

A CASE STUDY IN EMPIRE AND NARRATIVE

Teddy's Tantrum

John D. Weaver and the Exoneration of the 25th Infantry, by Tom Durwood



A very popular President unfairly persecuted a regiment of black soldiers in 1906. Sixty years later, a writer brought the case to light.

The U.S. Army issued a full apology.

How did this happen? Why was the story 'buried' so long?

Editor's Introduction

At a family gathering in 1967, a journeyman writer named John D. Weaver pointed to a photograph in the family album.

"Where was that taken?" Weaver asked his mother.

"Texas, dear," answered John's mother.

"And what were we doing in Texas, Mother?"

“Some Negro soldiers shot up the town,” she explained, “and Teddy Roosevelt kicked them out of the Army.”

Thus began the uncovering of one of the great “lost” stories of the 20th century, the story of Theodore Roosevelt’s epic 1906 temper tantrum. It was one of the worst moments of one of our best presidents, and a narrative that largely went untold for half a century.

His curiosity sparked by this stray remark, John Weaver investigated. His mother was entirely correct: President Theodore Roosevelt had issued Special Order 266 on November 9, 1906, dismissing without a trial 167 loyal soldiers of the all-black 25th Infantry. The men were suspected of making a midnight raid in the border town of Brownsville, Texas, yet the case against them was unproven. What is more, Weaver found that Roosevelt carried out a vendetta against the troops of the 25th Infantry, hiring private investigators to coerce “confessions” and to gather the flimsiest evidence against them. Roosevelt then drummed their champion, Senator Joseph Foraker of Ohio, out of office. The popular Roosevelt suffered no political consequences to his epic temper tantrum, and the men of the 25th Infantry were lost to history.

The Brownsville episode arose when Roosevelt, in a fit of rage, ordered the dishonorable discharge of several units of Negro troops ...

With the support of his wife, Harriett, John D. Weaver spent three years digging up the entire buried episode. He retraced the streets of Brownsville, and

measured the alleyways where witnesses claimed they saw the troops shooting. He found the case against them suspiciously weak. In 1970, he published a book about the Brownsville Raid which exonerated the soldiers. In February of 1973, the U.S. Army issued an apology to the men of the 25th Infantry and awarded the sole surviving battalion member (Dorsie Willis) back pay. Historian Lewis Gould called Weaver's work a correction of "one of the most glaring miscarriages of justice in American history." It was a victory of a true narrative over a false one.

Now a new ebook written by Tom Durwood, *Teddy's Tantrum: John D. Weaver and the Exoneration of the 25th Infantry*, takes a look at this "lost" episode and the lessons it holds for us. Weaver's detective work dredging up the true contours of the Raid were remarkable; equally remarkable is the fact that it took so long for the true story to emerge as part of the public record. Durwood finds in the episode several themes regarding the workings of empire, and the relationship between literature and empire. As one culture colonizes another, so does that culture's literature "colonize" such narratives; only the imperial version survives.

The rising American empire, Durwood theorizes, played a large part in the fate of the 25th Infantry. Roosevelt's intense desire to lead America onto the world stage helped drive him to so abruptly, and wrongly, dismiss the black troops, who could scarcely fight back. The Nobel Prize which Roosevelt won for brokering peace in the Sino-Soviet War and his daring success with the Panama Canal represented the prizes TR sought; disloyal Negro troops represented an obstacle. The fact that he had charged San Juan Hill with some of the very men he was dismissing fell to the wayside.

Historian Lewis Gould called it a correction of “one of the most glaring miscarriages of justice in American history.”

Black newspapers of the day decried the miscarriage of justice. Benjamin J. Davis, editor of the *Atlanta Independent*, put it plainly, comparing Roosevelt to two notorious racists: “The hand of Ben Tillman nor Vardaman never struck humanity as savagely as did the iron hand of Theodore Roosevelt. His new dictum is lynch-law, bold and heartless.” Such were the dynamics of empire that African American journalists did not have the standing to impact the Brownsville “verdict.” It would take a white reporter (Weaver) to write a version that would attract Congressional attention and bring about an official apology in 1973. By that time, the empire needed to repair the Brownsville trauma, since America’s black soldiers played a key role in the Vietnam War.

Teddy’s Tantrum is a chronicle of the overarching Brownsville story, treating Weaver’s work and the troops’ exoneration as equal parts of the narrative. Original scholarship provides an account of John D. Weaver’s early career and his two-decade campaign on behalf of the 25th. In the manuscript’s first sections, the author follows three separate storylines – John Weaver, Theodore Roosevelt, and the men of the 25th Infantry – until the three merge, and Weaver’s detective work uncovers the truth of the buried episode. In the book’s third section, the author looks at the work of seven scholars to help interpret the many aspects, roots and consequences of Special Order 266. *Teddy’s Tantrum* closes with the author attending the Brownsville Centennial in 2006, where the last word belongs to a Texas Congressman:

John Weaver's book, "The Brownsville Raid," is displayed in a glass case in the reception hall, its red cover bright and visible. Planted in the sunny courtyard lawn outside, 167 small flags fly, one for each of the dismissed soldiers. Handsome full-color invitations and at least a dozen articles in the Brownsville Herald have anticipated today's event.

Congressman Solomon Ortiz is the main speaker. An Army veteran, he is a member of the House Armed Forces Committee.

"Today, we take a hard look at our past," he tells the crowd.

"The only way we can overcome the uglier incidents in our history is to face them."



Buffalo Soldiers of the 25th Infantry Regiment, 1890

Wikimedia Commons

The Tantrum and Its Aftermath

Theodore Roosevelt's epic 1906 outburst turned into a national drama that would last over four years and ruin over a hundred lives, generating tens of thousands of words of controversy in newspapers, in Congress, and in churches and communities across America. It ended the political career of the Senator who opposed Roosevelt, who compounded the tantrum by refusing to make amends, going to extraordinary ends to avoid doing so. Yet the true Brownsville story was quickly buried by the myth of "TR," and remained so until John Weaver uncovered it.

In February of 1973, the U.S. Army issued an apology to the men of the 25th Infantry.

"The Brownsville episode arose when Roosevelt had, in a fit of rage, ordered the dishonorable discharge of several units of Negro troops ..." writes Taft biographer Judith Icke Anderson. The Brownsville Raid was known to Roosevelt historians before John D. Weaver took up his crusade, but it was unknown to the general public.

In his account of the original episode, the "burial" of the 25th Infantry from American history, and their eventual resurrection, Durwood begins with John D. Weaver. The first section of *Teddy's Tantrum* traces Weaver's career as a journeyman writer. One of his early influences was the 1932 Bonus March in Washington, when U.S. Army veterans protested on Capitol grounds for fair compensation. "John loved standing up for things he believed in," said his friend and editor, Pamela Fiore. His principles came at a cost.