VANGUARDS OF THE NEW NEGRO:
AFRICAN AMERICAN VETERANS AND
POST–WORLD WAR I
RACIAL MILITANCY

Chad L. Williams*

On 28 July 1919 African American war veteran Harry Haywood, only three months removed from service in the United States Army, found himself in the midst of a maelstrom of violence and destruction on par with what he had experienced on the battlefields of France. The previous day, simmering tensions between black and white residents of Chicago reached a boiling point following the stoning and subsequent drowning of young Eugene Williams who had dared to challenge the color-line at Lake Michigan’s 29th Street beach. As he returned to the city following his latest run as a waiter on the Michigan Central Railroad, Haywood, formerly a soldier in the highly decorated 8th Illinois National Guard (370th Infantry Regiment), learned of the riot and feared the worst. A white co-worker validated his anxiety, cautioning him against entering the southside of the city because, “There’s a big race riot going on out there, and already this morning, a couple of colored soldiers were killed coming in unsuspectingly.” While most likely rumor, the warning punctuated Haywood’s disillusionment with the façade of American democracy stemming from his battles with the systemic racism of the U.S. Army and deepened his resolve to actively resist the brewing assault on Chicago’s black community. After briefly reuniting with his family, Haywood immediately went to the 8th Illinois Armory and met with fellow veterans of the regiment to prepare a military style defense of their neighborhood from Irish rioters. Stocked with a cache of 1903 Springfield rifles and a Browning sub-machine gun procured from the armory, Haywood and his comrades established positions in an apartment overlooking 51st Street, and stood ready to utilize their military training in anticipation of an impending evening attack. Haywood recalled similar actions taken throughout the South’s Black Belt by other groups of African American veterans.1

Although no ambush occurred, the Chicago race riot indelibly transformed Haywood’s racial and political consciousness. As he wrote in his autobiography, “the war and the riots of the ‘Red Summer’ of 1919 left me bitter and frustrated. I felt that I could never again adjust to the situation of Black inequality.” The warlike nature of American race relations in the aftermath of World War I

*Chad L. Williams is Assistant Professor of History at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY.

347
prompted many black veterans to question the meaning of their service and seek new strategies for achieving racial justice. After a period of intellectual self-discovery, Haywood joined the radical African Blood Brotherhood (ABB), a secret paramilitary organization founded by Cyril Briggs, editor of The Crusader, and committed to the defense of black people, the liberation of Africa, and the destruction of global capitalism. Upon its dissolution, he became a member of the Communist Party and emerged as one of its most influential black leaders. Racially enlightened and deeply politicized as a result of their experiences, African American veterans like Haywood represented and embodied the New Negro of the post-World War I era.2

This essay examines how the activism and racial militancy of black veterans fundamentally shaped the historical development and ideological diversity of the New Negro movement. The New Negro movement, rooted in the political consciousness and collective racial identity of black people in communities throughout the United States and the African Diaspora more broadly, was a product of the domestic and global upheavals of World War I and its aftermath. While the etymology of the term dates to the post-Reconstruction era, when a new generation of African Americans sought to distance themselves from slavery and its legacy, the vast social, political, and demographic transformations brought about by the global conflict made the New Negro of the war and postwar periods substantively distinct from previous historical epochs. Scholars have examined the various factors that gave rise to the New Negro, which included black migration, international revolutionary movements, most notably in Russia and Ireland, the growth of a radical black press, the emergence of a host of new racially militant political organizations, and most significantly a spirit of defiance stemming from the disillusioning experience of black support for and military participation in the war. Combined, these factors inspired an ideologically diverse political and cultural movement characterized by racial self-organization, international and diasporic consciousness, social identification with the black masses, and a commitment to self-defense against white racial violence. Emerging from the war, the New Negro rejected the conservatism, parochialism, and political accommodationism of the “Old Negro,” a signifier of individual leaders and methods of civil rights protest deemed outdated in the context of the postwar period. While in part generational, the New Negro was the product of a particular historical moment and its constituent social, political, and economic forces.3

Little systematic attention has been paid to the central role of black World War I veterans in the history of the New Negro movement. The black veteran, emerging from the crucible of war with renewed self-determination to enact systemic change, symbolized the development of a masculinist spirit of racial militancy that characterized the New Negro. To borrow one formulation of the New Negro, African American veterans embodied a “reconstructed” Negro,
radicalized at the levels of racial, gender, and political consciousness by the combination of the war and the ferocity of white supremacy. Moreover, as Michelle Stephens and Marlon Ross have recently noted, black male intellectuals constructed the New Negro to convey a modern, radical, and internationalist image of black masculine subjectivity, an image black veterans uniquely epitomized. This symbolic black veteran served an important purpose for various African American social leaders and political commentators, who discursively employed former soldiers to galvanize a broader commitment to citizenship rights and resistance to racism following the war, as seen in W. E. B. Du Bois’s May 1919 Crisis editorial, “Returning Soldiers,” in which he famously proclaimed, “We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting.” In the trope of the New Negro male, the returning black soldier occupied the central position.4

The New Negro as African American veteran, however, constituted more than just a metaphor and rhetorical figure. Black veterans became self-conscious historical actors following the war. Some 380,000 black men fought and labored in France and the United States for the cause of global democracy, as propagated by President Woodrow Wilson. While fiercely proud of their service, many black soldiers returned home following the war deeply disillusioned with Americans’ professed democratic principles as a result of the soldiers’ encounters with racial discrimination in the U.S. Army. These black veterans developed a heightened racial, political, gender, and diasporic consciousness, which translated into a commitment to challenge the strictures of racial inequality during the postwar period. The relationship between African American veterans and postwar racial militancy forms part of a longer historical tradition linking black participation in the military and collective opposition to U.S. racism. Black veterans of the Union Army assumed active leadership roles in national and local Reconstruction politics and social movements such as the Black Exodus of 1879. Similarly, following World War II African American veterans such as Robert Williams, Amzie Moore, and Medgar Evers emerged as prominent grassroots leaders in the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. Historians of the World War I era have yet to fully trace the activism of returned African American servicemen and thus far the scholarship has been limited to their military experience, with scant attention given to the cultural impact of black veterans in shaping postwar racial and gender consciousness. Moreover, most studies of the postwar period only allude to disillusioned black veterans as figurative embodiments of this new racial consciousness, often at the expense of an examination of the actual experiences of former servicemen.5

