

Taking Leave, Taking Liberty: American Troops on the World War II Home Front

Aaron Hiltner

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Reviewed by Tadashi Hama

Few Americans know how many black American there are in the US. According to a 2001 survey, on average, Americans think that black Americans make up 30% of the US population--about 17% of Americans think that black Americans make up 50% of the population.¹ According to the 2000 US Census, Black Americans were about 12% of the population. The survey suggested that those who are most likely to come in contact with blacks, non-whites and the poor, are most likely to overestimate the black population. One should also consider media representation of black Americans for America's overestimation of their numbers. American media tend to show black Americans in prominent, uplifting roles on fictional TV shows and movies. Perhaps people who live outside the US, watching American entertainment, also overestimate the population of black Americans.

However, every once in a while on the Internet and social media, one sees black Americans beating Asian Americans and rioting and looting in American urban centers.² That black Americans, a mere 12% of the population, can cause so much social distress, is problem that the American ruling class has tried to address ever since the founding of the country. To the ruling class, including the socio-political and financial elites and orthodox academics, black American criminality is due to slavery, which, in turn, was a result of "white racism". The ruling class states that it is racists who are sensationalizing black criminality. In reality, the ruling class claims, there are more whites and, therefore, whites are more criminal than blacks. Furthermore, stating otherwise would be "racist". Rather than end here, a perceptive person would take a closer look at the numbers for him/herself. One would look at "rates of crime" (crimes per capita, e.g. per 1,000 people) and then compare rates between blacks and whites. For example, in California, in 2002, blacks were more likely than whites to be arrested for serious crimes such as homicide (9.78:1), forcible rape (7.58:1) and robbery (15.88:1).³ At the same time, between 2001 and 2013, while more whites were being incarcerated for violent crimes, incarceration of blacks decreased.⁴ In other words, the "white supremacist" judicial system was

¹ In 2019, blacks made up about 13% of the US population. news.gallup.com/poll/4435/public-overestimates-us-black-hispanic-populations.aspx

² For an (incomplete) view of which American racial group commits the most "hate crimes", see: *Policy Spotlight: Hate Crime Laws*. Boulder, CO: Movement Advancement Project (2021). www.lgbtmap.org

³ E.S. Rubenstein. *The Color of Crime: Race, Crime and Justice in America*. Oakton, VA: New Century Foundation, 2016. Consider these black-to-white ratios in light of the fact that in 2001, in California, blacks were only 6.1% of the population. While blacks generally commit more crimes relative to whites, there are rates of crime that are lower than, for example, that for homicide. Hispanics, or "Latinos", were about one-third of California's populations and their rates of arrests compared to blacks were much lower (e.g. for murder, 3.4:1; forcible rape, 2.7:1 and 2.7:1). Something other than "white racism" is mediating non-white criminality.

⁴ Rubenstein, *ibid*.

incarcerating more whites than blacks. After further exploration of the data, one can make up his or her mind about which group is committing most of the crime in America. The point here is that it is very easy to claim that the cause of socio-economic problems of some groups is due to “oppression” or “racism”. Actually reviewing data is apparently hard work.

So it is with this frame of mind that readers should approach Aaron Hiltner’s book, a somewhat amusing look at the crass and vulgar behavior of American troops, in their own homeland, during World War II. Had the current book focused on the behavior of American combat troops in their transition to a civilian life, one would empathize with their ordeal and understand their alcoholism and unruliness. The current book is exactly the opposite, of military personnel who were more in danger of being killed by their comrades than by either the Germans or Japanese. There were a lot of military personnel based in the homeland: out of 16 million American soldiers, “many of these troops never went abroad.” Hiltner estimates that “65-75 percent of all soldiers were stationed domestically” and suggests that “as few as 10 percent ... actually saw combat.”

And what did these rear echelon troops do? Drink to excess, fight amongst themselves, civilians and civilian police, rape and occasionally murder. Hiltner ascribes acts of violence and drunkenness to a masculine ego activated when one dons a US military uniform and a sense of immunity conferred by the uniform. For black American troops, however, their drunkenness and violence were due to “white racism.” Rather than allow a cliché to substitute for an explanation, one could review rates of crime of white and black civilians in the 1940s and also examine socioeconomic status, urban or rural upbringing and level of self-control as contributing to black criminality at the time. However, as noted earlier, it is much easier to ascribe inequality to “racism” than to root through history.

