

Primary Document #4

African American Soldiers Departing for Cuba, 1898



Background Information Primary Document #4

African Americans have participated in every war the United States has been involved in – from the Revolutionary War to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Spanish American War was no exception, and several African American units participated in the fighting in Cuba.

African Americans were encouraged to join the military, but they served in segregated units and their contributions were not always recognized. One example of this is the Battle of San Juan Hill – the most famous battle of the war. Although Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough Riders are solely credited with driving the Spanish from San Juan Hill, African American units also played a major role in the battle.

Six African Americans received the Medal of Honor for their actions during the Spanish American War. Despite the proven bravery of these soldiers and their willingness to fight for their country, the military remained segregated. In 1948, an Executive Order mandated the integration of the armed forces. Integration was finally achieved by the end of the Korean War – more than 50 years after the Spanish American War.

Primary Source Analysis:

1. What was the attitude of Americans towards African Americans at the time of the Spanish American War? How had the treatment of African-Americans changed since the Civil War?
2. What comparison could you make between the soldiers depicted in the photo and African American soldiers that fought during the Civil War?
3. Do you think African Americans would have been eager to fight for the United States during the Spanish American War? Why or why not?
4. Who were the Rough Riders? Did African Americans join the Rough Riders?
5. The charge of the Rough Riders at San Juan Hill became the most famous image of the Spanish American War. Few people today know that the Rough Riders were supported by a regiment of African American soldiers. Why do you think this history was "lost?"