The choice of African American veterans to forsake service in the name of the United States and instead employ themselves on the behalf of “the race” constitutes a key dimension of the New Negro movement. While obviously not every African American serviceman returned from war a politically transformed
racial militant, the postwar experiences of a significant number of veterans reflects the multidimensional nature of the New Negro movement, its ideological diversity, and the need to center former soldiers in this history. Disillusioned black veterans expressed their frustrations in multiple ways, from correspondence with newspapers and magazines, migration to northern cities, to actual physical resistance to white racist aggression, acts that inspired other African Americans and informed the tenor of the New Negro movement. Like their counterparts following the Civil War and World War II, many black veterans of the First World War also confronted white supremacy and reconstituted their political and gendered sense of self by serving as foot-soldiers and leaders in a diverse spectrum of social and political groups ranging from the NAACP to the Communist Party, depending on their own ideological orientation and goals for social reform.6

In this essay I specifically focus on the participation of African American veterans on the staff of The Messenger, the socialist magazine edited by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen; the League for Democracy (LFD), a group created by and specifically for African American veterans; and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), founded and led by the indomitable Marcus Garvey. While political engagement by black veterans was by no means limited to The Messenger, the LFD, and the UNIA, they offer clear examples of the ways in which black veterans consciously attempted to organize themselves and how certain postwar groups openly welcomed black veterans into their ranks. Former servicemen, in shaping the structure and evolution of all three organizations through their service and leadership, concomitantly influenced in a fundamental way the evolution of the New Negro movement. Examining the experiences of black veterans, in both their symbolic and historical context, is thus essential to the development of a multilayered conception of the New Negro of post-World War I America.

AFRICAN AMERICAN VETERANS AND THE POSTWAR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

African American soldiers’ experiences in the war and their battles with the pervasive racial discrimination in the U.S. military informed their postwar disillusionment and subsequent racial militancy as veterans. While serving with dignity and performing absolutely essential duties to the success of the war effort, black troops endured the indignities of segregation and social marginalization at every level. Inadequate training and disinterested racist white officers, many from the U.S. South, hampered the effectiveness of the 92nd Division, a black combat unit made up entirely of draftees. Although it did not assemble as a full unit until it reached France, white officials placed responsibility for the division’s perceived battlefield failure squarely on its black
officers, who despite the establishment of an officers' training camp at Des Moines, Iowa, endured constant derision from white officers and soldiers. Army officials cleansed their hands of the other black combat division, the 93rd, by assigning it to the French military. Ironically, this move proved to be a blessing in disguise, and the 93rd earned numerous commendations and black soldiers received universal praise from their French comrades. The vast majority of black troops, however, served in labor battalions, manning shovels more frequently than rifles. In, but not of the Army, black soldiers and officers were regularly disgraced and dehumanized. As one veteran wrote in a letter following the war, “We were treated like dogs. I mean worse than German prisoners. I would die before I would undertake to go through what I have gone through.”

The systematic discrimination during military service politicized black soldiers by vividly exposing the tensions between race, manhood, and citizenship. Empowering as well as debilitating, the encounters of black troops with racism in the military challenged their expectations of manliness, civic reciprocity, and the very meaning of democracy itself, thus laying an ideological foundation for postwar racial militancy and activism. For Willis Goodwin, a veteran of Chicago’s 370th Infantry Regiment, military service “made me realize my task which for me was here in America.” He continued, “After the fighting, and my return to this country [the] U.S., it made me wonder why can’t all men be treated equally. What did we fight for? Democracy. Are we living it?” The unfulfilled aspirations of their experience, informed by Wilsonian democratic ideals, caused many black soldiers to emerge from the war with a heightened civic consciousness. James Richard Golden declared that his overseas service “accentuated the desire that was dormant in one to have the full rights of citizenship.” In the case of fellow 370th veteran Don Estill, the war and time in France led to “an increased desire for real democracy in the U.S.A.” The destructive manifestations of white supremacy and its challenge to effective black manhood centered prominently in the expectations of former soldiers for postwar social change. “I believe now, more than before,” returned soldier Bolling Morris observed, “that as we were called regardless of race or color, so should justice be measured to all citizens accordingly. The lynch law, riots and other race frictions, must and should cease.”

The black press provided an outlet for veterans to express their discontent and sharpened political and racial consciousness and, in many ways, created and propagandized for the New Negro. A number of radical journals appeared during the war era, including The Messenger, The Crusader, and Negro World, while more established publications such as The Crisis, the Chicago Defender, and the St. Louis Argus adopted a discernibly more militant tone. Veterans appropriated the black press as their voice, and in the process jolted readers with accounts of their wartime experiences. Former servicemen, for example, flooded Crisis editor W. E. B. Du Bois with letters detailing their encounters with racial discrimination.
in the military. A black soldier stationed at Camp Sherman, Ohio, wrote to Du Bois immediately following the armistice, “Me being one of the soldiers of the United States, drafted for the United States Army, to fight for world democracy, I think it my duty to ask my people of the United States to appeal to the said government for Democracy of our and my own people.” He went on to question, “Now why can’t we have a fair trial, why can’t we have law and order at home, in other words, why can’t we have democracy in the United States and under the flag of which I fight....” Black veterans, having fulfilled their civic obligation, voiced an explicit expectation for social recognition and political reciprocity on the part of the government. Failure to do so, as a letter composed by a former soldier to the Washington Bee in the wake of the July 1919 Washington riot, warranted the disavowal of unconditional loyalty on the part of the race.

“During the war the Negro put every grievance behind him and dedicated himself wholeheartedly to the common task,” the veteran wrote. “Behold him and admire him for that—but mistake not! There is a new thought in the younger minds and, to be plain blunt, perhaps brutally frank, it approximates this:

We have labored in sweat and tears—we have pleaded and hoped in vain—we have been loyal in every crisis and died in wars without a winking.... We are done forever with blind devotion to a mere geographical idea. ... Henceforth our Loyalty is for sale—and the price thereof is Justice—no compromise—but Justice absolute and complete, without reservation and without restriction.

