



Attack on Fort Wagner by Thomas Nast.

Glory Be

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Glory. Freddie Fields, producer. Edward Zwick, director. RCA Columbia Pictures. 1990.

If movies are larger than life, then the story of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry was made for the big screen. Organized in the spring of 1863, following Lincoln's promulgation of the Emancipation Proclamation, the 54th Massachusetts embodied the transformation of the war for Union into a war for freedom. Its organizers—led by Massachusetts governor John Andrew, Senator William Sumner, and John Brown-supporter Charles Stearns—were among the most active white opponents of slavery. Its recruiters—led by Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, and John Mercer Langston—were among the most militant black abolitionists. Its ranks were filled by black men eager to enact the principles of equality and to bloody the Southern chivalry in the process. After enrollment and training, the regiment shipped out for the Sea Islands of South Carolina, where it was placed in the front ranks of the Union assault on Charleston, the seat of the Southern secessionist movement. Soon thereafter, the men of the 54th took to the field against the Confederate stronghold of Fort Wagner. When the smoke cleared, they had won everything but the battle, demonstrating their mettle to all except the most obdurate racists. But the rebels were not the 54th's only enemy. Like black soldiers throughout the war, the men of the 54th fought on two fronts, battling not only the slave-holding regime, but also the discriminatory policies of their own government.

The story of the 54th is the narrow neck in the hourglass of Afro-American history between the American Revolution and the age of segregation. Drawing on more than a century of slavery in the South and freedom in the North, the black men who filled the ranks of the 54th carried the aspirations and ideals of their people into the confrontation with the slave-holding enemy. The experience transformed them. Traveling widely, seeing the world from the perspective of the victor, and sharpening their racial consciousness, they returned home with a new sense of their power to remake their lives. Veterans of the 54th moved into positions of leadership within the black community and played an important role in representing black people in the larger white-dominated society. Their wartime service shaped black life into the twentieth century.

Other black men—some 179,000—shared this experience with the

men of the 54th. But the 54th stood at the forefront. More than any other black regiment, it came to represent the aspirations of black people in the epic struggle against slavery. Through the 54th, former free blacks and former slaves confronted, battled, and ultimately defeated their greatest enemy, carrying away the chalice of universal emancipation and citizenship. If the prize of full equality eluded the 54th—as it eluded all black people—the experience in struggling with their former masters informed all of Afro-American history.

In addition to encapsulating a near century of Afro-American life, the story of the 54th provides a ready antidote to the romantic myths, outright misconceptions, and dense ignorance that survive—indeed flourish—despite the best efforts of revisionist scholars. The most persistent of these is that black people were passive observers of their own liberation. No story does more to undermine the idea that emancipation was the gift of an all-wise and farseeing white emancipator, or that the federal government was an unalloyed friend of the freed people. Understanding the history of the 54th—its social origins, its battle against the Confederacy, its fight against discrimination within Union ranks, its engagement with former slaves as liberators and with former masters as occupiers, and its return to the North as victors and heroes—offers a window into the Afro-American past.

For these reasons alone, *Glory* is a welcome addition to the ever-growing library of Civil War cinema. In addition, *Glory* is written with great force, acted with skill, and photographed in a manner that captures both the eerie beauty of the South Carolina low country and the nightmarish specter of battlefield slaughter. It may well be, as historian James McPherson maintains, the “most powerful” motion picture ever made about the Civil War.¹

Glory captures much of the 54th's larger-than-life history, but not by a pedantic hewing to literal truth. Indeed—outside of the main outline of the story—there is little historical authenticity in *Glory*. Almost all of the characters, particularly black ones, are cut from whole cloth, and the few attempts to introduce real historical figures lead to laughable howlers, as with the presentation of a young, vigorous Frederick Douglass in the full gray beard of his dotage. Instead, *Glory* aims for plausibility—a general understanding of the black military experience placed in the context of the Civil War era—and speaks to the spirit of the 54th's story. While producer Freddie Fields, director Edward Zwick, and screenwriter Kevin Jarre present the details of uniforms, arms, and evolutions in exquisite detail, they feel free to bend the history of the 54th to their own purposes. The reliance on plausibility (increasingly evident in historically based cinema) raises important questions about the relationship of historical films to the historian's craft.

