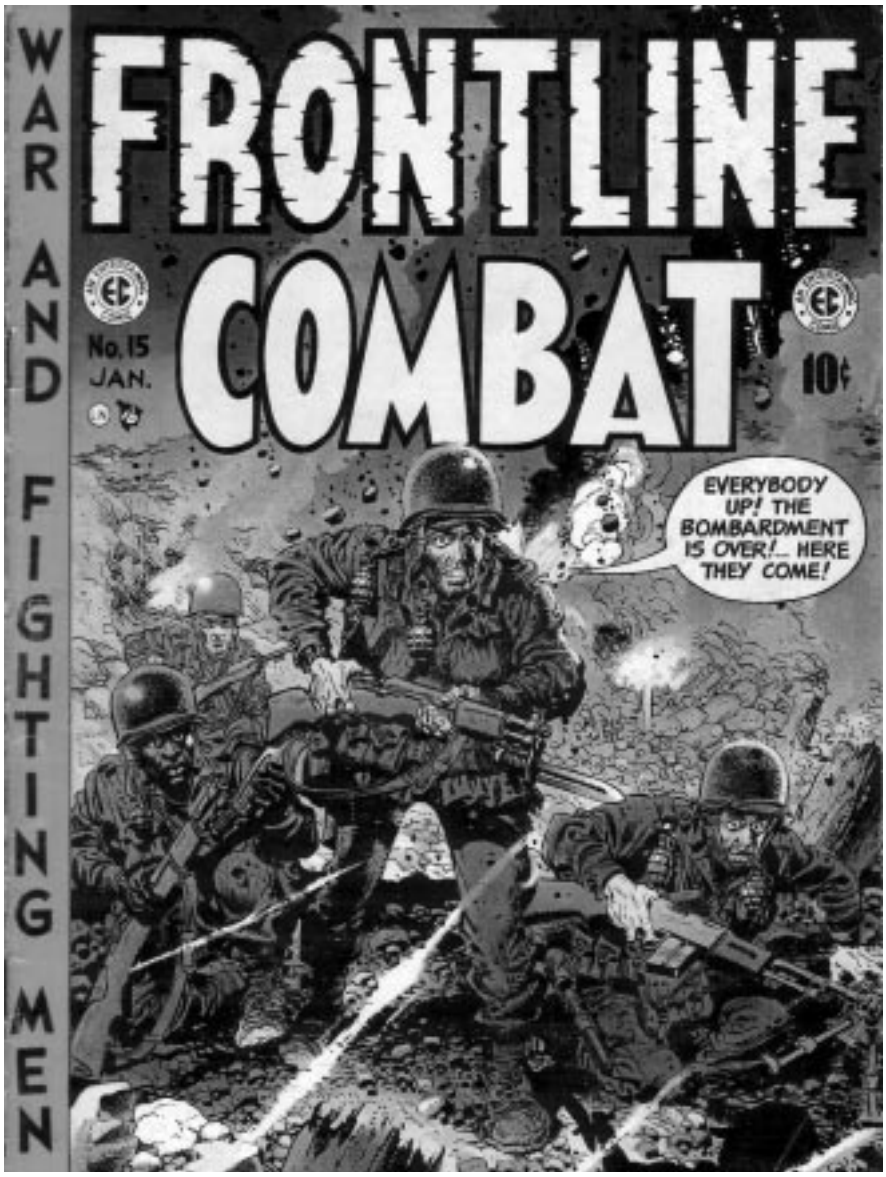


Race, Art, and Integration: The Image of the African American Soldier in Popular Culture During the Korean War

Gerald Early
Introduction by Alan Lightman

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Alan Lightman

There's a poignant moment in Gerald Early's essay "Life with Daughters: Watching the Miss America Pageant" – an essay that was included in Houghton Mifflin's *Best American Essays of the Century*. In that moment, Early catches his daughter looking at "her mother's very long and silken straight hair, the hair that the other black girls at school admire," and asks her if she would like to have hers straightened as well.

"Not now," his daughter answers. "Maybe when I'm older. It'll be something different."

"Do you think you will like it?" Early asks.

"Maybe," his daughter answers.

"In that 'maybe,'" Early writes, "so calmly and evenly uttered, rest the complex contradictions, the uneasy tentative negotiations of that which cannot be compromised yet can never be realized in this flawed world as an ideal; there is, in that 'maybe,' the epistemology of race pride for black American women so paradoxically symbolized by their straightened hair." It seems to me that Early's writing encompasses all of the complex contradictions and uneasy negotiations of African American culture and of American culture in general.