Ex-servicemen like this, in articulating a “new thought,” marked the arrival of the New Negro, bolstered by black veterans.9

The dashed expectations of the war, combined with the ideological dimensions of black migration, resurgent racial violence, and global revolutionary movements inspired the creation of a wide range of new political organizations that, in their respective ways, helped to shape New Negro movement. Disaffected black veterans, eager to channel their frustrations into broader struggles for progressive and in some cases radical change, sought out organizations that best reflected their particular ideological perspective. At the same time, New Negro organizations remained cognizant of the symbolic and experiential importance of former soldiers, and thus openly welcomed them as members and leaders. A broad range of social and political groups nurtured the disillusionment and determination of black veterans, and transformed these sentiments into concrete movements and agendas for social reform.

THE MESSENGER MAGAZINE

During and following World War I, The Messenger distinguished itself as the nation’s leading radical African American magazine and self-proclaimed voice of the New Negro. Its publishers, Asa Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, became
African American Veterans and Post–World War I Racial Militancy

active Socialist Party members in late 1916, spreading their call for anti-racist working-class solidarity on the street corners of Harlem. First published in November 1917, The Messenger was more than just a journal; it functioned as the heart of Harlem’s socialist community and served as a platform for a cadre of leftist black intellectuals, including Wilfred A. Domingo, Wallace Thurman, and George Frazier Miller. The end of the war, coupled with the resurgence of white supremacist ideologies and organizations, intensified The Messenger’s radicalism and its propagation of the New Negro mentality. Randolph and Owen welcomed the arrival of “New Crowd Negroes” who, unlike preceding generations of “bourgeois” black leaders, pledged to wage a tireless battle against racial discrimination and working-class exploitation. Dismissing the wartime efforts of “Old Crowd Negroes” such as Emmett Scott, W. E. B. Du Bois, Kelly Miller, and Robert R. Moton, Randolph declared that “the New Crowd is uncompromising. Its tactics are not defensive but offensive. It would not send notes after a Negro is lynched. It would not appeal to white leaders. It would appeal to the plain working people everywhere. The New Crowd sees that the war came, that the Negro fought, bled and died; that the war has ended, and he is not yet free.” The Messenger’s radicalism led U.S Attorney General Mitchell Palmer to label the magazine, “the most able and the most dangerous of all the Negro publications.”

Three black veterans played prominent roles in both the production of The Messenger and its ideological orientation. Victor Daly, a Cornell University graduate, Alpha Phi Alpha member, and former officer in the 92nd Division’s 367th “Buffaloes” Infantry Regiment, served as business manager for the magazine in 1919 and 1920. Commissioned as a First Lieutenant at the Des Moines officers’ training camp, Daly received the French Croix de Guerre for his unit’s battlefield performance in the war. Despite this achievement, like other officers of the 92nd Division, the pervasive discrimination Daly endured soured him to American democratic ideals and sharpened his racial and political consciousness. After his discharge from military service in April 1919, Daly began work as The Messenger’s business manager, a crucial position in the always financially strapped magazine.

Daly’s war experience had a discernable radicalizing effect. While he did not influence the magazine’s content as strongly as its two principal editors, Daly nevertheless exhibited a strong anti-racist political consciousness. A glimpse of Daly’s radicalism appeared in the October 1919 issue, in which he responded to a letter written by a self-described descendant of “black abolitionists” who accused The Messenger of being “the worst enemies of the Negro race” by promoting racial hatred, “bolshievism,” and social unrest. Daly immediately invoked his military service and decorated veteran status, stating that he wrote not solely on the behalf of The Messenger, but “as one who served as a 1st Lieutenant in the Army for nearly two years and winner of the ‘Croix de Guerre’ in France.” He
dismissed the writer’s accusations, asserting that while the socialist magazine in fact promoted working-class racial cooperation and opposed armed conflict, it did “advocate armed resistance,” a hallmark of the New Negro. Moreover, Daly explicitly linked his veteran status with the radical left and the politics of The Messenger. Exhibiting his solidarity with the magazine’s explicit goals, he declared, “classify me, too, a former United States Army Officer, as a Bolshevist.” This striking statement, from an individual who prior to the war thoroughly embodied many traits of black middle-class masculinity, reflects how military service informed Daly’s radicalism and The Messenger provided him with the platform to channel and articulate it.

A second veteran of the war affiliated with The Messenger was William N. Colson. Described by the magazine’s editors as “an especially critical thinker, courageous, and possessed of a rare and pleasing literary style,” Colson graduated from Virginia Union University, along with Chandler Owen, and later attended Columbia University Law School. Colson, an acquaintance of Victor Daly, likewise earned a commission at Des Moines and served as a 2nd Lieutenant in the 367th Infantry in France during the war. He returned to the United States on 15 March 1919, clearly anxious to expose the discriminatory treatment he and his fellow soldiers and officers of the 92nd Division faced while overseas. Colson reacquainted himself with Owen in New York City and, along with Daly, joined the staff of The Messenger as a contributing editor.

Beginning in July 1919, Colson published a series of articles on the experiences of black soldiers during the war. Essays such as “Propaganda and the American Negro Soldier,” “An Analysis of Negro Patriotism,” “The Social Experience of the Negro Soldier Abroad,” and “The Failure of the Ninety-Second Division,” co-authored with fellow Des Moines officer Ambrose B. Nutt, revealed to readers in vivid detail what black soldiers encountered and endured overseas, as well as the hypocrisy of government officials’ democratic rhetoric. Colson’s experiences and veteran status gave him first-hand knowledge and credibility to make these claims. The United States Military Intelligence Division (MID), already closely monitoring the content of The Messenger, identified Colson from the publication of his first article as a radical of particular concern.

Colson’s most powerful essay appeared in the December 1919 issue of The Messenger under the title “The Immediate Function of the Negro Veteran.” In it he asserted that returning black soldiers had a distinctive role to play in the postwar reconstruction. “The returned Negro veteran, by virtue of his service and experience, has a certain special function which he cannot afford to fail to press to the limit.” For Colson, this entailed African American veterans accepting their manly responsibility to first and foremost actively confront and resist racial prejudice and violence, with force if necessary. “The returned soldier, by reason of his military training, can do more to stop lynch-law and discrimination in the United States than many Americans want to see. He is accomplishing it by a
resolute demonstration of self-defense and a growing desire to lose his life in a
good cause.” In many ways this represented the worst fears of white Americans.
Along with fighting racial discrimination, black veterans in Colson’s estimation
were beginning to ally themselves with the labor movement, a reflection of his
socialist vision. Colson proclaimed that African American soldiers returned from
France possessing a new self-confidence and appreciation of “social values.” He
explained:

It is, therefore, the function of the returned soldiers with their new appreciation of social
values, straightway to appropriate the desire to either revolutionize or destroy every evil
American institution which retards their progress. They must first of all continue their
campaign of discontent and dissatisfaction. Let them neither smile nor sleep until they have
burned into the soul of every Negro in the United States an unquenchable desire to tear down
every barrier which stops their onward march.