That a picture which portrays the courage and heroism of black soldiers, expands popular knowledge of Afro-American history, and strikes a blow against the romantic view of the Civil War would make

a host of enemies is not surprising. However, that these enemies derive not from the Daughters of the Confederacy or the Grand Army of the Republic but descendants—real and spiritual—of the abolitionists who sponsored the 54th and the men who fought in its ranks, does come as something of a shock. Writing in the *Washington Post*, David Nicholson applauds *Glory's* "long overdue treatment of black participation in the Civil War" and the correction of "the omission of a significant chapter in the American history from popular culture." Nevertheless, he was deeply "troubled" by the film. Marilyn Richardson, curator of Boston's African American Museum, was similarly disturbed, asserting that "*Glory* denies the men of the 54th Regiment their rightful place in our collective history." Rather than finally telling the 54th's story, Richardson charges, "the real story is being suppressed again, ever deeper."²

What agitates these and other commentators is the central place given to Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the regiment's white commander. As with so many recent cinematic explorations of the black experience—*Cry Freedom* and *Mississippi Burning*, for example—some strange racial alchemy elevates a white man to the lead role in the black man's story. The quintessential contribution of black soldiers to emancipation is seen through the eyes of a white officer.

The privileged son of Boston brahmins, Shaw gained his rank through the good offices of his father, an early advocate of the sable arm, and a close friend of Governor Andrew and Senator Sumner. Like these senior members of Boston's abolitionist junta, the younger Shaw believed that the enlistment of a black regiment would do much to seal the fate of slavery and advance the cause of racial equality. Disdaining the stigma of "nigger soldier" and dismissing popular suspicion of the abilities of black soldiers, Shaw accepted the leadership of the 54th reluctantly and after considerable soul searching—far more than is evident in the film's rendition of his decision. But once he took command, Shaw acted with decision and transformed the motley collection of committed but untrained men into a disciplined unit.

From the first, Shaw prepared his men for battle, although the Emancipation Proclamation had implied that black soldiers would play only a supporting role in the back of Union lines. Some of Shaw's superiors seemed only too willing to send untested black troops on impossible missions, turning them into cannon fodder and confirming the prejudices of white Northerners. Most, however, harbored real doubts about the ability of black men to fight and maintained that fighting was the white man's business. Only Shaw's insistence, backed by Andrew and Sumner, that his men should be treated as other soldiers allowed the 54th to trade their shovels for muskets.

At Fort Wagner, the 54th proved the abolitionist case—in blood. Fort Wagner did not fall to the 54th, but the regiment's bravery in the face of withering fire, along with similar heroics by black soldiers at Port Hudson and Milliken's Bend, squelched any doubts that black

men could successfully confront their former masters on the battlefield. The courage of the 54th so affronted the Confederate defenders at Fort Wagner that, when Shaw fell at the front of his troops, rebel soldiers stripped his body of all evidence of high rank and dumped it into a mass grave with the tangled bodies of other Union dead. When the battle ended, federal officers, following customary practice, requested the return of Shaw's remains. The Confederate commander refused, contemptuously observing that Shaw had been buried with "his niggers." Later, when a Union naval bombardment allowed Northern forces to occupy the fort, officials ordered a search for Shaw's body. Much to its credit, Shaw's grieving family put an end to that grisly enterprise, noting that it was appropriate for an officer to be buried with his men.

The powerful message of Shaw's death and his family's affirmation of universal equality captured the imagination of the abolitionist North. Shaw, celebrated as the flower of Northern idealism, inspired hundreds of patriotic sermons and political speeches. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Robert Lowell wrote eulogies and odes to the fallen hero, and Augustus Saint-Gaudens carved a magnificent bas-relief of Shaw reviewing the 54th Massachusetts. It was placed on Boston Common, where it now stands.

To the critics of *Glory*, the renewed celebration of Shaw's martyrdom overshadows the real story of the 54th regiment—the men in the ranks. They note that Shaw dominates the movie as he dominated Emerson's sermon, Lowell's poem, and Saint-Gaudens's frieze.

It is difficult to argue the point. The film gives Matthew Broderick, who plays Shaw, top billing. *Glory's* story line centers on Shaw's efforts to overcome self-doubts and transmit a battle-won confidence to his men. Conceding this, however, does not denigrate Shaw's story or deny that it is a tale well told. It is wrongheaded and condescending to dismiss *Glory* as merely an exploration of "White racism, with White abolitionists who opposed its evils, and the Blacks who endured them." Shaw was an authentic hero, who did the right thing. His letters (read by a voiceover) are a magnificent statement of nineteenth-century American idealism. They reveal a young man struggling with the profound implications of slavery and race at a crucial moment in the nation's and his own life. It is appropriate to celebrate Shaw and the abolitionists who propelled him to his moment in history, and blatantly unfair to condemn Shaw as yet another white paternalist or, more strangely yet, a surrogate master.³

Moreover, while *Glory* places Shaw at the front, it does much to tell the story of the 54th. Viewers learn that black soldiers, unlike their white comrades, fought under the threat of enslavement or death, because Confederate president Jefferson Davis ordered captured black soldiers to be treated not as prisoners of war but as rebels in arms. (White officers of black regiments, like Shaw, faced a similar danger.) *Glory* also demonstrates how Northern racism informed federal policy,

condemning black soldiers to inferior rations, tattered uniforms, continuous fatigue duty, and—perhaps most significantly—pay nearly half of that of white soldiers. But black soldiers were not mere victims. *Glory* features the resistance of black soldiers to such demeaning treatment, particularly the regiment's principled refusal to accept any pay until it was given equal pay.

