

TRANSAFRICA FORUM

ISSUE BRIEF

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THE BLACK SOLDIER AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

While black Americans have had practically no input in the formulation of America's foreign policies, they have served in the military as instruments for the implementation of these policies. Since the founding of the Republic the black soldier has fought in every war America has prosecuted—even against other people of color.

Increasingly though, Blacks in the military have had to deal with the issue of how far they should go to promote U.S. interest or impose the will of the U.S. on Third World peoples. The recent U.S. intervention in Lebanon and the invasion of Grenada brought this issue to the forefront. The close relationship between the Reagan administration and the racist South African regime—which every U.S. administration has regarded as an ally—make an immediate consideration of this question necessary.

In this ISSUE BRIEF, we present an historical overview of the critical role black soldiers have played in the prosecution of U.S. foreign policies. We also discuss several trouble spots around the world where there is significant likelihood that the U.S. military will be called into action. We begin with an interview of Alfred Griffin, who in November 1983 as a corporal in the U.S. Marines Corps refused to join his unit in Lebanon and to fight in Grenada. Corporal Griffin was later charged with being "AWOL under thirty days" and for "Missing a Movement." He is currently appealing conviction on these charges. To contrast with Griffin's travail after refusing to go to Grenada and Lebanon, we also profile Malik Edwards who did go to Vietnam. □

"... until this country takes the shackles off our people, until it looks at us as human beings, until we are given full rights, and until we are treated equally, we owe this country nothing when it comes to going to war."



Alfred Griffin

Why did you join the Marines?

GRIFFIN: At the time I joined the Marine Corps, I could not afford to continue my education. It was an opportunity, I thought, to get job training and educational benefits. Your performance in the military has been outstanding; what made you jeopardize that record by deciding not to go to Grenada and Lebanon?

GRIFFIN: There are a number of reasons for my refusal to serve in those two countries. First, let me state that I am Moslem: I believe in Islam which prohibits aggression. Truthfully, when I enlisted in the Marine Corps, I had little intention of enlisting to serve in combat. Eventually I realized that I might have to fight in another country. I first learned that my unit had been assigned to Lebanon a year before actual departure. My unit had been to Lebanon before on a peaceful mission. I looked forward to going for the cultural experience, perhaps a chance to meet other Moslems. U.S. forces were sent to Lebanon to keep peace between the Moslems and Christians. Fighting broke out and as you know we sided with the Lebanese government. Our role became that of aggressor. I watched as the U.S. slowly changed over to a combatant

role. We were no longer peacekeepers. I saw an oppressed people fighting to determine their own destiny. I saw the U.S. involved only for political reasons. The U.S. was taking aggressive action against those people and that was wrong, morally wrong. That was one of the reasons for my refusal to go.

Later on, my unit, the one with which I refused to leave, was detoured to Grenada. They were told that they were going to push the communists out; that the communists had taken over this island. They didn't know anything about the island: they didn't know where it was located; they were not told what type of people lived there. They were just told they were going to push the communists out. They the invaded this island; attacked and raped this country and there was no justification for it.

Given your record of outstanding service, did you expect the authorities to be more understanding of your refusal to go to Lebanon especially since it was based on religious grounds?

GRIFFIN: I did expect them to be a bit more understanding but once I told them of my beliefs, I think that brought out a certain bias. I think if I had come to them as a Catholic, Jew, or Protestant, they would have been a little more understanding. I also think they felt threatened by the fact that I would choose to follow my beliefs over their orders. I was told that I was a soldier and that my responsibility was to my men and my country.

Did you find the black community supportive of your decision not to go to Lebanon and Grenada?

GRIFFIN: There were mixed reactions. My decision was a very bold one and it confronted a lot of issues. It confronted the issue of religion and the issue of the black man's role. In a sense I felt disappointed by the fact that a lot of Blacks were silent. Many of them were afraid to say anything. I would like to have seen more support from

black leaders. I did receive a number of letters, but as far as anyone speaking out in my behalf, I'm disappointed.

Was the reaction of blacks within the military different?

GRIFFIN: Yes. I think I have awakened a lot of consciousness among them. I had a welcoming reception when I came back to my unit. Even white soldiers were very warm. Many of the black soldiers could relate it to their own feelings in Grenada because they had not known they were going into a black country. If they had known, they wouldn't have gone.