Colson encouraged black veterans to actively fight back against
discrimination and racial abuse. “But each black soldier, as he travels on jim-
crow cars, if he has the desire, can act his disapproval. When he is insulted, he
can perform a counter-action. When he is exploited economically, he can
strike. . . . With Negro veterans fighting back, and stirring up merited discontent
and dissatisfaction on every hand, the attitude of the Bourbon South is bound to
become less degenerate.” Colson concluded by asserting that “the function of the
Negro soldier, who is mentally free, is to act as an imperishable leaven on the
mass of those who are still in mental bondage.” With himself as a prototype,
Colson envisioned black veterans serving as the vanguard of a radical
transformation of American society. His article cogently captured the symbolic
relationship between African American veterans, New Negro masculinity, and
the broader postwar militant political milieu.15

George S. Schuyler was the third former serviceman affiliated with The
Messenger. A native of Syracuse, New York, Schuyler joined the U.S. Army in
1912 at age seventeen and served in the 25th Infantry. Like Victor Daly and
William Colson, he attended the Des Moines camp and received a commission as
a First Lieutenant. Schuyler, however, never reached France. In the summer of
1918, following an incident where a Greek shoe shine man refused him service
on account of his race, Schuyler deserted the Army, no longer willing to tolerate
the hypocrisy of fighting for a racist nation. He went AWOL for over three
months and eventually presented himself to authorities in fear of inevitable arrest.
Schuyler received an initial sentence of five years in prison, which was later
reduced to one. He ultimately spent nine months and the remainder of the war
imprisoned at the Atlantic Branch United States Disciplinary Barracks on
Governor’s Island, New York. Upon release Schuyler floated between various
jobs in New York City and eventually returned to Syracuse in 1921. While there
he joined the Socialist Party, approaching his decision as an opportunity for
political engagement, intellectual stimulation, and as a means to express his frustrations with American racism born in his wartime military service. He returned to New York City in 1922 and became active in various political and intellectual circles, including the Friends of Negro Freedom, an organization founded by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen in March 1920 to challenge the perceived complacency of the NAACP and, later, the racialism of Marcus Garvey. Schuyler became friends with the Messenger's editors and in early 1923 was offered a position as office manager for the magazine.\(^{16}\)

Schuyler effectively ran The Messenger during his time with the magazine, which lasted until 1928. Applying the discipline learned in the military to his position as office manager, Schuyler increased The Messenger's operational efficiency and quickly made a name for himself in Harlem's political and literary circles. Beginning in September 1923 Schuyler contributed a monthly column entitled "Darts and Shafts: A Page of Calumny and Satire," which introduced readers to his iconoclastic and often intentionally inflammatory style. Schuyler's brilliant use of satire was undoubtedly informed by his time in the military, itself an ultimately satirical experience. As a seasoned soldier and commissioned officer who un glamorously spent the final months of the war imprisoned, Schuyler embodied the farcical, tragic-comic nature of race relations and American democracy. Perhaps not surprisingly, Schuyler, unlike Daly and Colson, made no mention of his military experience in his writings for The Messenger, and never spoke publicly of his desertion and subsequent imprisonment. Schuyler even went so far as to exclude it from his published autobiography. While he went to great lengths to bury this painful aspect of his past, it nevertheless shaped Schuyler's sardonically critical view of American race relations and prolific career as journalist and novelist.\(^{17}\)

The Messenger owed much of its reputation as one of the most radical magazines of the postwar period to the participation and symbolic influence of African American veterans. It served as an outlet for Victor Daly, William Colson, and George Schuyler to express their postwar discontent and to nurture their mutually reinforced racial and gender consciousness. The magazine's socialist critique of the American democratic structure and the war itself presented these former officers with an attractive political ideology, one that allowed them to make sense of the hypocrisy of their war experience and challenge the pernicious influence of white supremacist racial ideology as an impediment to interracial working-class solidarity. Moreover, as an independently operated, race conscious, male-dominated publication, The Messenger provided a space for the homo-social camaraderie, black self-organization, and critical intellectual engagement that this particular group of veterans clearly sought and relished.
The war emboldened other African American servicemen and officers to challenge the limitations of American democracy upon their return to the United States. In the days following the armistice, a number of black officers of the 92nd Division, enraged by their treatment, held a series of secret meetings in Le Mans, France, to discuss the formation of a postwar organization to combat racial discrimination, both in and outside of the military. American intelligence officials responded with palpable concern upon learning of the clandestine gatherings. A February 1918 report to the director of Military Intelligence stated, "Investigation by this Section has disclosed among American Negro troops in France the probable existence of a secret organization" with the avowed goals of "protection of Negro interests, collective combating of a white effort, especially in the South, to reestablish white ascendancy, the securing of equal intellectual and economic opportunity for Negroes and the maintenance of the social equality between the races as established in France." While similar meetings held by groups of black servicemen failed to yield discernable results, the organization envisioned by the officers of the 92nd Division announced itself to the public at a mass meeting in Harlem at the Palace Casino in March 1919 as the League for Democracy (LFD). With the motto of "Lest We Forget," the LFD appealed directly to black veterans' sense of martial collectivity and sought to harness their political energy. As stated in its promotional brochure and constitution, the LFD described itself as "an organization of soldiers, for soldiers, by soldiers" with the stated goal to "keep alive the military spirit of the race." Considering its location in Harlem, the LFD had a strong potential membership base of highly race conscious and politicized former soldiers of the 369th and 367th Infantry regiments. From an organizational standpoint, it provided a political alternative to the racist American Legion, which hesitated to admit black veterans to its ranks, as well as more ideologically conservative groups for returned African American soldiers such as the Grand Army of Americans, founded in Washington, DC, shortly after the war.18