Glory does not stop with this surface review of the 54th's accomplishments amid adversity, and merely reprise an all-too-common theme of Afro-American history. Instead, the film attempts the more difficult task of exploring the internal workings of Afro-American society. Playing off the diverse experiences of Tripp, an angry fugitive slave played by Denzell Washington, Searles, an Emerson-reading free black intellectual (he wears glasses) played by Andre Braugher, Jupiter, the stuttering plantation hand played by Jihmi Kennedy, and Rawlins, the sage master sergeant played with great effect by Morgan Freeman, *Glory* makes much of the tensions among black enlistees as they come to terms with their common mission. *Glory's* presentation of the 54th is more than black and white.

Yet, despite its considerable accomplishments, *Glory* fails to capture the black military experience. This is not because, as one critic charges, "'*Glory*' chooses instead to tell its story through the prism of White consciousness,"⁴ or because the diversity of the black community is too often put in terms of personality types rather than social experience.

Glory fails because its history of the 54th relies mostly on plausibility rather than the regiment's authentic past. In contrast to the film's faithful account to Shaw, *Glory's* representation of the 54th is a curious mixture of historical fact and fiction, ideological posturing and projection. It makes the history of the 54th into a Frank Capra-like view of black America: one Southern rebel and one Northern intellectual, one naive fieldhand and one wise old head.⁵

Take, for example, the question of origins. The 54th was not a representative sample of black America in 1863, as *Glory* implies. Although a few former Southern slaves entered its ranks (many Northern free blacks had escaped from the South), most of the members of the 54th had been Northerners, free by birth. Some came from families that had enjoyed freedom for generations. Moreover, since the 54th was recruited before any other black regiment—in fact, the War Department had denied the petitions of several midwestern governors to enlist their own black regiment until well into the summer of 1863—the 54th drew black men from all over the North. Many of those who traveled half a continent to Massachusetts had been pressing for the chance to enlist since the war began. Some had been drilling independently in militia units organized within their own communities. In short, the new recruits were highly politicized, hardened by long years of participation in the struggle for equality, and fully aware of the implications of their service for themselves, their people, and their nation.

From this perspective, *Glory's* characterization of Shaw as the master disciplinarian who transferred his own self-discipline to his men seems rather empty. Likewise, the struggle for equal pay and the protests that followed derived not from the enlistees' sudden discovery of a light pay envelope, but from their long and practiced opposition to second-class citizenship. The possibility of discriminatory treatment had been at issue in the black community for months before enlistment. Some black leaders had demanded—and received—explicit promises from federal authorities that black soldiers would be treated as the equals of whites. The 54th's famous strike for equal pay had deep roots in a protest tradition almost a century in the making.

The depiction of discipline infused from the top—the white top—is another matter of importance, since that notion has been seized by those obsessed with the question of discipline in contemporary Afro-American society.⁶ *Glory* contrasts Shaw and his disciplined Northern troops to a regiment of unruly former slave soldiers led by Colonel James Montgomery, an Ohio-born veteran of the Kansas border wars who had taught school in Kentucky and Missouri before the war. Whereas Shaw exhibited supreme respect for his men, Montgomery is portrayed as a crude racist who is motivated by hatred for the slaveholder, not sympathy for the slave, and who has nothing but contempt for his men. In one of *Glory's* most chilling scenes, Montgomery's South Carolina Colored Volunteers—soldiers who had been recruited among former slaves on the Sea Islands—loot and burn a plantation and abuse its residents, white and black. Montgomery leers, and acts only when a black soldier turns his lust from a black to a white woman. Then Montgomery coolly dispatches the offending soldier with a bullet. Shaw watches in horror.

James Montgomery, as far as is known, harbored no such contempt for the men under his command or black people generally. His admiration for John Brown and record in Kansas confirms his long opposition to slavery and commitment to racial equality.⁷ Like many Western soldiers, however, he believed that the war must be carried to the enemy—the civilian enemy. Like many veterans of Kansas, he thought of himself as a "practical abolitionist." Having witnessed the slaughter that accompanied direct frontal assaults on established positions—much as the 54th would attack Fort Wagner—Montgomery preferred to punish the slave-holding class directly. If some white Southerners were so foolish to ally with the slave masters, or so unlucky to stand in the way of the Union army, that was most unfortunate. The retributive raids he and other commanders of the South Carolina Colored Volunteers launched up the rivers of Georgia during the summer of 1863 marked, among other things, the changing nature of the struggle between North and South. Ultimately, Montgomery's understanding of the war, carried to its logical conclusion by William Tecumseh Sherman, would prove decisive. As Sherman noted, such warfare universalized the soldier's hell, but it did not make soldiers

less disciplined or less committed to a principled cause. For the record, the former slave soldiers who composed the South Carolina Colored Volunteers acquitted themselves well on the battlefield.

