



African Americans and World War II

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Thirty years ago, it was commonplace to refer to the era of World War II as the “forgotten years of the Negro revolution” (1). Beginning in the late 1960s, however, scholars started to focus attention on the black experience during the early 1940s, examining both the battle and homefronts. At first, historians concluded that this period constituted a watershed in history. They maintained that African American men and women made major advances as workers and military personnel and that communities across the United States witnessed a dramatic rise in black social activism and political participation. Over time, however, historians have tempered their enthusiasm for this interpretation. Social, economic, and political gains were often lost in the postwar period, something which contributed to the disillusionment and upheaval of the 1960s. Still, there is no denying the importance of the war years. Accompanying the global conflict were transformations in employment, geography, and social status that permanently affected not only African Americans but all Americans in general. Thus the Second World War may not be a watershed, but it was an unprecedented era in which African Americans sought a “Double V,” a victory over fascism abroad and apartheid at home.



Guy L. Miles, a skilled machine operator, makes parts for medium tanks at the Pressed Steel Can Company in Chicago, Illinois, September 1942. (Office of War Information, LC-USE6-D-005951)

A central component to the Double V was the quest to eradicate job discrimination, particularly in the defense industries. When the Second World War began with the German invasion of Poland in 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt began in earnest to put the country on a war footing. For the average American, the results of the defense preparedness program were dramatic and beneficial. By the time of the Pearl Harbor attack in late 1941, conversion to war production was

occurring nationwide. Gigantic factories such as the one at Willow Run near Detroit were built, and American workers as well as businessmen profited from the increased economic activity. Unemployment rapidly decreased from 8,120,000 persons in 1940 to 5,560,000 in 1941 to 2,660,000 in 1942. Moreover, union membership rose from roughly 8 million in 1940 to 10 million in 1941 (2).

But not all felt the return of prosperity equally. Some Americans, blacks in particular, were left behind as the economy geared up for war. Since the 1920s, African Americans had suffered from high rates of unemployment. 1920 was a high water mark for black employment in American industry. The Great Depression however, had wiped out these advances. Despite the New Deal's assistance, black and other minority workers languished through the lean and stagnant

years of Roosevelt's first two terms. As the United States prepared for war at the end of FDR's second term, they were again left out in the cold (3).

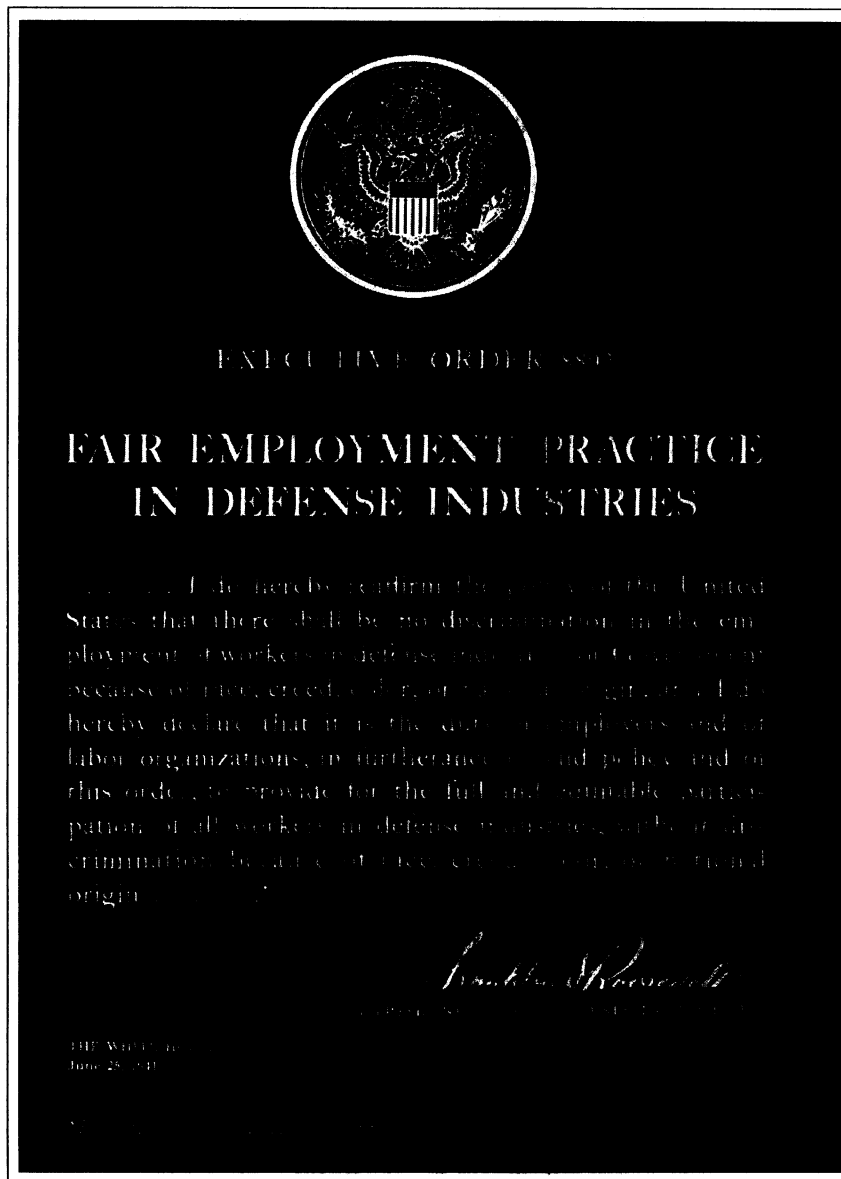
As American industry converted to war production, African Americans demanded equal treatment in obtaining the new jobs. At first, that was not forthcoming. Less than six months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, a little over half—144,583 out of 282,245—prospective war-related job openings were reserved for whites only. Moreover, blatant job discrimination was not merely a southern phenomenon. In Texas, African Americans were barred from over 9,000 out of the 17,435 openings (52 percent) for defense jobs. In Michigan the figure was 22,042 out of 26,904 (82 percent); in Ohio, 29,242 out of 34,861 (84 percent); and in Indiana, 9,331 out of 9,979 (94 percent) (4). Even before the Japanese attack on Hawaii, civil rights leaders and organizations sought to end discrimination in employment and the military. In January 1941, one black leader, A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, announced that if the Roosevelt administration did not take action against discrimination in the defense program he would parade one hundred thousand African Americans down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., on 1 July 1941. Through that winter and spring, Roosevelt and his advisors negotiated with Randolph without result. Finally, on 25 June 1941—six days before the scheduled protest march—FDR issued Executive Order 8802 banning employment discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin for employers with defense contracts, labor unions, and civilian agencies of the federal

