

Marginalized Masculinities and the American Nation: African American and Native American Military Heroism, 1941-1978

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Summary

The project examined African American and Native American military heroism to better understand the dynamic interrelationship of racially marginalized masculinities and U.S. nationalism between 1941 and 1978. This interrelationship is epitomized in the heroic citizen soldier, although this ideal frequently served exclusionary functions. Particularly in the United States, the white warrior hero became a central exemplar of national manhood that marginalized black and Indian citizens. Relying on a cultural history approach, two subprojects asked how black and Indian veterans, activists, and journalists utilized military heroism to challenge their marginalization as men and citizens during the civil rights era.

The first subproject showed that the nationalized and gendered meanings of black heroism have to be viewed as the result of a dialectical process that involved white authorities and black commentators. Especially during World War II, white authorities used black heroism to soothe black discontent, while black journalists used it as a political resource to argue that African Americans deserved to be treated as first class citizens. The memory of the exploits of black soldiers who had fought in America's wars was crucial to this argument and served to affirm both black martial manliness and the claim to full membership in the nation. However, such comments also revealed an abiding faith in white definitions and standards of heroism. This dialectical interrelationship thus testifies to the enormous cultural power of America's citizen soldier ideology and provides evidence that the idea of heroism became a powerful form of social control during the civil rights era. What was surprising was the fact that black veterans rarely addressed heroism in interviews or written statements. The subproject could examine the black discourse primarily in American print media.

The second subproject revealed conspicuous differences between black and Native American interpretations of heroism. Indian notions of heroism revolved around Indian masculinity and the American nation, but they were also of enormous significance for the welfare of Indian communities and the consolidation of tribal nations. Most significantly, there was no word for "hero" or "heroism" in Great Plains Indians' languages, and native communities regarded warriors not only as valorous men on the battlefield, but also as defenders of and providers for their respective tribes. This Indian "warrior tradition" influenced several generations of Indian men and was adapted and reinterpreted in the twentieth century, contributing much to the affirmation of Native American masculinity, to Indian communities' resilience, and to their revitalization in the 1960s and 1970s.

By concentrating on the largely unexamined agency of African Americans and Native Americans in the process of cultural nation building, the project makes important contributions to the historical study of nationalism and of military heroism. It ultimately calls attention to the ambivalent functions of heroism, which, in the case of the United States, could be both a means of resistance and a tool of oppression.