You found discrepancies between the pictures projected of the situation in both Grenada and Lebanon and what actually took place. Would it be your advice to blacks in the military to educate themselves beyond the surface of such situations so they will be sure of what they are getting themselves into?

GRIFFIN: Yes; exactly. They should be more aware of what is going on around them, in Third World countries as in any country. I will also say that this country portrays a certain side of the issues as you notice when you watch the news: People in the Middle East are portrayed only as radicals. Libya is portrayed as radical and terrorist and would do anything to disrupt this country. Our eyes were closed to Grenada. This country did not want us to see the invasion of a black country because they knew what the response would have been. In Grenada, many innocent lives were taken. There is a lot more to the story than was told publicly and as you know, the U.S. did not allow any journalists in Grenada till later.

What would be your advice to other black soldiers who might be faced with similar questions given the political tensions in such areas as Central America and southern Africa—places which have sizeable black communities?

GRIFFIN: My advice to them would be to refuse to go and fight in such places if so ordered. I feel at this time that a black person does not belong in the military. I have questioned and educated myself over the past two years about the role of Blacks in the service and you have to look back through history to see what our role was initially. Initially, the black man was told that if he served his country he would be looked upon more as a human being. He enlisted to gain freedom from slavery. In World War I blacks were used as shock-troops. They were first to go to the battlefields. We also have to look at what type of response these soldiers received when they came home. These soldiers were facing the same problems they have faced all their lives: discrimination, segregation. Even those black sol-

diers who fought the Germans came home to be lynched in the South. We have to look at Vietnam, at all the soldiers that died there—for what? Black soldiers are used by this country to do dirty political work. We must look at our heritage, at our position in society. We must look at our communities and see that they are suffering. We ourselves are an oppressed people. So how can we join the service and pick up arms against other oppressed people, people of Third World countries who are only trying to survive?

It is said that one of the advantages of the Marines is that it instills a sense of discipline, a sense of self-direction. Do you think that this advantage is worth black youth taking a detour of maybe four or five years in order to gain attitudes and outlooks that will help them to cope better with the future?

GRIFFIN: Good question! I gained discipline when I was in the service; I gained other things by joining the service. But do we gain discipline at the expense of losing ourselves? Is discipline worth the price of performing duties which are wrong, which are immoral—that is to pick up arms against an oppressed people for political reasons? Do we have to go through 11, 12 months of boot camp to be told what to do, to wake up at 5:00 am, to be able to run three miles in a certain amount of time? Do we have to strip ourselves of our dignity and everything to achieve this? No. We must not. I feel as though we must discipline ourselves. We must set up our own principles and our own directives.

In light of the fact that unemployment is particularly high among black youth, what would be your advice to them regarding the military service as a possible career?

GRIFFIN: I would dissuade black youth from joining the service. I see the service only as a detour. I think we have to look beyond "the job" and rather at what the service itself wants. It is not looking to educate you or to give you a job. It is looking to use you as a tool. And the purpose is often wrong if one looks at Lebanon or Grenada.

If black Americans were to say that they do not belong in the armed forces of the United States, would that not be seen as saying that they do not deserve to be citizens?

GRIFFIN: No, it should not be seen that way at all. I feel that until this country takes the shackles off our people, until it looks at us as human beings, until we are given full rights, and until we are treated equally, we owe this country nothing when it comes to going to war. □

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PROFILE: MALIK EDWARDS, BLACK VIETNAM VETERAN

Malik Edwards, currently involved in community work in Washington D.C., went to Vietnam in 1965—one of the first black Americans to do so. His decision to go contrasts with Alfred Griffin's refusal to go to Grenada and Lebanon some twenty years later. Edwards' experiences, reactions, and current status are sketched below.

Malik Edwards' odyssey has taken him from the rural South to Vietnam to the Black Panther Party and finally to self-expression through his artwork and community service.

His stint with the Marine Corps had a major effect on the direction his life was to take, especially politically. "The Marine Corps experience taught me that if I could serve this country, which really ends up serving corporations, that I should at least go back and serve my own community. If I could put my life on the line for the white ruling class, then I had a real obligation to my own people. That's what these men (the North Vietnamese) were doing for their people, so I figured that I have to do the same thing."

Edwards went to Vietnam in 1965 mainly to earn a living because he was too poor to go to college. "Today there are more choices, more ways to go to school. There are more options than going into the military." The war that Edwards saw in 1965 was not the full-fledged American escalation of the late 1960s. He served with other Marines as an adviser and trainer for the South Vietnamese army. "War in '65 was different. It was like when the Marines went to Lebanon or trained people in Honduras and places like that." The experience made him realize that, "We have Americans all over the world: everywhere there is a war there are American military people."