government. To enforce the policy, FDR set up an executive agency, the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC), that accomplished much during the war. With no more than one hundred and twenty officials, the FEPC exposed prejudice in the war industries and broke some racial barriers, processing over twelve thousand complaints of discrimination and settling nearly

five thousand to its satisfaction. The committee also vigorously pursued an educational campaign in order to create more harmonious industrial relations between white and minority workers. Above all, the FEPC influenced the course of civil rights reform as it became a postwar model for city, state, and federal efforts against employment discrimination (5).

Despite its successes, the Fair Employment Practice Committee did not rid American society of job bias. At most, it opened some new opportunities where there previously had been none. Nevertheless, African American workers rushed to fill these new employment openings, often moving from their homes in the South to cities in the Midwest, North, and West. During the war, the black population of San Francisco increased by over five hundred percent. In the Willow Run area near Detroit, the percentage growth of African Americans was nearly ten times that of whites (6). These job seekers were at times

frustrated by discrimination and yet often with the assistance of the FEPC and civil rights organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League, African Americans found war jobs. In addition to well paying defense jobs, black migrants, especially to northern and western cities, found it possible to escape the oppressions brought by Jim Crow. Marion Clark,



daughter of John Clark, head of the St. Louis Urban League, provides an illustrative example. In 1942, Marion moved to Chicago. Describing the city in a letter home, she wrote, "it is fun, as you agree, to be able to breathe the freer air of Chicago" (7). Northern and some western cities offered other amenities that African Americans found welcoming. Housing in cities such as Chicago and New York was much better than that of the rural South. Blacks also had access to superior health care and to foods higher in nutrition. As a result, during the war, the black mortality rates dropped considerably and the birthrate rose. Generally speaking, the four hundred thousand African Americans who moved out of the South during the war created significantly better lives for themselves.