Early studies jazz, boxing, baseball, beauty contests, and film for their deeply human meanings. As a writer, he is one of the great essayists of our time. But more than that, he is an explorer. He is a thinker. His trademarks are utter honesty, a powerful intellect, and fierce independence. The African American experience is the lens through which Early photographs the world, but he is not a separatist. While showing the richness and complexity of African American culture, he also shows it as an organic part of American culture. After reading Early, we feel provoked in the best sense of the word, and we also feel more whole.

One of Early's most appealing qualities, to me, is his modesty. He does not try to establish a persona. Rather, he wants to be measured by his thought – and that quiet thought has been widely recognized and honored. In 1988 he received a coveted Whiting Prize for promising writers near the beginning of their careers. In 1995 his essay collection *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture* won a National Book Critics Circle Award. Other of his books include *Tuxedo Junction: Essays on American Culture*, *Daughters: On Family and Fatherhood*, and *One Nation Under a Groove: Motown and American Culture*. He is the editor of many volumes, including *The Sammy Davis, Jr., Reader*, *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, and *Body Language: Writers on Sport*. His edited volume *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation* was named an Outstanding Book by the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights in 1993. He has been a commentator for National Public Radio, and

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Gerald Early

Integration in America Before the Brown Decision

Between 1945, which marked the end of World War II, and 1954, the year of the Brown decision, which outlawed racial segregation in the nation's public schools, the United States experienced integration in several symbolic and potentially powerful ways that challenged institutionally the ideology of white supremacy. The fact that World War II was fought, in part, against the racist ideology of Nazism; that increasingly race was being challenged in academic circles as a legitimate scientific concept; that sociological studies such as the pathbreaking *American Dilemma*, compiled by Gunnar Myrdal, described America as a society suffering from a disjunction between its democratic creed and its practice of segregation and racial oppression; that African Americans had become more deeply restive about their situation and more militant about social change – all partly explain the shift that was beginning to accelerate during those postwar years. Furthermore, the rise of communism as a world power, through both the expansion of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, had put more pressure on the United States to change its racial practices in order to influence nonwhite third-world countries in Africa and Asia.

However, there was still much uncertainty and nervousness about drastic racial change in the United States at the time. It must be remembered that while World War II was, in a way, a war against racism, the United States was intensely racist in its pursuit of victory against the Japanese, spewing forth virulently racist propaganda against them and placing Japanese Americans in internment camps during the war. With the advent of the cold war in the late 1940s, conservatives tended to see agitation by African Americans as being instigated by communists. The repressive political atmosphere in the United States during the early 1950s tended to make any expression of liberal perspectives suspect, even condemned, as if bourgeois liberal reform were interchangeable with socialism or communism. An extraordinary example of this – especially relevant in this instance, as it relates to the loyalty of African Americans and their willingness to fight for the United States against a foreign power – is Jackie Robinson's testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee on July 18, 1949, spurred by Paul Robeson's comment a month earlier that he thought African Americans should fight against lynching in the United States and not against the Soviet Union.*

But probably nothing was held in lower regard or seen as more dangerous by many adults of the period than comic books.

Nonetheless, important acts of integration, of crossing over, occurred during that time, particularly in the cultural realm – including the integration of major-league baseball when Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers as a rookie in 1947; the awarding of the National Book Award in 1953 to Ralph Ellison for his novel *Invisible Man*, published in 1952; and the awarding of the 1950 Pulitzer Prize for poetry to Gwendolyn Brooks for her collection *Annie Allen*, published in 1949. Indeed, in some respects racial integration had become, as these instances indicate, something of a mainstream act in American culture by the early 1950s. Yet integration had not gained casual acceptance; it was still seen in many circles as something unusual, radical, associated with the Left. After all, a good portion of the American public did not trust popular culture, within which several noted examples of integration were occurring at the time. People in the film industry, for example, were under attack for their alleged affiliation with communists (and had adopted a policy of self-regulation back in the 1930s after first being attacked). Many people had mixed feelings about American popular music – especially jazz and the new rhythm-and-blues music of the late 1940s – and the people who played it. But probably nothing was held in lower regard or seen as more dangerous by many adults of the period than comic books.

So integration did not resolve racial tension in the American society of the early 1950s. Rather, in the various ways it was depicted, integration reflected the complex depths of a profound contradiction Americans felt deeply – not only about race but also about the strength of their institutions and the influential reach of popular culture. Nowhere was this complex welter of tensions more richly expressed than in the cultural representations of the most important act of institutional integration to occur before the Brown decision – that is, the 1948 decision to integrate the American military. And nothing dramatized the integration of the military, or accelerated it, more than the Korean War – the most significant political event for the United States between the end of World War II and the Brown decision.