He says that the war made him aware of the contradiction of fighting against people of color on behalf of a country that discriminated against him and other people of color. "To Americans these people—the Vietnamese—were 'gooks.' I could identify with 'gooks' because the same people—whites—who called them 'gooks,' also called me 'nigger'; so maybe the Vietnamese people weren't so bad."

Edwards experienced and observed discrimination within the Marines in Vietnam. While some instances were subtle and others blatant, it felt to him as if discrimination was ever-present. Admittedly, there were some positive instances of loyalty and camaraderie between black and white soldiers, particularly those in the same small units. However, these were outnumbered and outweighed by the instances of racism and prejudice. The

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Vietnam experience, then, deepened Malik Edwards' dissatisfaction and search for alternatives.

Political consciousness came to him somewhat later: "My interest in other struggles didn't happen until I got back to the States and Martin Luther King got killed." That event among others in the late 1960s caused him to join the Black Panther Party. "It was like leaving one military group and going into almost another military group."

His membership in the Panthers after his time in the Marines helped Edwards decide where he wanted his life to go. "Those two experiences—Vietnam and the Panthers—taught me what kinds of organizations I felt black folks needed. So when I came out of the Panthers, the first place I went to was Valley Green in Southeast Washington D.C. "My first job was working with kids in the community. At that time Valley Green was the roughest area in D.C. . . . So we went there and started working with them. It was fun. The kids were very smart and I learned a lot. So most of my work since then has been toward dealing with kids. I think that our future is in their hands. A lot of times when they don't seem to listen to adults, it is because they figure, 'Well, you're not successful at what you're doing so you can't tell me anything.' "

On the role of blacks in the armed forces Edwards says, "I'm not going to tell blacks not to go into the military because that'll mean that only white people will know how to use tanks and sophisticated military equipment. My opinion is that we should be conscious of what we do and take responsibility; because I had a bottom line that I wouldn't cross: I wasn't going to come up as a Marine and shoot black people. I'd rather go to jail or get shot first . . . I think that's the kind of consciousness that blacks in the service should have."

"Servicemen respond to the society because they're just people. My generation of young black servicemen responded the way we did because we saw what happened to Martin Luther King. We had the civil rights movement to draw from. So we have to educate, put things in these guys' minds today. So there'll be more brothers saying, 'No, we're not going to Grenada. We are not going to go and kill people like ourselves who are struggling for what we are struggling for.' "

Malik Edwards feels that he has a role in creating that awareness in the black community. "Most of my work has been within the community. I figured that somebody has to do it: somebody has to go out there and be political, and say the things that have to be said, and keep the issues alive . . ."

"The Marine Corps and Vietnam experiences taught me that if I could serve this country, which really ends up serving corporations, that I should at least go back and serve my own community. If I could put my life on the line for the white ruling class, then I had a real obligation to my own people."

BLACKS IN AMERICA'S MILITARY: AN HISTORICAL SKETCH

Blacks have served with valor in America's armed forces since the country's birth. They have fought and died every time the United States has gone to war, always with the hope that their demonstration of loyalty would improve their status at home. That hope has yet to be fully realized: throughout American history, black soldiers have experienced humiliation, discrimination, violence, and the indifference of a less-than-grateful society.

Although the first man to die in the war of Independence was a black man, and despite the fact that blacks fought with honor in the early battles of the war, pressures from influential southern slaveholders, including George Washington, excluded blacks from the Continental Army. Not until a serious American man-power shortage occurred later in the war did the army again admit blacks to its ranks. Many of the blacks who did serve were slaves sent to the army in the places of their white masters who had been drafted. Many blacks fought on the British side because the British promised to free all slaves who joined their army. After the war, while the Americans were renegeing on their promises of freedom and reenslaving many of their black soldiers, the British transported more than 20,000 ex-slaves to freedom in the West Indies, Florida, and Canada.

During the Civil War, almost 200,000 black soldiers fought for the Union in segregated units. Many historians and contemporary observers have commented that the Northern victory might not have been possible without the black participation. Until the Emancipation Proclamation on 1 January 1863, the Union Army did not recruit black soldiers for many of the same reasons that the Continental Army had used to discriminate against blacks during the Revolutionary War. Even when the army began to include blacks it accorded them second class status by paying them the same salary, regardless of rank—a salary which was a fraction of that of a white private.