To improve their new lives, many African Americans joined civil rights groups such as the NAACP, the Urban League, and the newly formed Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). These groups were dedicated to the Double V. Not only did they attempt to create new employment opportunities, but they challenged racism and segregation in public accommodations, housing, and education. In many ways, these activists laid the groundwork for the modern civil rights movement. Although housing in northern ghettos was often an improvement, there was not enough to meet the needs of southern black migrants. City governments responded to the crisis slowly. Eventually the Roosevelt administration sought to alleviate the situation. For instance in 1942, the federal government in cooperation with Detroit's city government built the Sojourner Truth Housing Project to relieve overcrowding in the black ghettos. Pressure from a white "improvement association" caused a reversal in policy, resulting in the exclusion of blacks in the project. Vigorous objections from civil rights activists caused another quick about-face. Yet as blacks attempted to move into the housing, whites formed a picket line, burned crosses, and used violence to turn the residents away. In the end, federal officials held firm, but the Sojourner Truth Housing controversy demonstrated not only how desperate the housing situation was but also how tense race relations were in America. During the war, there were dozens of incidents of racial violence. The war's worst riot happened again in Detroit, one year after the violence at the Sojourner Truth homes. On 22 June 1943, at Belle Isle Park, Detroit's main recreational area, fights broke out between white and black men. As news of the fights and rumors of murder and rape spread, so did the conflict, which lasted four days. By the time federal troops had restored order on 24 June, twenty-five African Americans and nine whites were dead, nearly seven hundred were injured, and two million dollars worth of property had been destroyed (9).

The wartime race riots as well as employment discrimination and segregation greatly lowered black morale for the war. At no point were African Americans as a group disloyal. Nevertheless, as a federal official wrote in 1942, the lack of racial equality in the United States had given rise to "a sickly, negative attitude toward national goals" (8). In its extreme form, disaffection with the war effort resulted in draft resisters who refused to fight "the white

man's war." More commonly, cynicism produced scathing editorials and newspaper articles condemning the hypocrisy of American democracy. Some of President Roosevelt's White House advisors pressured him to indict black editors for sedition. FDR refused to sanction such an action. Instead his administration began to collect information on black morale. A 1942 Office of War Information report detailed the widespread discontent. One Cincinnati housemaid told investigators that to her it did not matter if Hitler won the war. "It couldn't be any worse for colored people—it may and it may not. It ain't so good now," she commented (10). The Federal Bureau of Investigation also conducted its own investigation. In its RACON (racial conditions in America) report, the FBI concluded that although most African Americans supported the war, racism undercut the government's efforts to build a unified nation in wartime. Nevertheless, the bureau noted that while cynicism was found in nearly every black community, so was the strong desire to aid the war effort. In fact, other federal officials close to the situation had discovered the same "positive attitude toward racial aims and aspirations" (11).

While one goal of the Double V campaign was to conquer employment discrimination another was to eradicate discrimination in the armed services. Like the fight for fair employment, the battle to end racism and prejudice in the military began before formal American entry into the Second World War. At the start of the war, there were minimal opportunities for African Americans in the military. Although blacks had served valiantly in all American conflicts from the Revolution to the First World War, the War Department systematically discriminated against them. In 1939, African American participation in the army was at a nadir. There were only 3,640 black soldiers, five of whom were officers (three of them were chaplains). All were segregated into four units under white command. The navy was even worse. African Americans could only enlist to work in the galleys. The Coast Guard's racial policies were slightly more enlightened and were far more liberal than the marines and the Army Air Corps, which prior to the Second World War did not allow any blacks to serve.

African Americans took great pride in their past service in American wars and were angry at their exclusion from the military preparedness program. Initially, Rayford W. Logan, black historian, World War I veteran, and leader of the Committee for the Participation of Negroes in National Defense, led the charge to break the racial barriers in the military. The committee's major success was the inclusion of nondiscrimination language in the 1940 Selective Service Act which required that draftees be taken and trained regardless of race. To open more avenues in the military, on 27 September 1940, Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP, T. Arnold Hill of the National Urban League, and A. Philip Randolph met with President Roosevelt. They brought a list of seven demands: that black officers and men be assigned on the basis of merit, not race; that more black officers be trained; that African Americans be allowed to serve in the Army Air Corps; that blacks be allowed to participate in the selective service process; that black women be permitted to serve



Captain Andrew D. Turner, who in a few minutes will be escorting heavy bombers en route to enemy targets, signals to the chief of his ground crew before taking off from a base in Italy in September 1944. (National Archives, Records of the Office of War Information)

as nurses; and that “existing units of the army and units to be established should be required to accept and select officers and enlisted personnel without regard to race” (12). Although Roosevelt seemed receptive to these ideas, he later signed policy statements which reaffirmed segregation in the military and established a racial quota system to limit black participation in the military to nine percent, roughly the African American proportion in the general population.

