

Harlem's Rattlers and the Great War: The Undaunted 369th Regiment and the African American Quest for Equality

By Jeffrey T. Sammons and John H. Morrow, Jr.

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Reviewed by Alan L. Gropman

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois, the eminent American sociologist, scholar, and leader, wrote that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.” Recent events in Ferguson, Missouri; Staten Island, New York; Cleveland, Ohio; and North Charleston, South Carolina should make us realize that, despite America’s recent racial progress, the problem of the 21st century is still the color-line. *Harlem’s Rattlers* lays bare the bigotry that African-American citizens faced in the early 20th century and, more importantly, details the innumerable accomplishments by black American soldiers despite the racism propagated by the President of the United States, U.S. military, and bigoted American civilians.

This book is the definitive history of the 369th Regiment in World War I, an outstanding black infantry regiment comprised of 3,000 men led by a white command element. It is the most complete, scholarly, and fully documented account of this famous (and underpublicized) unit, unlikely to be superseded. The authors, both prominent historians, are renowned experts in their fields.

Sammons and Morrow tell the complete story of the 369th—a combat unit that grew out of the 15th New York National Guard Regiment—from the bigotry that black leaders initially had to overcome to create the unit and the herculean efforts required to convince both New York city and state politicians hostile to the idea of an all-black unit to their valiant service in France and their ultimately humiliating return to the United States after having spent more time in the trenches than any other U.S. combat unit. The book also examines the postwar tribulations of the 369th and contains several epilogues that detail the unit’s combat losses, postwar histories of the key officers and men, and unfortunate lives of two of the unit’s most famous warriors: Henry Johnson, who, nearly 100 years after the war’s end, is under consideration to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor, and Needom Roberts.

Why the title *Harlem’s Rattlers*? That was what the men called themselves—not “Men of Bronze” or “Harlem’s Hellfighters,” terms often used incorrectly in other histories of the unit. The men of the 369th thought of the rattlesnake as a symbol of power (like the Gadsden flag used during the Revolutionary War that depicted a coiled snake atop the words “Don’t Tread on Me!”). This and many of the other myths associated with the 369th are rewritten by the authors, bringing truthfulness and clarity to a story that has long been riddled with inaccuracies.

The authors devote approximately one-fifth of the book to describing the domestic political issues within both the New York state and the federal governments, as well as the turbulent conflict within the black community, over the formation of an all-black combat unit.

Once formed, training for the 15th New York National Guard Regiment was difficult for a number of reasons, most of them racial.

Black political and social leaders including W.E.B. Du Bois thought there was a positive correlation between serving as uniformed soldiers and possessing full citizenship. Why they believed they could improve the situation of black Americans through military service is difficult to understand. A dearth of both recognition and reward defined the service of black soldiers during the Civil War, in which nearly 40,000 died, the Indian Wars, in which they comprised a far greater proportion of the Army than they did the U.S. population in general, and the Spanish-American War, during which all four historic black regiments fought. These black leaders struggled continually to convince the War Department and U.S. Government to establish black infantry units and to permit blacks to serve in combat. Even men as sophisticated as Du Bois, however, underestimated the depth of bigotry in the country; there would be no rewards for the black soldiers for their service in World War I. In fact, following the end of the conflict, political and social conditions for black civilians were worse than they had been prior to its outbreak.

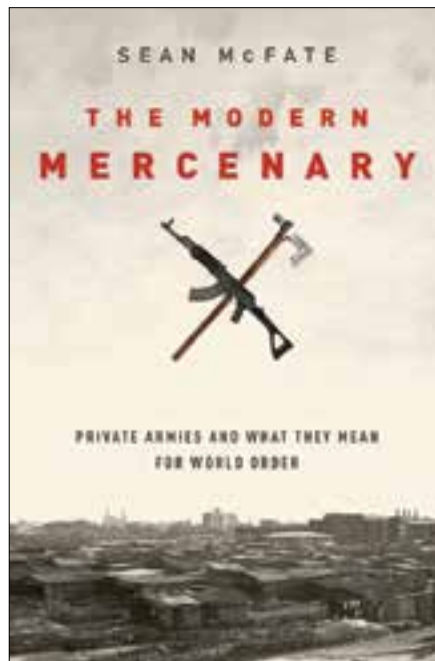
Training for the 369th was to have been completed in Spartanburg, South Carolina, prior to the soldiers’ departure for the frontlines in France. Racist treatment of the soldiers by the city’s inhabitants, however, nearly provoked an armed attack on Spartanburg by the unit, forcing the War Department to send the 369th overseas without having been fully trained. Once in France, the American Expeditionary Force commanders did not want to attach the 369th to any U.S. division and instead assigned them to a French division. The performance of the 369th in combat was distinguished, and the men of the unit were highly praised by their French commanders for their determination, cohesion, high morale, and fighting capability. Despite this, when the U.S. Army Chief of Staff asked the Army War College in 1924 to make recommendations regarding future racial policy,