Glory's comparison of Shaw and the 54th, on one hand, and Montgomery and the *South Carolina Colored Volunteers*, on the other, illustrates the problem of plausibility as the basis of cinematic narrative. It may be useful—and, sadly, even necessary—to remind the audience of the persistence of racism by presenting a white officer who cared nothing for his men to balance the celebration of Shaw's deep concern, just as it is useful to see the 54th as black society in microcosm. However, the utility of these lessons becomes moot when the viewer finds they have no validity. History without a basis in fact loses its warrant. The debate over Shaw's role in the making of the 54th becomes a hollow exercise once it is discovered that the composition of the 54th is misrepresented and the regiment's true history ignored. Likewise, a discussion of the derivation of social discipline—from the top or the bottom—is rendered moot once it is admitted that the South Carolina Colored Volunteers and its commander enter the film only as foils to the 54th and Shaw, not as a true representation of former slave soldiers and their officers.

The dangers of such a misappropriation of history become most evident in the discussion of Afro-American manhood, another subject of great contemporary importance, particularly when educators concede the necessity of separate schools to tutor young black men in manly responsibilities. Appropriating the language of the recruiting broadsides, *Glory* argues that black soldiers proved their manhood by bloodying the slave-holding enemy in battle. "Ain't much matter what happens tomorrow," reflects the rebel Tripp on the eve of 54th's suicidal attack on Fort Wagner, "'cause we men, ain't we?" Many people thought so, and *Glory* reinforces this message. But there is little evidence that black people—former slaves or former free men—thought their manhood contingent upon military service or suicidal sacrifice. While black leaders brandished the sable arm in pressing their claim to equality, black people understood that manhood had many more fundamental sources. If they needed a text, they could of course find one in the nation's founding charter. *Glory's* disservice is not so much in making the contrary case, but in fabricating the evidence upon which its own argument rests. Without appropriate sources, the experience of the 54th can have no weight in contemporary debates. History is reduced to whoever is holding the camera.

Glory then demonstrates the necessity of applying the same standards of historical validity to cinematic reconstructions of the past that are applied to other historical genres. To be sure, providing an accurate portrayal of the 54th on film would be difficult, but in many ways no more difficult than an accurate portrayal in text or on stage. The dangers of failing to do so are great. If movies are going to carry a portion of the burden of understanding our past, they must provide—

at the very least—an accurate rendition of that past. The story of the 54th is too important to be mangled, and *Glory* is too good a film to be reduced to irrelevance.

Notes

1. James M. McPherson, "The 'Glory' Story: The 54th Massachusetts and the Civil War," *New Republic*, 8–15 January 1990, 22.

2. David Nicholson, "What Price 'Glory'?" *Washington Post*, 21 January 1990; Marilyn Richardson, "What Price Glory?" *Reconstruction* 1 (1990): 40–41.

3. Alan A. Stone, "Glory: A Failure of Reconstruction," *Reconstruction* 1 (1990): 42–48.

4. *Ibid.*

5. This, of course, is putting matters kindly, for *Glory's* presentation of the 54th as personality types participates in an older—and less enviable—American cinematic tradition. Donald Bogle in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* (New York: Viking Press, 1973) explicated a typology of black characters that bears close resemblance to those in *Glory*. From Bogle's perspective, Tripp corresponds to the Buck, Searles to the Tom, and Jupiter—in a tragic reversal of the Stepin Fetchit character—the Coon. Only Rawlins transcends these types, making him easily the most interesting character in the film. I would like to thank Anthony Speranza for this point.

6. See the editorial in the *New York Times*, 1 February 1990, which recommends *Glory* be required viewing for all teachers and students in the New York school system because "the men of the 54th were models of discipline, the results of months of rigorous training by a commander who knew first hand what hell warfare is and directed his men enough to prepare them for it."

7. Steven Z. Starr presents evidence of Montgomery's concern for black soldiers in his opposition to the appointment of the notorious Charles Jennison as a commander of a Kansas black regiment. *Jennison's Jayhawkers: A Civil War Cavalry Regiment and Its Commander* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 30–36, 45–46, and esp. 107; and Albert E. Castel, *A Frontier State at War: Kansas, 1861–1865* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1958).