Integration in the Mainstream

The cover of the January 1954 issue of EC Comics's *Frontline Combat* showed a black soldier (along with three white soldiers) in combat. This was highly unusual. Blacks were almost never seen on the covers of comic books in the 1940s and 1950s – the heyday of comics – unless they were depicted as jungle natives or as comic caricatures. Comic books were a highly racialized and intensely racist art form during this period of the early cold war. The exceptions to this were some special-edition sports comics that featured on their covers noncaricatural images of such popular black athletes as Jackie Robinson, Larry Doby, Roy Campanella, Willie Mays, and Joe Louis. Published in the late 1940s and early 1950s, these comics reflect the positive, if limited, impact that the integration of sports – particularly team sports – had on the United States and on how whites in this country saw African Americans.

How many young people read comics during that era? According to Bradford W. Wright, author of *Comic Book Nation: The Transforma-*

* For more on this, see Roger Kahn, *The Era 1947–1957: When the Yankees, the Giants, and the Dodgers Ruled the World* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1993), 198 – 207; Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 360 – 362; and Arnold Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 210 – 216. Robinson also discusses his testimony in his autobiography, *I Never Had It Made* (Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco Press, 1995).

tion of Youth Culture in America, the comic book industry grew to unprecedented heights during the years of the Korean War (1950 – 1953). In 1950, 300 comic book titles were published, producing annual sales of $41 million. In 1953, 650 titles were published, producing sales of over $90 million. Circulation in 1953 averaged about 70 million a month. Ninety percent of boys and girls under eighteen read them, as did most American GIs. Twenty-five percent of high-school graduates admitted to reading them as well. Comic books were, without question, the most popular art form, and the most popular form of literature, for the young in America.

The fact that blacks were generally not to be found on the covers of war comics or inside them is hardly surprising, considering how American society generally saw African Americans at the time of World War II and the Korean War, and particularly how it saw African American soldiers. Most Americans at the time still found it hard to imagine blacks in combat. In World War II, which had ended only five years before the Korean War began, the vast majority of African American men in the service were employed in service units. They were thought by most whites who were in command in the armed services to be unfit for combat. Whites thought blacks lacked courage and leadership skills and were not intelligent enough to be in the infantry or anywhere near the front line.

The decidedly mixed reports on the performance of all-black units in combat during World War II – particularly the 92nd Division's unimpressive performance in Italy in June 1944 – only suggested to many whites in command that blacks were indeed unfit and that the practice of segregating troops by race and tracking them into certain occupations was a sound one that should be continued. As army brass were wont to say when pressed about the issue of integration during World War II, the armed forces were no place for social experimentation or social engineering.

I have interviewed Truman K. Gibson, who in 1943 followed a thoroughly frustrated and thwarted William Hastie as the civilian aide to the secretary of war, and who wrote the report on the performance of the 92nd Division. Gibson said that he told the armed services high command that what they had with a segregated army was social engineering and a politicized army – because, after all, racism is a political idea, and segregation is a political and social arrangement. What he was advocating, by urging integration, was the depoliticization of American military life by acknowledging and exposing racism – not as a truth or a self-evident reflection of a natural law, which it professed itself to be, but as the political idea that it was. After all, Gibson argued, how could black units be expected to function well when they had such a high percentage of men who had performed poorly on the army's aptitude test, mostly because of their poor education and impoverished backgrounds? Black units had a higher percentage of such men than white units, and a far higher percentage than the armed forces recommended for a good regiment. The good black soldier was weighed down by being surrounded by too many men who were unfit through no fault of their own. The unfitness in the segregated units was intensified by being concentrated; white unfitness was spread around. The very segregation that whites said was necessary and unavoidable was actually making it impossible for black men to perform well, no matter how much they wanted to; thus, segregation was nothing but a self-fulfilling prophecy that ensured a status of inferiority for blacks by creating it in the first place.

During the era of segregated armed forces, depicting black soldiers in pulp art would essentially have meant drawing a largely black comic book.