With Harlem attorney and former 92nd Division officer Aiken Pope serving as president, the LFD infused a traditional liberal pluralistic approach to civil rights with the "military spirit of the race" that characterized postwar New Negro radicalism. This appealed to the collective racial, civic, martial, and masculine sensibilities of veterans who, while critical of the United States, remained extremely proud of their service and stood committed to the larger democratic principles they supposedly fought for. The primary mission of the LFD was to combat institutionalized racism within the military, although the organization had broader objectives such as ending black disfranchisement in the South and fighting legal segregation. As these goals suggest, the LFD adopted an unabashedly grandiose vision, describing itself as "the most gigantic scheme of
organization ever attempted by the race” and projecting that the League “can and should become the predominant race organization in the Republic.” To that end, the LFD boasted, “It will have a local Camp in every town in the United States containing 1,000 or more Colored inhabitants. It will be able to reach directly and personally, within 48 hours, over one million Colored people the first year of its organization, for any concerted movement or propaganda it desires to create.” Cognizant of other African American organizations with similar goals, the LFD pledged its cooperation with the NAACP and the National Negro Business League in order to avoid a duplication of efforts. The LFD’s founders saw their organization as a vehicle for black veterans and their advocates to fight to realize their dreams of a new racially just society. As the LFD’s brochure stated, “Suppose again, again and again you will appreciate as never before, the staggering, immense, wonderful, magic powers of organization and group action, the tremendous potential possibilities and probabilities of the League for Democracy.”

Osceola McKaine, a native of Sumter, South Carolina, served as the leading voice and organizing force behind the LFD. McKaine began his military career with the 24th Infantry, serving in the Philippines and Mexico, and upon the U.S. entrance into the war, he joined 250 other enlisted regular soldiers at the Des Moines officers’ training camp where he received a commission as First Lieutenant with the 367th Infantry regiment. During his overseas service, McKaine reacted strongly to the racism of his white superior officers and, along with other members of the 92nd Division, emerged from the war radicalized and determined to combat racial injustice through collective organization. With McKaine passionately manning the helm, the LFD quickly attracted attention and support among veterans and non-veterans, in Harlem and beyond. At an April 1919 meeting held at the Harlem Palace Casino, presided over by Ambrose B. Nutt, an associate of The Messenger’s William Colson, McKaine energized an “enthusiastic capacity audience” with a “masterly address,” resulting in the organization adding three hundred new members to its roster. African American intelligence agent Walter Loving reported the formation of LFD branches in at least eleven cities across the country, including Boston, Providence, Rhode Island; Philadelphia, Chicago, Atlanta, St. Louis, Newark, New Jersey; and Tallahassee, Florida; and singled out McKaine as “an energetic young man of excellent education and ability.”

McKaine vociferously promoted the LFD and challenged the longevity of the “Old Negro,” literally and figuratively. Speaking on the behalf of the organization, he boldly confronted Robert Russa Moton at a July 1919 New York Tuskegee Institute banquet, accusing him of disrespecting black soldiers with a mollifying speech during his visit to France, and proclaimed that the “new element of the race” would now elect its own representatives. Additionally, McKaine served as editor of the LFD’s official newspaper, the New York
Commoner. The first issue appeared on 28 June 1919, announcing the aims of the LFD and providing an update on the organization’s growth and activities. McKaine’s pugnacity, the rapid expansion of the LFD, combined with concerns regarding its leadership cadre of former officers, earned the fledgling organization the utmost attention of military intelligence personnel, who at the time viewed it as an even greater threat than Marcus Garvey’s nascent UNIA.21

The LFD at the national and local levels functioned as an opportunity for returned soldiers and officers to forge a shared identity as veterans, an identity rooted in a militant racial, gender, and political consciousness that sought to aggressively defend the legacy of their war service. This accounts for the organization’s first major campaign, an effort to have the 92nd Division’s Chief of Staff, Colonel Allen Greer, charged with treason for his slanderous postwar comments degrading the performance of the division’s black officers. In a December 1918 letter written to Senator Kenneth McKellar of Tennessee, Greer disparaged the abilities and manhood of the 92nd Division’s officers, labeling them “rank cowards” and insinuating that their primary concern was the pursuit of French women. McKaine and the LFD learned of the letter prior to its publication by W. E. B. Du Bois in the May 1919 issue of The Crisis, and they organized to demand that the War Department, as outlined in an open letter to Secretary of War Newton D. Baker, court-martial Greer “for conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline; for attempting to influence legislation, and for aiding the enemy.” By pressuring the Wilson administration through the black press and several well-attended rallies in New York City and Washington, DC, the LFD secured meetings with Secretary of War Baker as well as other congressional leaders, at which they presented their case against Greer.22

While the War Department stalled in taking any definite action, McKaine and the LFD in the meantime continued to inspire black veterans and the broader African American public to collective action. McKaine put his radicalism on full display at a June 1919 meeting in Washington, DC, exhorting the audience, “No Negroes anywhere in the United States should ever let white mobs take a black man to lynch him without using all the force possible to prevent it. The only thing with which to meet force is force.” Branch president James H. N. Waring, a former 1st Lieutenant, assured the crowd that, “The League is in this fight and intend to see it through,” adding that the organization had “declared war on discrimination in the district.” The presence of the LFD in Washington, DC, some three hundred members strong, further emboldened the city’s black community and contributed to their spirit of self-defense during the vicious rioting which erupted only weeks following this particular meeting.23

Despite its meteoric rise and the confidence of its leaders, the LFD began to diminish in significance by early 1920. As the heated memories of the war cooled, and the martial bonds between veterans affiliated with the LFD gradually dissipated with their continued incorporation into civilian life, the organization’s
cohesiveness and political focus suffered. Several other factors, however, account for the LFD’s brief existence. As evidenced by the military intelligence’s surveillance of the LFD, high ranking federal officials identified the organization as a key target in its campaign to suppress black radicalism and actively sought ways to undermine its effectiveness. Moreover, the LFD had to compete with a host of other organizations, many of which, like the NAACP, had similar goals. Finally, and most significant, the LFD’s political program lacked the definition necessary to sustain the long term viability of the organization. James Weldon Johnson offered a prophetic observation in a May 1919 New York Age editorial, where he wrote, “the program of the League for Democracy is too comprehensive, it takes in too much,” and suggested that the organization, “concentrate all its strength and energy upon those particular objects which by the nature of its being it is best fitted to accomplish.” The LFD’s sole attempt to do just this, its campaign to charge Greer with treason, made little headway and eventually demoralized the membership. Moreover, this single issue lacked the resonance to attract and maintain a stable membership base outside of a core of highly politicized former officers like McKaine. With flagging support and dwindling financial resources, the organization and its newspaper effectively ceased to exist by 1922.24