the authors of the study disregarded the heroism of the 369th and produced a document that was blatant in its racism.

The chief was advised to maintain racial segregation and to ensure that all-black fighting units were commanded by whites. The study concluded, incorrectly, that blacks believed themselves to be inferior to whites and that they were “by nature” subservient, lacking “initiative and resourcefulness” because, as stated in the report, “[t]he cranial cavity of the Negro is smaller than the white; his brain weighs 35 ounces contrasted with 45 for the white.” Most damning, however, was the illogical argument that “[i]n physical courage . . . the American Negro falls well behind all other races.” This statement flew in the face of the numerous black soldiers who had served with honor in the Civil War, Indians Wars, and Spanish-American War and were awarded congressional medals of honor in recognition of their courage and valor. (No medals of honor were awarded during the 20th century for World War I.) The report was prepared by the entire student body and faculty at the Army War College in 1924 and 1925 with nine additional iterations appearing prior to the start of World War II; the same racist notions were included in each report. The United States in general—and the U.S. Army in particular—paid a steep price for allowing the country’s deeply entrenched racism to define—and limit—the use of a courageous, determined, and highly capable fighting force in World War II.

Harlem’s Rattlers is a soundly researched and documented history that all Americans—and especially military officers—should read. JFQ

Dr. Alan L. Gropman is Professor Emeritus in the Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resources Strategy at the National Defense University.



The Modern Mercenary: Private Armies and What They Mean for World Order

By Sean McFate
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235 pp. \$29.95
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Reviewed by T.X. Hammes

At their peak, contractors comprised more than 50 percent of U.S. personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan. Furthermore, despite complaints about contractor performance, the Pentagon has stated that contractors will make up half of any future U.S. force deployments. Why? Because they work. This reality requires defense professionals to seek a deeper understanding of what contractors do and the implications for future conflict—making Sean McFate’s *The Modern Mercenary* a very timely book. In it, he not only carefully examines contractors, but also describes the changing international environment in which they will operate.

McFate does not claim his book covers all aspects of contracting. Rather, he focuses on the most controversial element: private military companies or, in

his words, “the private sector equivalent of combat arms.” As he notes, the most disturbing aspect of the Pentagon’s increasing reliance on contractors is “the decision to outsource lethal force.” He places these companies in two categories. Those that directly apply military force are “mercenaries,” while those that train others to do so are “enterprisers.” These categories represent two distinct markets. Mercenaries exist as a free market in which each individual sells his or her services directly to the buyer, offering the means of war to anyone who can afford it. Enterprisers represent a mediated market in which the company is an arbitrator between the individual and the buyer. Essentially, the company recruits and organizes personnel to fulfill specific mission/contract requirements as defined by the buyer. For good business reasons, enterprisers are more discriminating in both the clients and tasks they accept. Unfortunately, if business demands, enterprisers can easily slip to the mercenary side of the scale.

McFate does not see mercenaries and enterprisers in the same light. Using Somalia as a case study, he argues that free market mercenaries are likely to contribute to increased instability and will not improve a state’s chances of success. In contrast, enterprisers offer a state an opportunity for success. He uses Liberia as a case study where, as a DynCorp employee, he participated in raising and training the new Liberian army. However, his argument for enterprisers is weakened by the lack of success in Iraq and Afghanistan despite the presence of dozens, if not hundreds, of enterprisers.

In one of the most interesting aspects of this intriguing work, McFate applies the concept of neo-medievalism—the belief that the world is becoming increasingly non-state-centric and multipolar—to describe the emerging global security environment. While states will remain major players, overlapping authorities and allegiances will have major impacts on how and why wars are fought and who fights them.

In this environment, McFate states, “the private military industry has a bright future. This multi-billion-dollar industry