This in turn ensured that in the age of integration, which the United States was entering, nothing positive was to be found in racial segregation or in the ways that blacks had adjusted to it. In effect, for African Americans, all segregation translated into inferiority and powerlessness. Clearly, in regard to an institution like the military, there is hardly a place or a reason for the idea that segregation may have had some positive aspects, but there may be important reasons to consider that idea in regard to the development of a vibrant African American cultural identity and its expression. Of course, it must be understood that at the time, most black leaders who endorsed integration felt that any assertion that could be interpreted as the least bit supportive of segregation would undercut any possibility of changing the American political and social arrangement, as most whites were unable or unwilling to examine African American life in their society in any sort of sophisticated or nuanced way.

Gibson, of course, couched this in terms that the military could understand: namely, that segregated armed forces were an inefficient use of manpower and demoralizing for blacks, who consequently became a hindrance rather than a help in any war effort. That argument, compelling as it was, was not terribly persuasive at the time. African Americans' compromised citizenship status, which was reflected in their use in the armed forces and which intensified their lack of morale, was something that the military thought, perhaps rightly so, that it should not challenge unless other major institutions in the United States were willing to do so as well. In the game of social change, no one ever really wants to be first.

During the era of segregated armed forces, depicting black soldiers in pulp art would essentially have meant drawing a largely black comic book. The officer in charge of the black unit could be white, but he would be the only white, and the characters could not be in combat. This would have violated two important selling points of war comics – or any comics, for that matter: first, by depicting a large number of blacks as anything other than a jungle tribe, and second, by showing soldiers in wartime doing something other than engaging in combat, when precisely what attracted adolescent readers to depictions of war were images of carnage and heroism. Black service units would not have interested readers of war comics, even if the men who drew comics had been interested in dramatizing such aspects of military life.

How the public saw service units and the politics of convincing the public of the value of an integrated military probably explain the United States military's support of the production of the film *Red Ball Express*, shot in November and December 1951 and released in May 1952, during the height of the Korean War. Although the film is about World War II, its true subject, its real cultural moment, is Korea – in much the same way that while Robert Altman's 1970 film M*A*S*H is about the Korean War, its true subject, its actual cultural moment, is Vietnam. *Red Ball Express*, which stars Jeff Chandler and features prominently a young Sidney Poitier, is about the trucking detail – the 371st Quartermaster Truck Company – that supplied the 1944 Allied European invasion. It was over 70 percent African American, and some of its men later volunteered for, and were accepted into, combat

units in the European theater that were suffering from shortages. These men acquitted themselves well when placed in combat. But the film wishes to tell us that these black men also were heroes in service, and that integration does indeed work: the white and black men of the trucking outfit learn to get along with one another, after a couple of tense racist moments early on.

The Department of Defense, which at the time was very interested in the movie business, helped in the making of the film. Indeed, location scenes were shot at Fort Eustis, Virginia, the headquarters of the Army Transportation Corps. It had apparently become, by 1951, important army propaganda to show a successfully integrated army and to puff the role of blacks in it. This was a significant change from 1948, when President Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which in effect integrated the armed forces. In 1948 the army was strenuously opposed to this order.

Red Ball Express celebrated the idea of an integrated army, as did the *Saturday Evening Post* in an article entitled "How Do Our Negro Troops Measure Up?" (June 16, 1951). The piece essentially told the story of the demise of the last all-black army unit, the 24th Infantry Regiment, which entered Korea in July 1950 – just one month after the war started, when things were going poorly for unprepared and outnumbered American troops. The performance of the 24th was so poor, according to the article, that the members of the unit made up a derisive song about themselves, called "Bugout Boogie." "Bugging out" – abandoning one's position in battle, running away, tossing aside one's weapon, refusing to fight – was common among both black and white soldiers during the early days of the Korean War, when the North Koreans made incredible advances in their invasion of the South, and American troops were ill equipped to stop them. Blacks were singled out more for this behavior than whites and were more severely punished for it.

The most famous case was that of Lieutenant Leon Gilbert, who was sentenced to death for refusing to take his men on what he thought amounted to a suicide mission on July 31, 1950. Because of an outcry by the black press and the national black community, Gilbert's sentence was eventually reduced to twenty years in prison. Indeed, so vigorously were blacks court-martialed in the early days of the Korean War, before the all-black 24th Infantry Regiment was integrated, that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People sent Thurgood Marshall to Japan in January 1951 to investigate. Eventually, Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Allied Commander of the United Nations forces in Korea, was forced "to concede that these courts-martial may have been excessive" (*Pittsburgh Courier*, June 9, 1951, pp. 1, 4). At a conference recently held at Morgan State University about black soldiers' participation in the Korean War, all the surviving men of the 24th said emphatically that they did not "bug out," that racist whites said this about them to smear the reputation of black men. Some were nearly in tears discussing this, and the audience was deeply moved.

