

Rep. Speier Testimony

Buffalo Soldiers in the National Parks Study Act

Chairman Rahall, Ranking Member Hastings, Members of the Committee: thank you for inviting me to this hearing on H.R. 4491, the Buffalo Soldiers in the National Parks Study Act. It gives me great pleasure to testify here today about an important bill for our National Parks that will also help bring an untold American story to light.

Specifically, my bill authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to study the role the Buffalo Soldiers played in the development of the National Park System.

My goal in seeking this study is to determine how we can make the Buffalo Soldiers Trail a National Historic Trail. I am glad Mr. Stephen Whitesell with the National Park Service will testify and take your questions in this area.

I am also grateful you have invited Ms. Geneva Brett here today, who represents the Los Banos Buffalo Soldiers 9th and 10th Cavalry Association. Geneva and her colleagues have put remarkable effort into this cause and I commend them for their patriotic service.

As many of us learned in school, African Americans could not enlist in the Army until after the Civil War. By 1869, Congress formed four all-black regiments: the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry. These soldiers came to be known as the Buffalo Soldiers. What many of us do not know is just how unique this story is to my home state of California.

The Buffalo Soldiers were garrisoned at the Presidio in San Francisco in the early 1900s. Many of them fought in the Philippines and the Spanish American War, where they gained legendary status as fearless fighters alongside Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders.

However, they faced racism and discrimination as they performed their new duty on the Western frontier. They patrolled Yosemite, Sequoia and Kings Canyon parks before the Park System was established. To get there, they left the Presidio and headed south along El Camino Real through San Mateo County, in my district.

These soldiers were truly the first guardians of our National Parks, blazing the trails, building the roads and protecting the lands for visitors – they helped make the vision for our National Parks a reality.

Native Americans nicknamed the troops "Buffalo Soldiers" after their dark skin and curly hair. Since the buffalo was revered among Native Americans for its brave fighting spirit, the troops accepted the title as a badge of honor.

I have lived my entire life within walking distance of the Buffalo Soldiers Trail and never knew this chapter in our history. Upon learning of the Buffalo Soldiers, the chance to recognize those who gave everything in the face of adversity was simply too important to pass up.

The bill I have introduced is only one step toward the rightful recognition of these soldiers. At the same time it will enhance our National Parks, we should not lose sight of this story's relevance to our long and ongoing struggle with racism.

Some of you may have seen the recent documentary by Ken Burns, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*. In his film, Mr. Burns highlights the work of Park Ranger Shelton Johnson, who is proudly sharing the Buffalo Soldiers' story with visitors to Yosemite today. He describes the overt racism the Buffalo Soldiers fought to overcome as they did their duty, and he also conveys the importance of their mission to protect our treasured wild places. Quotes Mr. Johnson of Yosemite:

It is a window into the ancient earth, the earth that once was, the earth that will always be. Park is not a strong enough term to describe what is beyond this gate.

I now know the Buffalo Soldiers must have felt the same, and if we commemorate their service, I know many Americans' experience in our National Parks will be better for it.

Therefore, as we approach the Centennial of the National Park Service in 2016, and during this Black History Month, it is fitting that we seek to raise awareness of the Buffalo Soldiers' great contribution to the United States of America.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today on my legislation. I hope the Committee will support H.R. 4491, and I look forward to your questions.