While exemplifying the spirit and ideals of the New Negro, the ambition of the LFD and its leaders, some of whom, like Newark camp president Lester Granger who subsequently led the National Urban League, moved on to other organizations, and surpassed what the group could feasibly achieve. Nevertheless, the LFD stands as the most militant organization of its time created specifically by and for African American veterans. The organization allowed former soldiers to take pride in their service, while simultaneously addressing their postwar disillusionment in a specific and targeted manner. During its existence the LFD represented the determination of black servicemen to use their war experience as an opportunity to combat institutionalized racism and inspire militant political resistance among African Americans more broadly.25

THE UNIVERSAL NEGRO IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION

The New Negro of the postwar period is in many ways synonymous with the Universal Negro Improvement Association. In a remarkably short time, the UNIA, led by its charismatic leader Marcus Garvey, emerged as the largest secular organization among peoples of African descent in the early 20th century. Just as the evolution of the New Negro is inextricably connected with the rise of the UNIA, the history of the organization itself cannot be divorced from the experiences and symbolic significance of African American veterans. Garvey consciously invoked the recent historical memory of black military service as a strategy to popularize the rapidly expanding UNIA and promote his vision of a
African American Veterans and Post–World War I Racial Militancy

diasporic black empire. At the same time, the nationalist and Pan-Africanist ideologies of the UNIA, with its concomitant gendered militarism, attracted many disillusioned black veterans to its ranks. Former soldiers, as both leaders and members, played a key role in the expansion of the organization. As the UNIA made its presence felt throughout the Americas, black veterans physically and symbolically coursed throughout the organization’s structure, ideology, and performance.  

The First World War deeply influenced Garvey and the development of the UNIA. The unfulfilled ideals of the war, combined with the virulence of racial violence, exposed democracy in the United States to be fundamentally flawed, and the American nationalism, to which many African Americans optimistically clung in supporting the conflict, to be transparently white supremacist. Instead, Garvey encouraged people of African descent to embrace what he termed “African fundamentalism” as a practical oppositional worldview for reaching the ultimate goal of social, political, and economic freedom and self-determination in the United States and beyond. In the context of postwar imperialist and racialist thought, Garvey developed a broad organizational philosophy that stressed the primacy of black racial distinctiveness, historical achievement, economic uplift, and collective diasporic self-determination. His vision of the UNIA serving as the “nation-state” of a “black empire” extending throughout the African Diaspora, though modeled in large part after the British imperial government, was intended to directly challenge the hegemony of the Western powers. The war thus crystallized Garvey’s nationalist and imperialist goals and ultimately determined the militaristic nature of the UNIA. As the war destructively demonstrated, race, nation, empire, and militarism formed an inextricable nexus.  

Garvey’s speeches following the November 1918 armistice were dominated by rhetoric of a future world war between whites and peoples of African descent that in his estimation lay on the not so distant horizon. The UNIA leader appropriated a racial discourse espoused by reactionary whites—ranging from Lothrop Stoddard to the ku klux klan—predicting an impending global clash between the white and darker races stemming from the social and political unrest caused by the war, and brilliantly rearticulated it through the symbolic prism of black soldiers to demonstrate the collective martial strength of peoples of African descent. Because black soldiers had not fought for themselves and their race, the full military potential of African-descended people remained unrealized. Garvey believed African peoples were destined to emerge triumphant in an impending racial conflict. In a speech in July 1921, Garvey exhorted, “They talk about the New York 15th; that was only an experiment in warfare.... They talk about the Illinois 8th; that was only a pastime for the boys. They talk about the prowess of the West Indian regiments; those fellows were only having a picnic; it was a gala day. No man has ever yet seen the Negro fighting at his best, because the Negro has never yet fought for himself....” As people from throughout the African
Diaspora joined the UNIA in unprecedented numbers, Garvey grounded the militarism of the organization and its nationalistic aspirations in the history of the war and the military participation of black soldiers.28

Garvey’s preoccupation with the interconnected relationship between race war and black military service formed part of his broader discourse on the emergence and militancy of the New Negro. His conception of the New Negro starkly reveals the symbolic utility of black veterans to the UNIA and its broader appeal. As African-descended peoples recommitted themselves to self-defense against white racial violence—a key dimension of postwar racial militancy—black soldiers represented the New Negro’s willingness to fight back. Garvey said as much in a January 1922 speech, asserting, “The new Negro likes a good fight—a fight like the fight of Needham Roberts—two taking twenty—and I want to say to them and to the white world that if they trifle with this Universal Negro Improvement Association they are going to get what they are looking for.” Heroes of the 369th Infantry, Needham Roberts and Henry Johnson single-handedly fought off at least twenty-four German soldiers during a surprise raid. Roberts and Johnson served as racial heroes and powerful individual symbols of the potential ability of African-descended people to combat and defeat white racial aggression. For Garvey, black soldiers in the United States and throughout the African world represented the New Negro in body and spirit. “I say this positively: the morale of the New Negro cannot be broken,” Garvey declared before a cheering audience in another January 1922 address recounted in the Negro World. “The morale of the Negro American soldier in France, the morale of the Negro West Indian soldier in France, the morale of the Negro African soldier in France was unbroken and the morale of the soldiers of the bloody war of 1914 to 1918 is the morale of Negroes throughout the world.”29

A symbiotic relationship developed between black veterans and the UNIA, as Garvey actively solicited their participation and leadership. Constructions of the New Negro fundamentally centered on questions of racial leadership and Garvey, who consciously distinguished himself from preceding generations of black leadership, idolized black soldiers in a broader global historical context for their military skills, modern cosmopolitanism, and diasporic sensibilities. “[W]e are not depending on the statesmanship of fellows like Du Bois to lead this race of ours,” exclaimed Garvey in his opening address of the August 1921 International Convention of Negroes of the World, “but we are depending on the statesmanship of fellows like the New York Fifteenth, the West Indian regiments and the Eighth Illinois, who fought their way in France.” Garvey looked upon black veterans of the U.S. military, as well as those of the British West Indian Regiments, as the future leaders of the race. They responded by joining the UNIA in significant numbers. From an ideological perspective, former servicemen saw in the UNIA an organization that represented their increased racial consciousness and desire for self-determination. African American
veterans in particular were receptive to the black nationalist dimensions of the UNIA, in light of their disillusionment following the war. Vilified by white officers and the broader U.S. military establishment, black veterans instead found praise in the UNIA and Garvey’s rhetoric.  