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Truman Gibson made the same allegation about black performance in combat when he reported on the 92nd Division during World War II, and he was attacked in the black press for it. He responded by saying, in effect, that if racism and segregation are horrible, how can their products and results be construed as good? The 1951 *Post* article strongly endorsed the integration of combat units, citing considerable evidence (a significant portion of which was anecdotal) that blacks perform better in integrated units. With both *Red Ball Express* and the *Post* article, racial integration in the military had become acceptable mainstream opinion in America. Yet racial integration remained an uneasy topic.

Integration as Subversive Art

The black man on the cover of the January 1954 issue of *Frontline Combat* is, indeed, an American GI in combat – one of a group of four soldiers – and provides a complex point of departure as rich as a film like *Red Ball Express*. This character is in an integrated unit; the other soldiers on the cover are white. He is not a comic caricature; he is drawn as realistically as the other men. And he is the subject of that issue's lead story, entitled "Perimeter!" This startling moment in American comics signals a change in how war stories can be depicted in pulp art.

The story is set in Korea, appropriately enough, as the war there had just ended five months earlier, in July 1953, and as that war was our first with officially integrated armed forces and integrated combat units. The story opens with a harsh perspective on the war itself. Most comic books about the Korean War that were published during that war took a decidedly grim, world-weary view of it, as William W. Savage, Jr., points out in his book *Commies, Cowboys, and Jungle Queens*. This was a departure from the comic books of World War II, which were considerably more jingoistic and tended to see war in strictly heroic terms. A good deal of this might be ascribed to the fact that the Korean War was more difficult to understand politically, even though its ideological distinctions were fairly clear in the popular mind. It was essentially a civil war being played out on a world stage and as a sort of proxy for the jousting taking place among the United States, the Soviet Union, and the newly arrived Communist China. It was also militarily indecisive; indeed, some saw the stalemate as a defeat for the United States.

Considering the censorship movement – or, put another way, the content-regulation movement – that was threatening the comic industry in the early 1950s, as well as the tense restriction of political opinion in America during the McCarthy era, it is clear that comics took a view of the war that generally mirrored the view of the general public: We hate communists, but this war seems strange and pointless. Few comics were willing to probe the public's limits on cultural and political matters, other than on how much sex and violence would be tolerated.

"Perimeter!" tells us at the start that the cast of war is diverse, representing many nations and many races. And so we get the story of Matthews, a black man who constantly reads the Bible. When one of the white soldiers refers to the Koreans as "gooks," Matthews corrects him, noting that the ROK (Republic of Korea) soldiers would be insulted if they overheard that slur, and insists that they be called Koreans. One of the white soldiers, Miller, is prejudiced and thinks he has an ally in Tex, the Southerner. The story is fairly blunt in its portrayal of racial dislike, a subject that was virtually never broached in this way in comic books of the period or even in later ones.

The Americans are attacked several times by the Chinese – routed by them, in fact – and Tex is separated from the other men in his platoon. At night, after one battle, Tex hears a wounded soldier crying for help. He helps the soldier, carrying him back to his foxhole and protecting him the entire night. The wounded

soldier turns out to be Matthews, the black man. When the racist Miller chastises Tex for saving Matthews, Tex gives him Matthews's Bible to read. It is unclear in the story whether, during the night, Tex actually knew he had saved Matthews. The fact that the white Southerner risks himself to save the black is the ironic point of the story.

William Gaines was the publisher of EC Comics, a company he inherited from his father. He started a new trend in comics by developing unusual horror titles like *Haunt of Fear*, *Crypt of Terror*, and *Vault of Horror*, as well as two war publications that were considered pathbreaking: *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales*. His publications were always somewhat above the usual comic book fare, and they spawned imitators – particularly the horror comics. He effectively combined pulp

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with liberal politics, and he offered a more challenging moral vision than usually directed toward adolescents. When excessive gore, violence, and sexual innuendo began to plague comic books, including some of Gaines's own titles, a movement was mounted in the early 1950s to censor comics, as they were thought by some to be a cause of juvenile delinquency. Gaines, because he so vigorously resisted the censorship movement, became the most visible target of it. Fredric Wertham, a noted psychiatrist who testified about the baleful effects of segregation on black schoolchildren in a 1951 case in Delaware, published the anti-comic book treatise *The Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954. This intensified the debate, eventually leading Gaines to testify before a Senate subcommittee on crime. By November 1954, not too long after the issue of *Frontline Combat* that contained "Perimeter!" was published, the comic industry, under mounting pressure, established a comic code that ended virtually all of Gaines's publications – with the exception of *Mad*, which he changed from a comic book to a magazine, with great success. Among other things, the 1954 code banned the words *terror*, *weird*, and *horror* from comics. "Those were my three big words," Gaines said (quoted in Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*, University Press of Mississippi, 1998, p. 109).