Many blacks entered military service in the "war to make the world safe for democracy" with the hope that their efforts would increase democracy at home. Just ten years earlier, in 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt had dishonorably discharged all 167 soldiers of the black 25th Infantry Regiment for their "conspiracy fo silence" about the alleged attempted rape of a white woman. [In 1972 these men were finally exonerated after pressure from Congressman Gus Hawkins(D-Calif.); there were only two of them alive then.] The treatment of black soldiers did not change during wartime. Blacks took part in most of the major battles in segregated units. One such group, the 369th Infantry Division, received the *Croix de Guerre* from the French for courage under fire. Yet the U.S. Army officially warned the French to keep their distance from the black soldiers and to refrain from showing courtesies that would cause them to expect equal treatment. Segregation, discrimination and humiliation followed the black soldier all the way to the front lines.

The treatment of blacks soldiers in World War II differed little from that of World War I. More than 75 percent of black men in the army had assignments in the service corps. Although those blacks assigned to combat units fought as bravely in this war as in others, they were

awarded not one of the many Congressional Medals of Honor given to American soldiers. Of the more than one million blacks in the various armed forces in the war, only the 17,000 black men in the marines served in integrated units. The rest of the military reluctantly desegregated after the war in 1948 only as a result of an Executive Order from President Harry Truman.

The abolition of segregation did not end discrimination; black soldiers learned that—along with other lessons—twenty years later in the Vietnam. The Vietnam War brought a new awareness to black Americans, especially black soldiers, about American intervention in the Third World and the contradiction of black soldiers denied equality at home while killing other people of color abroad. In Vietnam, they saw themselves as being given more dangerous assignments than white soldiers while suffering from the same effects of racism as did blacks in earlier wars. Although they totaled eleven to twelve percent of the enlisted troops in Vietnam, black soldiers accounted for twenty to twenty-five percent of the casualties. This did not endear the American cause to them and Vietnam proved to be the first time large numbers of black soldiers actively questioned the foreign policy they were implementing.

A particularly relevant aspect of the black involvement in America's military is the black soldier's participation in America's wars against other people of color. One of the first instances of this occurred when some of the first black U.S. Army regulars took part in the Indian wars after the Civil War. From 1866 to 1890, the black soldiers of the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments—the *Buffalo Soldiers*—played a major role in putting down Indian resistance to appropriation of their land while winning 14 Congressional Medals of Honor.

At the turn of the century, black soldiers participated in America's foray into imperialism when they helped conquer the Phillipines. From the U.S. attempt to put down a Filipino insurgency and retain control of the islands they had won in the Spanish-American War came the first instance of black soldiers showing overt reluctance to take part in the subjugation of another people of color. In fact, some white officers expressed opposition to sending blacks to the Phillipines out of a fear that blacks and Filipinos would find that they had common cause in opposition to white oppression.

More recently black soldiers have taken part in the invasion of Grenada and the "peacekeeping" efforts in Lebanon. The press blackout during the fighting in Grenada as well as the one-sided analyses afterwards have made the rumored opposition among black soldiers difficult to verify. However, the opposition of black Americans to future American military adventures in other Third World countries might not remain as quiet. Black soldiers reflect the growing foreign policy sophistication of black Americans in general, and more black soldiers may follow the example of Corporal Griffin and find some way to register their disapproval of potential American intervention in southern Africa, Central America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, or any other part of the globe.

REAGANWATCH: HOT SPOTS AROUND THE THIRD WORLD

Although blacks constitute approximately thirteen percent of the U.S. population, they comprise more than 30 percent of the enlisted personnel in the U.S. Army. While the figures for black representation in the other services are not as high, they still exceed the numbers for the black population as a whole. Because of their large numbers and their world-wide assignments, black soldiers would almost certainly participate in any American military action taken around the world. Most such conflicts would probably take place against Third World countries—for example the invasion of Grenada. The U.S. military has used black soldiers against people of color in the past, but black soldiers have increasingly objected to fighting against people with whom they have oppression as well as color in common. Keeping in mind the growing foreign policy sophistication of black Americans, it is interesting to speculate about how black soldiers will react to being assigned to military action in one of the "hot spots" in the Caribbean, Africa, Central America, or elsewhere in the Third World.

