Black Americans and the White Man's Burden, 1898-1903

Willard B. Gatewood Jr.

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Dust jacket notes: "Despite the fact that they had not freed their fellow black citizens from discrimination and oppression, in 1898 white Americans were eager to take up arms in order to 'liberate' the dark-skinned people of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines from the Spanish government. Black Americans found themselves in an awkward position. In this book, Willard Gatewood draws on a vast array of sources including letters of black soldiers, articles in black newspapers, and other materials of the period to show how blacks dealt with the dilemmas posed by the Spanish-American War. A scant quarter-century had passed since Americans fought a bloody Civil War over the question of equality and freedom for all; nevertheless, blacks found themselves at the nadir of their postwar existence as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Gatewood details instances of discrimination and oppression, both subtle and flagrant, which made it difficult for black Americans at home and overseas to commit themselves to their nation's cause. But if black men refused to fight, or took up arms on the side of the Cubans or Filipinos who were also 'men of color,' they were admitting that they had abandoned all hope of improving their own lot in the United States. Imperialism was an idea whose time had come by 1899, as Kipling exhorted Britishers to 'Take up the white man's burden.' When the United Staes began its own expansionist ventures, it stressed the humanitarian aspects of the concept. But black readers who delved more deeply into Kipling's famous poem could not help noting his characterization of 'new-caught, sullen peoples,/ Half-devil and half-child'; thus they bore in their own hearts a different, and perhaps heavier, burden."

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