Hardboiled Integration, or Integration as Noir Art

Filmmaker Sam Fuller was another artist of the period who had to explain his art to authorities. In his autobiography, *A Third Face*, Fuller says that after the release of the film *The Steel Helmet*, which he wrote, produced, and directed, "The Pentagon asked me to come to Washington to be questioned about the movie" (p. 262). *The Steel Helmet*, shot in ten days in October 1950 on a budget of $104,000 and released in February 1951, was the first American movie about the Korean War. Fuller admits that the topicality of that conflict made it attractive for him as a film subject. Before the credits roll, an on-screen tribute appears: "This story is dedicated to the United States Infantry."

Fuller had fought in the infantry in World War II – had, in fact, been a member of the Allied invasion force on D-Day. He was certainly not unpatriotic, and in many respects he seemed to love the military, particularly the infantry. Many former servicemen were attracted to the film, but the military brass felt uneasy about it. Whether the general public felt that way did not affect the film's success at the box office. As Fuller writes in *A Third Face*, "Maybe *The Steel Helmet* cast a stone at the façade of intolerance and simple-mindedness. Maybe it didn't. In any case, the picture was an unexpected box-office smash. Unbelievably, my share of the profits was a couple of million bucks after taxes" (p. 264).

In 1949, when the War Department was reorganized as the Department of Defense under James Forrestal, the Motion Picture Production Office was established. It was meant to regulate the armed forces' "zealous pursuit of film roles," as military historian Lawrence H. Suid notes in *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film* (pp. 136 – 137). But the Office never succeeded in regulating and controlling how the armed services interacted with Hollywood. As early as the Korean War in 1950, each service decided for itself the extent of the help it was willing to provide a filmmaker, in accordance with its best interests.

The preoccupation with Hollywood on the part of the Defense Department and the various branches of the military indicated that they saw film as an important propaganda tool and were very concerned about how the armed services were depicted. The Defense Department did not officially approve *The Steel Helmet*, but it did provide some stock military footage. Despite the Pentagon's distrust and dislike of the film, according to a February 1951 *Variety* news item, *The Steel Helmet* was shown, uncensored, to the entire circuit of army and air force camps in the United States.

"What kind of outfit is this?" asks a soldier when the remnants of the company whose story we have followed emerge from a Buddhist temple at the end of *The Steel Helmet*. The camera pans the faces of the four survivors of the enemy attack on the temple: Zack, the unbalanced hero of the film; Thompson, the black medic; Tanaka, the Japanese American sergeant; and Driscoll, the bald-headed young white private. What kind of outfit is this, indeed. And what kind of story was Sam Fuller trying to tell about race and war?

The Steel Helmet does something that had become a cliché in war movies: it shows war through the personalities in a small company of men who are on an odyssey. But Fuller changes things by introducing fresh social and political elements: one of the central characters of this company is African American, another is Japanese American, and race is a dramatic issue in the film.

Fuller was driven to make a different sort of war movie. In an interview published in Lee Server's study *Sam Fuller: Film Is a Battleground*, Fuller expands on his views about war and film: "In the movies it is almost impossible to show a real war, to photograph battle. There is smoke everywhere. And the average moviegoer does not want to see real war. Not real war! Men afraid, men vomiting, men shitting in their pants, men shooting men on their own team. And before battle, there's no movie there. Before an invasion the soldier is sleeping. He's trying to sleep as much as he can because afterward he doesn't know when he'll get another chance" (p. 20). In *A Third Face*, Fuller writes, "I wanted an opportunity to show audiences that war was more complex than front-page newspaper articles. You never saw the genuine hardship of soldiers, not ours nor the enemy's, in movies. The confusion and brutality of war, not phony heroism, needed to be depicted. The people who chanted 'We are right, and they are wrong' needed to be debunked. . . . One of the major studios heard about the picture and offered to produce it, with John Wayne playing Zack. That would

have taken all the reality out of the film. This wasn't a gung-ho war movie. I was determined to make it look real, my soldiers human and deeply flawed. War brings out the best and worst in you. With Wayne, I'd end up with a simplistic morality tale" (p. 256).

