

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.<sup>1</sup>

*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