CARIBBEAN: One of the potential hot spots is close to home. The Reagan administration made it known by its invasion of Grenada that it will tolerate little ideological deviation in the Caribbean.

Except for Cuba, there are no other pockets of "anti-Americanism" left in the Caribbean now that a client government has been installed in Grenada. That does not, however, mean that conditions in the region remain to the administration's liking. If Jamaicans reelect Michael Manley prime minister and if he resumes his policies of independence from the U.S. and friendship and cooperation with Cuba, Reagan is almost certain to react with the same ruthless destabilizing policies that were so effective in the case of Grenada.

Haiti could also become a hot spot if the U.S.-backed regime of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier falls. Whichever regime replaces his in a country as poverty-stricken and oppressed as Haiti is, would likely be critical of the United States. The U.S. Marines invaded the Dominican Republic—with which Haiti shares the island of Hispaniola—in 1965 to topple a left leaning government that refused to toe the American line. A repetition of that in Haiti is quite feasible.

Black soldiers, and black Americans in general will probably react with anger and opposition to any more U.S. military adventures in the Caribbean. It is not likely that black soldiers will passively bear arms in the overthrow of black governments and the killing of black people again.

SOUTHERN AFRICA: The Reagan administration's constructive engagement policy and its growing closeness with the apartheid regime which it sees as a bulwark against communism raises the stakes if the regime's control becomes shaky. Although there is no defense pact with Pretoria, the Reagan administration as well as future U.S. administrations might see it in their interests to defend the apartheid regime. Should the collapse of the Pretoria regime appear credible, Soviet support of apartheid's opponents—whether rumored or true—might be seen by an American administration as sufficient justification to intervene on Pretoria's side.

It is clear that not many black soldiers would fight black Africans in defense of South Africa's oppressive white minority regime. A widespread black American refusal to participate in the support of South African white rule would threaten the superficial unity of the armed forces if not of the United States as a whole.

CENTRAL AMERICA: The Reagan administration's goal of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government has made the possibility of military conflict in Central America more likely. Reagan has said that he will tolerate no Soviet or Cuban intervention in the area and seems to be waiting for an opportunity to invade Nicaragua. The probable excuse would be the defense of U.S. allies—Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica—from Nicaraguan cross-border military incursions. The irony of such an excuse is that the Nicaraguans cross their neighbors' frontiers only during defensive actions against U.S.-funded rebels who find shelter in the bordering countries.

Because of the strategic importance of its canal, Panama could become another area of possible U.S. military intervention. Administration officials consider it crucial that Panama remain in the hands of a government sympathetic to the United States. If the present government falls, and especially if Reagan sees the chance of pro-Soviet domination of the canal, a U.S. military strike would be a highly regarded option.

It is important to recall that the black segment in the populations of most of the countries of Central America is substantial. Black American soldiers are therefore likely to face other blacks in an armed conflict especially in Nicaragua and Panama.

THE PHILIPPINES AND THE MIDDLE EAST: The Philippines and the Middle East are also areas where American troops could intervene in the foreseeable future. In the Philippines, the U.S.-backed regime of Ferdinand Marcos appears shaky. American military bases there are considered to be strategically important. Although the majority of the opposition to Marcos is non-communist, the communist insurgency movement in the south of the country gains in strength every year. Many observers expect them to become strong enough to threaten the existence of the Marcos regime in a few years. Will the Reagan administration find it necessary to intervene directly?

The most recent U.S. military foray into the Middle East—the Marine peacekeeping force in Lebanon—ended disastrously. The Lebanon debacle made clearer the risks that America runs in attempting to function as the world's policeman.

In both the Philippines and the Middle East, as with other hot-spots, black soldiers who, as a group, suffer in disproportionately high numbers, could object to fighting other people of color. Their changing consciousness is not special or exceptional; rather, it reflects the development of an independent foreign policy consensus among black Americans. What that development could mean is that black soldiers might no longer be willing implementors of those American policies that were developed without black input and without regard to the interests of black Americans. □

TRANSAFRICA FORUM

A Quarterly Journal of Opinion on Africa and the Caribbean

TRANSAFRICA FORUM is a quarterly journal of opinion on matters pertaining to Africa and the Caribbean. The journal presents an independent review of differing perspectives on political, economic and cultural issues affecting black communities globally. The intent of the journal is to provide an expanded analytical framework which can be useful to a broad audience with a continuing commitment to African and Caribbean advancement.

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