At the beginning of *The Steel Helmet*, Zack, whose company was bound and killed by North Koreans, is freed from his bonds by an orphan South Korean boy who happens upon him. After an exchange in which Zack calls the boy a gook and is emphatically corrected by the boy, who says he is a Korean, Zack dubs the orphan "Short Round" and tells him to outfit himself with the boots and steel helmet of a dead soldier. The two travel together, eventually meeting Corporal Thompson, a medic (played by African American actor James Edwards, who had opened new doors for black actors when he played the main character in Stanley Kramer's pathbreaking war drama *Home of the Brave*, set during World War II).

Thompson, too, is something of an archetype. He served in the last war as a driver for the Red Ball Express, as well as on the front lines. He is, in fact, in miniature, the history of the black soldier in American wars since 1941. He volunteered to fight; in this way, black loyalty is not questioned. He went to school on the GI Bill and learned surgery (this seems to suggest subtly that the GI Bill might do a great deal to advance black men socially and economically). The viewer is meant to see Thompson as a grizzled veteran as well. He is clearly cast in a different light from the black soldiers of *Red Ball Express*. The viewer is meant to respect him as a soldier, and the film does not depend on the assumption that he must prove himself.

Thus, we have a war film built on the construction of this multiracial trio: the black, the Asian, and the white. Moving through the fog, they run into a company that seems to be wandering in circles. Zack is first greeted by Tanaka, the Japanese American sergeant. The company is under the command of Lieutenant Driscoll, who apparently does not listen to his far-more-experienced sergeant because he is Japanese ("His eyes are slanted the wrong way," as Zack says). It is Sergeant Tanaka who stops the lieutenant from calling the Korean boy a gook. Also, it is Zack and Tanaka who kill the North Korean snipers who attack the group. Subsequently, the trio finally joins the patrol company on its mission of finding and holding a Buddhist temple as an observation post. This is when the story of *The Steel Helmet* really begins.

This film has two major themes: first, the violation of the sacred, and second, learning how to see clearly.

Hidden in the temple is a North Korean major, who kills one of the soldiers (here, the film takes on the quality of a science-fiction story about an alien hidden among a space crew). The North Korean is eventually captured. Short Round, the Korean boy attached to Zack, is killed by a North Korean sniper. In a fit of rage, Zack kills the North Korean prisoner for mocking the dead boy.

It was the latter act that got the film in trouble with the Pentagon, which did not appreciate depictions of American soldiers violating the Geneva Conventions. Fuller wrote about the reaction to this scene in *A Third Face*: "What really made the reactionaries go nuts was my scene in which Zack gets so mad that he kills the POW with a machine gun in cold blood. The Pentagon asked me to come to Washington to be questioned about the movie. . . . It turned out to be an inquisition" (p. 262). Later, Fuller said, "We all knew the Geneva Convention rules. But war's irrational. Order breaks down. A guy who's been trying to kill you sticks his hands in the air and says that he's your prisoner. Sometimes it doesn't fly, because he just shot your buddy. You kill him. It's shameful. It's against the convention. But it happens, damn it. I was only reporting it with a camera" (p. 264).

This film has two major themes: first, the violation of the sacred, and second, learning how to see clearly. Korea is presented to the viewer as a land of the sacred: Short Round, the Korean boy, wears a prayer on his back; he winds up becoming Zack's companion because, according to the rule of Buddha, he who saves someone's life "holds his heart in his hands" (and it is the boy who humanizes Zack). Zack and Short Round are attacked by two North Korean soldiers dressed as women praying at a Buddhist shrine. Most of the film takes place in a Buddhist temple. Short Round tries to attach a prayer to Zack's back (Zack removes it). The lieutenant tells his company not to harm anything in the temple – to leave it exactly as they found it. Ultimately, the temple is destroyed when the Americans must hold off a North Korean attack. Short Round continues to write prayers while in the temple. Indeed, ridiculing one of Short Round's prayers – a wish to Buddha to make Zack like him – is what gets the North Korean prisoner of war killed. Just before he dies, his last words are a request for prayer – even though he had described himself, when captured, as a "North Korean communist." To be sure, Fuller's message is that war is a gross violation of the natural order of the sacred and the profane in life. Perhaps the worst crime that war commits is that it respects nothing, honors nothing, affirms nothing about life as we normally know it and live it. It is irrational. War is the great leveler of civilized life but, ironically, it is also a product of civilized life – and the technical sophistication with which modern war is conducted depends on civilization.

