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The Brownsville, Texas, Disturbance of 1906 and the Politics of Justice

Garna L. Christian

An acrimonious civilian-military conflict reached into the halls of Congress and the White House when residents of Brownsville, Texas accused the First Battalion, 25th Infantry, of attacking the town from Fort Brown around midnight on August 12, 1906, claiming the life of one townsman and injuring two others.

The disputed episode took place against the background of deteriorating racial relations in the state and region, an enhanced self-confidence of black soldiers following heroic achievements in the Spanish-American War and the Philippine insurrection, and the economic decline of the South Texas town bordering the Rio Grande. Texas, like other southern states, was tightening segregation at the turn of the century. Brownsville, bypassed when rail joined San Antonio to Laredo, Texas in the late nineteenth century, failed to recover the prosperity the Civil War had inspired.

Companies B, C, and D, previously stationed at Fort Niobrara, Nebraska, drew the wrath of some Brownsvillians even before their arrival on July 28, replacing the white 26th Infantry. Complainants wired Washington of their disapproval of black troops as had other Texas garrison towns in previous years. Since 1899, expressed hostility had led to physical confrontations at Laredo, Rio Grande City, and El Paso. Threats from white Texas National Guardsmen prompted the military command to cancel the participation of the regiment in maneuvers at Camp Mabry, Austin. Federal officials, ironically, exacerbated matters.

Inspector of customs Fred Tate pistol-whipped Pvt. James W. Newton for supposedly jostling Tate's wife and another white woman on a sidewalk. Another customs officer, A. Y. Baker, pushed Pvt. Oscar W. Reed, whom he accused of drunkenness and boisterous behavior, into the river. Soldiers complained of racial insults directed to them in the streets.

On the evening of August 12, Mrs. Lon Evans stated that a uniformed black man had thrown her to the ground before he fled into the darkness. Mayor Frederick J. Combe met with post commander Maj. Charles W. Penrose to defuse the potentially explosive situation. The major imposed an eight o'clock curfew on his men, which appeared successful until shots rang out about twelve a.m. near the wall separating the fort from the town. Various residents testified to having seen a shadowy group of from nine to twenty persons charging through an alley toward town, firing several hundred shots indiscriminately or into lighted areas. Evidently dividing into two sections, the raiders mortally wounded bartender Frank Natus and shot the horse from under police Lieutenant Joe Dominguez, shattering the man's arm, which required amputation. A bullet grazed bookbinder Paulino Preciado, barely missing other bystanders. Witnesses insisted the raiders were soldiers, some claiming to have seen them and others describing the shots as reports from military rifles. Townspeople were unable to identify any culprits individually.

Conversely, the soldiers maintained their innocence. Pvt. Joseph Howard, guarding the area closest to the wall, and Matias Tamayo, post scavenger, assumed the garrison was under attack, a belief shared by Major Penrose until confronted by Mayor Combe. A roll call of troops found all present or accounted for, and an inspection of weapons and ammunition noted none missing. A search of the fort uncovered no spent shells, discarded cartridge belts, or any indication of firing from the post. After the morning call of the Brownsville mayor, displaying empty cartridges from the city streets, Penrose reversed his belief in his command's innocence.

Many outside the fort and town shared the post commander's new view. Texas newspapers reported the story with an assumption of guilt, most beneath sensational headlines, citing trivial incidents not warranting such behavior. Editors, seconded by Texas officeholders ranging from congressmen to Governor S. W. T. Lanham, demanded the withdrawal of all African-American troops from the state.

President Theodore Roosevelt dispatched Maj. Augustus P. Blocksom, assistant inspector-general of the Southwestern Division, to Brownsville only days after the raid. After eleven days of inquiry, the officer submitted a report to the White House concurring in the guilt of soldiers in the garrison. Deciding that both sides had exaggerated the facts, Blocksom judged that Tate had probably overreacted in his whipping of Private Newton and that some of the citizenry were obviously racially prejudiced. Nevertheless, asserting that black soldiers had adopted a more aggressive stance on social equality, the major outlined a scenario of troop culpability. He conjectured that some soldiers began firing between the barracks and wall; others fired into the air to create an alarm, and from nine to fifteen men jumped the wall and rushed through an alley into the streets. The shooters subsequently returned to camp to clean and reassemble their weapons, while duping their officers.