The current book states that whites actively oppressed black military personnel, who were fighting “for freedom overseas” and fighting “for freedom from racial and economic inequality at home.” The book bemoans that blacks were mostly assigned to service and labor units. The implication is that much more blacks should have been put into combat units—what would black people say to that? While the level of education of average American whites was low (approximately middle school level), the level of education of American blacks was lower.⁵ Even combat units required a minimum level of intelligence. Again, if the issue is “racism”, then there is apparently no need to look further.

The US government at the time hoped for the full participation of blacks in military service—it set 10% of all inductees be black.⁶ Thus, the US military was obligated to meet this quota. However, many black applicants were rejected, not because of “racism” as stated by the book, but because many could not even read the induction forms and did not know how to sign their names. The book does not mention that later during the war, black inductees, as well as whites, underwent literacy training, to boost overall literacy

⁵ U. Lee. *Special Studies. The Employment of Negro Troops, United States Army in World War II.* Washington, DC: Center of Military History United States Army (2000).

⁶ The 1940 US Census indicates that about 10% of the US population was black.

levels.⁷ One other potential barrier to induction for blacks is their generally poor physical health. However, physical fitness of young black males was similar to that of white males. If blacks were rejected, it was for venereal disease. Later on during the war, however, those with venereal disease were subjected to treatment, and accepted into service upon treatment completion.⁸ Thus, the government and military were more interested in producing fighting men to win the war rather than oppressing a potential pool of recruits.

The current book suggests “white racists” rejected black Americans for service, which, again, reminds readers to dig deeper into history. Some black community leaders, such as black nationalist W.E.B. Du Bois, and black separatist groups, such as the Nation of Islam, greatly admired Japan’s rapid modernization following its emergence from isolation, its victory over Russia, a white, European empire, and Japan’s proposal to abolish racial discrimination at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. At the same time, before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese agitators approached black communities for their support in Japan’s fight against western imperialists. Some black nationalist leaders, such as Mittie Maud(e) Lena Gordon of the Ethiopia Pacific Movement, called on blacks to register as conscientious objectors and stated in a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt that “nothing was to be gained by blacks fighting the white man’s wars.” While Gordon denied being “pro-Japan,” she was charged with sedition in 1942.⁹ Thus, rather than pure racism, perhaps draft boards were leery of the loyalty of some of the black candidates.

The Japanese military system of comfort stations and how they were organized *ad hoc* by the Japanese military in forward military areas has been detailed elsewhere.¹⁰ Rather than sordid chambers of horror, as depicted by American elites these stations were designed to keep Japanese soldiers away from local women, to reduce criminal behavior and to reduce the risk of venereal disease. The current book missed the opportunity to describe similar arrangements—within the homeland—for US military personnel sanctioned by the US military. Hiltner describes one arrangement between officials of the city of Norfolk, Virginia and its prostitutes to business within a designated area. Prostitutes paid city taxes and were regularly examined for venereal diseases. However, the Navy pressured the city to close the area due to an “outbreak” of venereal disease among naval personnel, forcing prostitution and crime to spread throughout Norfolk. Not described in the book was Honolulu, a key American military base in the Pacific.¹¹ While prostitution was not legal, prostitutes were fingerprinted and registered to work as prostitutes. From the prostitute’s \$3 fee, the brothel owner received \$1. More on the government or military’s regulation of prostitution in the US during World War II, with the aim of controlling crime and disease transmission, could have been mentioned in the current book. Hiltner notes that generals and admirals were more concerned with keeping personnel free of venereal disease, for the sake of combat effectiveness. Here we can see a possible dissociation between Japanese and US thinking on prostitution—Japan was

⁷ Lee, *ibid.*

⁸ Lee, *ibid.*

⁹ K.N. Blain. “Confraternity Among All Dark Races”: Mittie Maude Lena Gordon and the Practice of Black (Inter)nationalism in Chicago, 1932–1942. *Palimpsest* 5, p. 151 (2016).

¹⁰ I. Hata. *Comfort Women and Sex in the Battle Zone*. Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books (2018).

¹¹ www.civilbeat.org/2015/03/denby-fawcett-the-brothels-of-chinatown/

concerned with regulating behavior while the US was more concerned with outward appearances. To confirm this, readers will need to read elsewhere.