The Steel Helmet is also about seeing and perception: When Zack raises his head at the beginning of the film, we see his eyes, and we see the eyes of the Korean boy in a close-up when he saves Zack. According to Zack, Lieutenant Driscoll ignores Sergeant Tanaka because his eyes are slanted the wrong way. And the North Korean prisoner of war, when he talks to Sergeant Tanaka, says that the whites hate them because of their eyes. Two North Korean soldiers are disguised as women praying. Zack fears that a group of Korean peasants are North Koreans in disguise (a common tactic of North Korean soldiers). Fog, at one point in the film, obscures perception – an obvious reference to the metaphorical expression "the fog of war."

But the two most dramatic moments concerning perception in the film are about race and politics, and they occur when the North Korean prisoner of war talks to the black medic and the Japanese sergeant. The North Korean thinks that neither man sees himself as he truly is or for what he truly is. He strikes a nerve in Sergeant Tanaka by asking if his family had been interned in the prison camps during World War II; the sergeant replies yes. The North Korean presses, "Were you one of those idiots who fought in Europe for 'your' country?"

To this, Tanaka proudly responds that he did, with the 442nd Combat Team, and that over three thousand of them won Purple Hearts. He asserts that he is an American, and ultimately loses patience with the North Korean, warning, "Knock it off before I forget the Articles of War and slap those rabbit teeth of yours out, one at a time." It seems peculiar that the Japanese sergeant would use the term "rabbit teeth" with the Korean, given that he himself was subjected to the same sort of racial slur during World War II. It is difficult to know if

Fuller is being ironic about how assimilated the Japanese American is. The use of the term "gook" is clearly disapproved of by characters in the movie; is the slur against the Korean all right because Tanaka, a Japanese American, says it, or because Tanaka was provoked by being reminded that he himself is Asian, or because the North Korean is a communist?

Then there is the prisoner of war's conversation with Thompson, the black medic. "I just don't understand you," the North Korean says to Thompson as his wounds are being dressed. "You can't eat with them unless there's a war. Even then, it's difficult. Isn't it so?"

"That's right," Thompson replies.

"You pay for a ticket. But you even have to sit in the back of a public bus. Isn't it so?" the North Korean continues.

"That's right. A hundred years ago I couldn't even ride a bus," Thompson says. "At least now I can sit in the back. Maybe in fifty years, sit in the middle. Someday, even up front. There are some things you just can't rush."

"You're a stupid man," the North Korean says. He spits in disgust. The medic responds by ripping some of the bandages from the prisoner's chest.

Never had a war film raised such issues as the loyalty of black soldiers or what they had to fight for. This aspect of *The Steel Helmet* probably jarred many white viewers and perhaps made them think about racism in the United States. These same viewers were doubtless reassured by the gradualism that the black soldier seems to endorse in such a hardboiled way.

Certainly, in his interactions with both the black medic and the Asian sergeant, the North Korean gets the better of the argument – the logic of which suggests something about colored solidarity that was to become a political fact in the world with the 1955 Afro-Asian Unity Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, and something about how communists were going to use Americans' racism against us to undermine our nation's position in the world and to sow seeds of doubt and despair in the minds of minorities. To the North Korean, both Thompson and Tanaka misperceive themselves as Americans when in fact they are not. That is precisely the point Fuller wants to make in this rather crazed war film: the true American heroes are a collection of maladjusted misfits. The condition of being American, in Fuller's multiracial vision of humanity, is the drama of people who are not seen as Americans by other Americans but who still identify themselves as such.

The film is a far darker story of the multiracial struggle for humanity than *Red Ball Express*, and also a more profound one. Unlike most films of its era that deal with integration, *The Steel Helmet* does not sentimentalize the subject. The film's message is not that the minority soldiers have to prove themselves but that all the men must bond, in the end, in a way that transcends their race. There is something almost unfeeling and repressive, not celebratory or liberating, about integration in this film – rather like the feeling one generally gets about American life in the standard film noir of the cold war period. Fuller seems to be skeptical not about integration itself but about claims that it would dramatically change the elements of American life that spiritually make Americans American. In this regard, *The Steel Helmet* is probably the most impressive, most mature film about race and war ever made. ■

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Quotes by Sam Fuller are from *A Third Face: My Tale of Writing, Fighting, and Filmmaking* by Sam Fuller, with Christa Lang Fuller and Jerome Henry Rudes (Knopf, 2002), and from *Sam Fuller: Film Is a Battleground: A Critical Study, with Interviews, a Filmography, and a Bibliography* by Lee Server (McFarland, 1994).

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