FDR’s actions sparked a flurry of protests. To pacify black leaders and to encourage blacks to vote for the Democratic Party in the November elections, Roosevelt made some concessions such as forming an all-black Army Air Corps unit, promoting Colonel Benjamin O. Davies to the rank of general (making him the first African American to hold that rank), and appointing Colonel Campbell C. Johnson as Negro Advisor to the Selective Service Director and William H. Hastie, dean of Howard Law School, as civilian aide to the Secretary of War. Following Roosevelt’s appointments came moderate improvement in the armed services for black Americans. In 1941, an Army Air Force training base was established at the Tuskegee Institute. Although still segregated, African Americans were accepted into regular service in the navy and the marines. Moreover, the number of black servicemen in the army rose dramatically, from 98,000 in late 1941 to 468,000 in late 1942. Still, serious problems re-

mained. The army never met its promised quota of becoming nine percent African American. At most, only five percent of the total number of G.I.s were black. Moreover, over eighty percent were stationed in the United States. This was partly due to requests of Allied governments such as Australia that the War Department not send African American troops so as to not upset local whites. Moreover, African Americans were not shipped overseas, because ranking officials in the military believed them to be inferior soldiers. African American soldiers were also largely confined to the Corps of Engineers and the Quartermaster Corps. Working conditions for black servicemen on the homefront were at times horrible. Nothing demonstrated this more than what happened on 17 July 1944 at Port Chicago in San Francisco Bay. Two hundred and fifty black stevedores were killed when two ammunition-carrying ships they were load-

ing exploded. The survivors were sent to Vallejo where they were asked to stow munitions in similar dangerous conditions. Initially almost two hundred and sixty refused to accept this assignment. In the end, all but fifty returned to work. The navy court-martialed the protestors, handing down sentences of fifteen years hard labor and dishonorable discharge (13). The Port Chicago incident, as it became known, was the most extreme case of hazardous duty, but even basic training was often treacherous. Across the nation, black soldiers encountered not only segregation and discrimination but also racially motivated violence. Racial tensions on and off base were high and clashes between whites and black were altogether too common. In a scathing report to his superiors in the War Department, Civilian Aide Hastie summarized these problems. His protests fell on largely deaf ears, and he later resigned.

Despite the obvious handicaps to military service, African American men and women made considerable contributions to the victory over the Axis powers. General Dwight D. Eisenhower publicly praised the 99th Fighter Squadron which had trained at Tuskegee as well as the engineer and antiaircraft ground units stationed in Italy. Perhaps black soldiers’ greatest achievement came in December 1944 when Nazi forces launched a last-ditch offensive at the Ardennes. In the Battle of the Bulge, the American army was caught desperately short of infantry replacements. To fill the voids in the American lines, General Eisenhower sent

in black platoons which were partially integrated into regular units. Thus reinforced, the Americans defeated the Germans. Moreover, after the Battle of the Bulge, all branches of the military began instituting integration policies. The navy, including its Women's Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service (WAVES), was first and followed shortly thereafter by the air force and the army.

By helping defeat the Axis, black Americans realized one-half of their Double V. The remaining half—a victory over discrimination and segregation in American life—remained elusive. And yet, blacks made remarkable strides in four short, war-torn years. With the federal government's assistance, African Americans attacked employment discrimination and achieved some positive results. Civil rights organizations such as the NAACP were reinvigorated. Moreover, African American communities across the nation became healthier and more socially and politically dynamic. Perhaps the greatest achievements came in the military, which continued after the war to break down barriers to not only African Americans but to women and minorities generally. V-J Day may have marked the end of the military conflict, but it did not signal an end to the struggle for civil rights on the homefront. Indeed, these efforts became the basis for a postwar civil rights movement which has continued for more than fifty years. □

Endnotes

1. Richard Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution," *Journal of American History* 55 (1968): 90-106 and Neil A. Wynn, "War and Racial Progress: The African American Experience During World War II," *Peace and Change* 20 (July 1995): 348-63.
2. United States Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1960), 98, 446, 466.
3. "Out in the Cold," *Crisis* (July 1940): 209.
4. Andrew E. Kersten, *Race, Jobs, and the War: The FEPC in the Midwest, 1941-46* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 37.
5. *Ibid.*, 1-3.
6. Allan M. Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.: America During World War II*, 2d ed. (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2000), 67 and Neil A. Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1993), 62.
7. Letter, Marion Clark to John Clark, 22 November 1942, St. Louis Urban League Papers, series 1, box 9, Washington University Archives.
8. Cornelius L. Golightly, "Negro Higher Education and Democratic Negro Morale," *Journal of Negro Education* 11 (July 1942): 324.
9. Thomas J. Sugrue, "Crabgrass-Roots Politics: Race, Rights, and the Reaction against Liberalism in the Urban North, 1940-1964," *Journal of American History* 82 (Sept. 1995): 551-578.
10. Office of War Information, "Negroes and the War: A Study in Baltimore and Cincinnati, July 21, 1942," appendix D, vi, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Presidential Office Files, OF 4245G, box 7.
11. Golightly, "Negro Higher Education and Democratic Negro Morale," 324.
12. Quoted in Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War*, 23.
13. After the war, the convictions were set aside.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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