Acknowledging the failure of witnesses to identify culprits, the fact that some bars had served enlisted men, and that the victim Natus had never quarreled with troops, Blocksom held the testimony of the townspeople superior to that of the soldiers and based his judgment squarely on that testimony. In this manner he discounted the revelation that the discovered cartridges did not fit the recently assigned Springfield rifles. Blocksom recommended the discharge of all the enlisted men of the battalion, without option to reenlist in any military branch, if they refused to identify the guilty by a date determined by the War Department. Heeding the demands of Texans, Roosevelt ordered the First Battalion to Fort Reno, Oklahoma.

Texas Ranger Captain William J. "Bill" McDonald, a formidable critic of black garrisons, and Penrose set curious guidelines in selecting a dozen suspects. The list included the sentinel, scavenger, the two victims of physical abuse, and an eyewitness to one of the latter incidents. The Cameron County grand jury grudgingly abstained from entering any indictments, and the War Department scheduled Fort Brown for temporary closure.

Determined to uncover the guilty, Roosevelt sent Gen. Ernest A. Garlington, inspector general at Washington, to Fort Reno and Fort Sam Houston, at San Antonio, where the unindicted suspects remained. The president instructed Garlington to threaten the battalion with dismissal

without honor, as Blocksom had suggested, if they were uncooperative. When even the specter of separation could elicit no information, the general urged his superior to issue the order, to which Roosevelt complied on November 4, widening the controversy from Texas to the nation.

The post-election edict evoked particular criticism from the African-American community. The Richmond *Planet* and Atlanta *Independent* accused Roosevelt of waiting until after the congressional elections to assure the Republican Party won the black vote in key northern states. Black ministers entered the fray and rising activist W. E. B. DuBois urged his followers to vote Democratic in the 1908 elections. Booker T. Washington, the widely-publicized White House guest and the administration's patron to the African-American constituency, stood with Roosevelt, sharing criticism directed at the chief executive and heir apparent, Secretary of War William Howard Taft. An interracial organization, the Constitutional League, first raised the argument of the troops' innocence. Director John Milholland, a white Progressive, assailed racism, haste, and inconsistencies in the reports of Blocksom and Garlington. The criticism stung Roosevelt, who had cultivated a reputation for racial fairness since his military service alongside black troops in the Spanish-American War. From the outcry, Republican Senator Joseph B. Foraker took up the cause of the cashiered battalion.

Whether acting on principle, from old grudges against Roosevelt, or in pursuit of presidential ambitions, the Ohio conservative became the soldiers' most celebrated advocate. His efforts produced a Senate investigation of the raid and a summons to the War Department seeking all evidence leading to its decision. Roosevelt countered with a message defending the summary dismissals. The Senate Committee on Military Affairs held hearings between February 1907 and March 1908, during which Foraker attacked the absence of trials and suggested that outside forces had raided the town. Foraker's campaign for the soldiers failed in tandem with his presidential candidacy. Voting 9–4, the committee sustained the administration policy, while Foraker mustered only 16 delegate votes at the national convention against 702 for Taft. By November, most blacks had drifted back to the Republican Party and contributed to Taft's victory. Roosevelt made only two concessions before leaving office, enabling the debarred soldiers to reapply for military service and to

hold jobs in the federal civil service. Inexplicably, in 1910, the War Department allowed 14 of the troops to reenlist, never stating its criteria for the selections. Courts-martial of Major Penrose and officer of the day Capt. Edgar Macklin, for dereliction, produced no convictions, though Macklin suffered gunshot wounds from an unidentified assailant after his transfer to Fort Reno.

No subsequent evidence came to light, but President Richard Nixon, acting in 1972 on a proposal by Congressman August Hawkins, an African-American Democrat from California, granted honorable discharges and a pension of \$25,000 to each of the unredeemed 153 men of the First Battalion, without placing blame for the disturbance. The decision followed the publication of a history of the incident, *The Brownsville Raid*, by John D. Weaver, who blamed outside raiders or townsmen. Only one survivor, former private Dorsey Wills, benefited from the measure. He maintained his insistence on the innocence of the battalion until his death five years later.

Bibliography

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