A number of black veterans who joined the UNIA came from distinguished backgrounds and served in crucial leadership positions. Clarence Benjamin Curley became involved in the UNIA through the Black Star Line (BSL), the main entrepreneurial component of the organization’s goal of black economic self-sufficiency and a powerful symbol of its potential strength. A graduate of Howard University, Curley received training at the Des Moines officers training camp and fought in France with the 368th Infantry. While earning a masters degree in business at New York University after the war, he served on the Board of Directors for the BSL, holding the key positions of general accountant and secretary. William Clarence Matthews, a former Negro League baseball star, Harvard University alumnus, and prominent Boston area attorney, served as an important member of that city’s UNIA chapter upon his return from the war. His leadership contributed to membership in the Boston division increasing from a paltry seven individuals in November 1919 to a robust 1,300 by May 1920. He was subsequently elevated to the position of Assistant Counselor General. J. Austin Norris, a former commissioned officer in the 351st Field Artillery who served in France alongside future civil rights leader Charles Hamilton Houston, volunteered his services to the UNIA upon returning to the United States. Norris was a highly respected attorney in Philadelphia, having graduated from Yale University Law School, and, along with representing the city’s UNIA division, served as an elected member of the organization’s 1922 League of Nations delegation. The impressive pedigree of these individuals, who would all have been considered representatives of the “Talented Tenth,” speaks to the relationship between racial uplift, military service, manliness, and black nationalism in the UNIA.  

Historians Kevin Gaines and Martin Summers have concluded that racial uplift ideology formed a central part of the UNIA’s black nationalist agenda and, while the UNIA appealed to the black masses, its leadership was decidedly middle class with somewhat Victorian sensibilities. In the mold of the National Negro Business League, the UNIA’s black capitalist emphasis on economic self-sufficiency was clearly attractive to veterans with expertise in business and commerce. In addition to their practical business and organizational skills, these former soldiers by virtue of the self-discipline and personal achievements associated with their military background, represented the highest manifestation of black manhood in the postwar era. Similar to the LFD, some of the most elite black veterans of the war found a home in the UNIA and provided the organization with brilliant examples of racial progress.
The Universal African Legion, the paramilitary wing of the UNIA, functioned as the primary avenue for black veterans to join the organization, express their male subjectivity, and make use of their military training. A potent symbol of racial power and national progress, Garvey based the structure, organization, and drill formations of the African Legion on those of the U.S. Army. This made the participation of African American veterans, already familiar with the rules and conventions of military life, extremely valuable. Many former soldiers, although disillusioned with the U.S. Army and its pervasive racism, valued the discipline and homo-social camaraderie of military life. Because the Army denied most soldiers the opportunity to reenlist following demobilization, the African Legion allowed black veterans to remain associated with a military structure and simultaneously express their racial consciousness. With Garvey viewing them as valuable leaders of the movement’s paramilitary wing, black veterans again offered their service, this time in the name of the race.

The expertise of former servicemen proved invaluable to the development and training of the members of the African Legion. Harry Haywood, who contemplated joining the UNIA, stated in his autobiography, “A key role in the movement [the UNIA] was also played by deeply disillusioned Black veterans. . . . Veterans were involved in the setting up of the skeleton army for the future African state, and in such paramilitary organizations as the Universal African Legion. . . .” Haywood’s observation carries added weight considering his brother, Otto Hall, who served in an overseas labor battalion during the war and returned deeply embittered and personally radicalized, joined the African Legion in Chicago before becoming involved in the Communist party through the African Blood Brotherhood. As in Chicago, veterans formed the core of the Detroit’s African Legion. Nationwide, the military experience of black servicemen catapulted them to positions of leadership in the legion’s branches. Emmett L. Gaines, a veteran of the 24th Infantry before serving in the American Expeditionary Forces during World War I, held the powerful position of Minister of the African Legion. Similarly, Wilfred Bazil, formerly of the 15th New York National Guard and an officer in the 92nd Division, served as commanding officer of the Brooklyn African Legion, while former soldier James Nimmo led the Miami chapter.

Bridging potential class divisions among veterans who joined the UNIA, the African Legion attracted former soldiers from working-class backgrounds as well. Thomas W. Harvey, who migrated to Philadelphia from Georgia in 1917, joined the city’s UNIA division in 1920, approximately a year after his discharge from the military. While admittedly apprehensive and initially knowing little of the UNIA, his commitment to the organization deepened after attending a meeting at which Garvey himself spoke. Describing the rally as “packed to rafters, people all in uniforms, parading up and down like they were somebody,”
Garvey’s commanding presence, combined with the spectacle of the African Legion, captivated the former soldier and marked the beginning of a life-long commitment to the Garvey movement. He joined the Philadelphia African Legion and, in his words, “was made a lieutenant because of my previous army service,” a position he held until 1930. One of Garvey’s closest confidants, he continued to rise through the ranks of the UNIA, becoming president of the highly influential Philadelphia division in 1933, Commissioner of the State of New York, and eventually President-General of the entire organization in 1950. Emblematic of many former soldiers who were attracted to the UNIA, Harvey’s achievements demonstrate the valued presence and leadership abilities of black war veterans for the development of the African Legion and the success of the organization more broadly.35

