignored the contributions of Black patriots like Crispus Attucks and disparaged Black people as less American than their white neighbors. To fight back against the racism, Nell called on young Black men to volunteer for the army and the fight for the Union. Famed leaders including Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth joined Nell. At recruiting meetings, Douglass thundered, "Men of Color, to Arms!" For her part, Truth collected food and supplies for enlisted men. But not all Black leaders agreed with Nell, Douglass, and Truth. Given in part the dismissal of Black Revolutionary War patriots, many Black leaders asked: "Why should we fight for the United States?" They pointed to the stubborn anti-Black racism that barred Black heroes from honor and denied Black people rights. These dissenters argued Black men should delay enlistment for better terms or refuse to serve entirely. As Brian Taylor reveals in *Fighting for Citizenship*, the dissent initiated a debate over Black military service that influenced volunteering for Black regiments and the meaning of Black citizenship.

In *Fighting for Citizenship*, Taylor broadens the focus of scholarship on Black Northerners during the war from the most prominent leaders to newspaper editors and other local trailblazers, showing that not all Black Northerners trusted military service would garner citizenship. Scholarship on Black citizenship in the Civil War era by historians Stephen Kantrowitz (*More than Freedom*, 2012), Martha Jones (*Birthright Citizens*, 2018), and

Christopher Bonner (*Remaking the Republic*, 2020), among others, has exposed the unyielding dedication of free Black men and women to move from the margins of society to the center of democracy and the varied opinions on how to best attain citizenship. Scholars including David Blight (*Frederick Douglass' Civil War*, 1989), Christian Samito (*Becoming American Under Fire*, 2009), and Chandra Manning (*Troubled Refuge*, 2017) have exposed the struggle for Black citizenship continued during the war. In his research, Taylor provides an insightful addition to both stories. He demonstrates that the myriad views regarding uplift among Black activists before the war did not evaporate when the war began. Nor did they after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation officially opened the army to Black men. Rather, Taylor contends that looking at a larger swarth of Black Northerners means witnessing a deliberation over the merits of Black military service. Taylor argues that the ensuing debate shaped the trajectory of Black enlistment and the eventual outcomes of Black military service, especially citizenship.

Taylor traces the efforts to attain citizenship from the prewar moment through the war's end chronologically in *Fighting for Citizenship*. Chapter one introduces the battles fought by leaders like Nell, Douglass, and Truth before the war. Complicating the picture from April 1861 to December 1862, Chapter two demonstrates that Black Northerners were neither apathetic to the war nor feverish to earn Black men a blue uniform. Rather, Taylor shows Black leaders questioning whether Black men should volunteer if offered. Taylor reveals the spectrum of opinions existing before the war translated into a variety of views in 1861. From skeptics seeking guarantees in return for sacrifice to unwavering supporters of Black service, Black leaders debated enlistment. Chapter three pivots from speculation over enlistment to whether men should enlist, as the government opened the army to Black men. Taylor contends much of the debate ended by late 1863 because recruiters fruitfully persuaded many Black civilians of military service's importance and because Black men realized the direction of the war meant that victory would bring radical change to their lives. Turning to the activism following service in Chapter four, Taylor discusses Black troops' response to discrimination in the army. The soldiers thought that if they accepted unequal treatment, they would be accepting inferior citizenship, so Taylor shows the troops peacefully protested. In Chapter five, Taylor draws together the wartime activism of his earlier chapters with the postwar politics detailed in extant works especially by Donald Shaffer (*After the Glory*, 2004) and Barbara Gannon (*The Won Cause*, 2011). Taylor argues that Black civilians and soldiers thought they needed to demand citizenship immediately.

As a result, in the half-decade after the war, they urgently fought to affirm Black citizenship based on Black men's contributions to Union victory

As Taylor details distinctive responses to Black military service, he is particularly successful in showing how ongoing anti-Black racism continuously threatened the relationship Black Americans strove to forge during the war, a theme that has been more visible in studies of the Black military experience in different eras. As scholars of Black military service in twentieth-century wars have observed, supporters of Black military service who appealed to young Black men to volunteer often had to respond to dissent. Most clearly, as Kimberly Phillips shows in *War! What Is It Good For* (2012), Black service advocates during the Vietnam War needed to answer to not only the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense but also Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nina Simone. Yet, even during World War II as supporters of Black military service called for the double victory against fascism abroad and racism at home, the advocates of the Double-V Campaign had to answer C. L. R. James, the Trinidadian historian who observed the problems of Black sacrifice in his pamphlet, *Why Negroes Should Oppose the War*. While Civil War historians have not entirely missed similar dissent, Taylor furnishes greater detail and persuasively argues for the significance of the debates and the contingency of them. He shows, for example, how events like the anti-Black mob violence in New York City and Detroit bolstered arguments against service and made the job of recruiters more challenging.

Although he provides a rich portrait of political engagement by Black northern civilians, Taylor's chapter on Black soldiers' protests fails to expose similar complexity of Black activism within the army. In his chapter on Black activists in the ranks, Taylor builds on previous scholarship about Black soldiers' political engagement, which has been embedded in the historiography since the first book-length treatment by William Wells Brown in 1867. Much like Brown and historians since, Taylor links Black soldiers' activism with Black civilians' labors. Yet unlike his detailed analysis of debate among Black civilians, Taylor largely depicts the soldiers as a monolith. Here, Taylor misses an opportunity to deepen our understanding of Black soldiers' activism, as he has done for civilians in Northern towns and cities. As scholars of other ethnic minorities have shown, not all subgroups in the army had the same ideas regarding service. In *Shades of Green* (2017), for instance, Ryan Keating observes divergent views among Irish Americans or Irish immigrants in the army. Taylor might have similarly followed up his robust evaluation of the politics of service with politics in the service. After all, as Gary Kynoch

shows in “Terrible Dilemmas” (*Slavery and Abolition*, Aug. 1997), not all Black men enlisted to free the enslaved Southerners or obtain equal rights; men volunteered for various reasons, affording them distinct visions of service. While Taylor admits not all agreed with the protesters on page 106, he does not detail their objections or their objections’ significance, a noteworthy oversight given his emphasis on conflicting postures in *Fighting for Citizenship*. To account for the stances, Taylor might have broadened his analysis on Black soldiers’ debates over the politics of service in the ranks and incorporated men with mixed perspectives on military duty.

Overall, Taylor’s *Fighting for Citizenship* hits its mark. Taylor fulfills his central objective, complicating the push for Black military service among Black northern civilians and clarifying the debate embroiling Black northern leaders. Taylor shows that the support of Black Northerners for Black military service was not a foregone conclusion, and not all Black civilians wished to sacrifice their husbands or fathers, sons or brothers for a Union so quick to forget Black patriots and devalue Black lives. Indeed, once you’ve read Taylor’s account, you cannot listen to Douglass’s declaration – “Men of color, to Arms!” – without remembering Douglass was but one voice among many.

Jonathan Lande is an Assistant Professor of History at Purdue University and is completing a book manuscript on Black deserters and mutineers in the U.S. Army derived from his dissertation, which won the Allan Nevins Dissertation Prize from the Society of American Historians and the Cromwell Dissertation Prize from the American Society for Legal History. He has authored articles on Black Civil War-era politics, including “Lighting Up the Path of Liberty and Justice” in the Journal of African American History and “Trials of Freedom” in the Journal of Social History.