Gender and racialized formulations of black manhood played a significant role in the relationship between the UNIA and black veterans. The New Negro was a highly masculine construction and, as Barbara Bair and Martin Summers have demonstrated, a constellation of gender discourses similarly informed the participatory structure of the UNIA and Garvey’s broader racial ideology. Garvey’s oratory directly targeted the gender sensibilities of black veterans and their identification with New Negro manhood. The qualities of the New Negro that the UNIA modeled itself after—militancy, physical strength, leadership, aggressive resistance to racial violence—were distinctly masculine traits in the context of early 20th century gender conventions. For Garvey, black soldiers as representations of a paradigmatic black manhood functioned as the quintessential embodiments of the New Negro. In a letter appearing in the Negro World, Garvey proclaimed, “The new Negro is no coward. He is a man, and if he can die in France or Flanders for white men, he can die anywhere else, even behind prison bars, fighting for the cause of the race that needs assistance.” Having fought and defeated Europeans on the battlefield, black soldiers embodied the potential racial and masculine superiority of black men over white men. Black soldiers and their war experience thus allowed Garvey to skillfully undermine and appropriate racist pseudoscientific constructions of black manhood and simultaneously elevate the place of black men on the social Darwinian evolutionary ladder. “Do you still believe in the Darwin theory that [the black] man is a monkey or the missing link between the ape and man?” Garvey declared in a March 1921 speech. “If you think it is, that theory has been exploded in the world war. It was you, the supermen, that brought back victory at the Marne!” Participation in the UNIA therefore provided black veterans with the opportunity to reclaim their manhood and demonstrate openly their racial consciousness.36

The pageantry of the UNIA allowed African American veterans to exhibit themselves as powerful visible prototypes of New Negro manhood and racial militancy. As political assertions of African American civic nationalism and racial pride, the dramatic and highly choreographed UNIA parades, famously
photographed by James Van Der Zee, paralleled in appearance and meaning those visions about black soldiers held during and after the war. In the case of the UNIA’s events, black nationalism supplanted civic nationalism in significance for participants and spectators alike. Attracting huge crowds, the pageants prominently featured the African Legion, who marched in the military formations characteristic of the U.S. Army. Along with the Black Cross Nurses, the parades placed militant black manhood and womanhood on full display. Modeled after wartime female Red Cross volunteers, the Black Cross Nurses complimented the African Legion and served as embodiments of feminine militancy, albeit in the gender specific role of racial motherhood.

The interplay between the UNIA’s gendered militarism and the symbolism of African American soldiers was exhibited in the grand opening parade of the International Convention of Negroes of the World, held in Harlem on 1 August 1921. Thousands of fascinated spectators lined the sidewalks of Lenox Avenue from 128th Street to 145th Street to witness Garvey, members of the UNIA high command, and the organization’s various auxiliary bodies on display. Emmett Gaines, mounted on horseback, led the New York and Philadelphia African Legions in formation, while the Black Cross Nurses, immaculate in their all-white gowns, occupied a prominent place in the parade. UNIA members joined the procession and invoked the historical memory of black military service in the war, carrying signs and banners reading, “The Negro as a soldier has no peer,” “The Negro won the war,” “The Negro’s fighting strength is not known,” “All hail to the New York 15th Regiment and the 367th Regiment,” “Remember the New York 15th.” Informed by gender and the legacy of African American soldiers, the UNIA’s pageants, as part of a historical tradition of ritual and performance within the contested space of American public culture, constituted powerful assertions of nationhood and racial sovereignty. Events such as this captured the metaphorical and experiential symbiosis between the UNIA and former servicemen. In the broader context of the UNIA’s history, black veterans embraced their role as ambassadors of the New Negro and indispensable members of Marcus Garvey’s organization, the most significant movement of peoples of African descent in the postwar era.

CONCLUSION

African American veterans constitute a formative dimension of the post-World War I black experience and the development of the New Negro movement. Former servicemen represented and engendered powerful and highly contested symbolisms that effectively shaped the ideological and discursive terrain upon which the New Negro emerged. But it was on the physical terrain of postwar American society that African American veterans had their most profound impact. Just as Harry Haywood following his return to the United
African American Veterans and Post–World War I Racial Militancy

States and in the aftermath of the Chicago Riot joined the radical African Blood Brotherhood, so too did countless other black veterans commit themselves to similarly militant organizations and movements. Disillusioned, but not deterred, black veterans channeled their interconnected racial, gender, and political consciousness into creating an American society reflective of their military sacrifice. With dreams of the freedom they supposedly fought and labored for during the war vivid in their minds, former servicemen, whether with The Messenger, the League for Democracy, or the Universal Negro Improvement Association, represented the advance guard of a national and diasporic movement to attack and challenge white supremacy and the continued assaults on black humanity. Their vision, fortitude, and inspiring symbolic potency necessitates placing African American veterans at the center of how we conceptualize and historicize the New Negro of the post–World War I era.

NOTES

I would like to thank Nell Irvin Painter, Maurice Isserman, Saje Mathieu, Tiffany Patterson, Philip Klinkner, V. P. Franklin, and the anonymous readers of the JAAH for their extremely helpful comments and suggestions on various drafts of this essay.


368 The Journal of African American History


For information on the WWI black veterans counterparts in the Civil War and World War II who were also known for their racial militancy, see Foner, Reconstruction; Painter, Exodusters; and Parker, “War, What Is It Good For?”


Victor R. Daly Papers, Box 1; Victor Reginald Daly, Public Affairs Records, Box 350, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.


Kornweibel, No Crystal Stair, 64.

William N. Colson, “Propaganda and the Negro Soldier,” The Messenger (July 1919), 24–25; Memo, 30 June 1919, 10218-341, Files of the Military Intelligence Division on Negro Subversion, Record Group 165, United States National Archives, College Park, MD (hereafter MID, RG 165); Kornweibel, No Crystal Stair, 75.


21. “Dr. Moton Answers Charges at New York Tuskegee Assn. Banquet,” Chicago Defender, 5 July 1919; Moton traveled to France following the armistice to investigate the conditions of African American soldiers and debunk charges of rape committed by men of the 92nd Division. During his trip he delivered a widely criticized speech to the soldiers and officers of the division, imploring them to quietly return to the United States and not strike the attitude of heroes; see, Felix James, “Robert Russa Moton and the Whispering Gallery after World War I,” Journal of Negro History 62 (July 1977): 235–42; “League for Democracy Has Unique Slogan, ‘Lest We Forget’,” The New York Commoner, 28 June 1919, 10218-337, MID, RG 165; Walter Loving to Director of Military Intelligence, 6 August 1919, 10218-337, MID, RG 165.


