The World War II Era
and the Seeds
of a Revolution

How did African Americans use the World War II crisis to protest racial discrimination?

What role did African-American physicians and nurses play in the struggle to desegregate the military during World War II?

How did the Tuskegee Airmen contribute to victory in World War II?

How did the war exacerbate tensions and competition over housing and jobs between black and white Americans?

How did the Italian invasion of Ethiopia help to shape black internationalism?

Why did Ralph Bunche receive a Nobel Peace Prize?

Racial segregation as practiced by the U.S. military reminded African Americans of their second-class status in America. The World War II crisis made impossible continued acquiescence to blatant inequalities. The black “Double V” campaign sought victory against racism on the home and foreign fronts.
1936–1948
Between 1939 and 1954, the U.S. role in the world was transformed. The victory in World War II of the Allies—the Soviet Union, Great Britain, the United States, and dozens of other countries—over the Axis powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan marked America’s emergence as the dominant global power. This international role placed new constraints on the nation’s domestic policies, particularly when, after the Axis surrender in 1945, suspicions between the United States and the Soviet Union developed into the Cold War. This long conflict, which lasted until 1989, led to a vast expansion in the size and power of the federal government, particularly its military, and greatly influenced domestic politics.

International events replaced the Great Depression as the defining force in the lives of African Americans. In preparing for and fighting World War II, America finally emerged from the Depression and laid the basis for an era of unprecedented prosperity. Industrial and military mobilization resulted in the movement of millions of people, many of them African Americans, from agricultural areas into the cities. This population shift substantially increased black voting strength in the North and West, which—combined with a moral recoil from the savage racial policies of the Nazis—drove the issue of black equality to the forefront of national politics. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of black men and women learned new skills and ideas while serving in the armed forces, and many resolved to claim their rights. Events abroad and in the United States during the 1940s heightened black consciousness and led to a more aggressive militancy among local leaders and black citizens in southern states.

The Cold War also had a tremendous impact on African Americans and their struggle for freedom. The two sides of this global conflict avoided direct confrontation with each other. Instead, they sought to enlist Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans as proxies. American leaders, trying to convince these peoples of America’s virtues as a democracy, were pressed to address the segregation and racial discrimination that remained firmly imbedded in American life. The U.S. Department of State sponsored worldwide tours of outstanding black jazz musicians to represent the positive dimensions of American culture. Still, the advocacy groups and black press that had come of age during the 1930s and 1940s focused attention on fighting racism and demanded the full rights and responsibilities of citizenship for all people. The result was a powerful movement for civil rights that many liberal white Americans and, increasingly, key institutions in the national government supported.
These favorable developments, however, provoked strong resistance. Egged on by their politicians, white southerners defended segregation with all the power at their command. The emerging conflict with the Soviet Union prompted many white conservatives to charge that all those seeking to fight racial injustice were agents of the communist enemy. These contrary currents—one hand, the push for a new democracy, and, on the other, the Cold War mentality—would indelibly stamp the emerging civil rights movement.

On the Eve of War, 1936–1941

As the world economy wallowed in the Great Depression, the international order collapsed in Europe and Asia. Germany under Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) and Italy under Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) created an alliance, known as the Axis, to control Europe. These fascist dictators advocated a political program based on extreme nationalism that suppressed internal opposition and used violence to gain their will abroad. Germany was the dominant partner in the Axis. Its National Socialist, or Nazi, Party in part blamed communists and foreign powers for the nation’s economic depression and loss of power. But even more than by anticommunism, however, Hitler was driven by virulent racism and his belief in Anglo-Saxon, or white Aryan, supremacy. Unlike racists in the United States, he blamed Jews for Germany’s social and economic problems. But the Nazis also despised black people and considered them inferior or subhuman beings. They discriminated against Germans with African ancestors and banned jazz as “nigger” music. Beginning in the mid-1930s, the Germans and Italians embarked on a series of aggressive confrontations and military campaigns that placed much of Central Europe under their power. In August 1939 Germany signed a nonaggression pact with the Soviet Union, a prelude to its September 1 attack on Poland, which the Soviets joined a few weeks later. Poland’s allies, Britain and France, reacted by declaring war on Germany, thus beginning World War II.

As Germany and Italy pursued their aggression in Europe, the empire of Japan sought to dominate East Asia. The Japanese considered themselves the foremost power in the Far East and wanted to drive out or supplant both the European states—mainly Britain, France, and the Netherlands—and the United States, which had extensive economic interests and colonial possessions there. (The United States controlled the Philippines, Hawaii, Guam, and other Pacific islands.) Japan’s aggressive expansionist policies also led to conflict in the 1930s with the Soviet Union in Manchuria and to a long and bloody war with the Nationalist regime in China. The United States supported China and encouraged the Europeans to resist Japanese demands for economic and territorial concessions in their Asian colonies. Japan’s alliance with Nazi Germany and fascist Italy further aggravated United States–Japanese relations, which deteriorated rapidly after the outbreak of World War II in Europe. These tensions led to war on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese bombed American warships at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and launched a massive offensive against British, Dutch, and American territory throughout the Pacific.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt watched the events in Europe and Asia during the 1930s with growing concern, but his ability to react was limited. Despite its large economy and large navy, America was not a preeminent military power at the time. Roosevelt had trouble convincing Congress to enlarge the army because a significant segment of the American population, the isolationists, believed the United States had been hoodwinked into fighting World War I and should avoid becoming entangled in another foreign war. During the late 1930s, the president had managed to overcome some of this opposition and had won the authority to increase the size of the nation’s armed forces. By early 1940 the United States had instituted its first peacetime draft to provide men for the army and navy.

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE EMERGING WORLD CRISIS

Many African Americans responded to the emerging world crisis with growing activism. When Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, it was, along with Liberia and Haiti, one of the world’s three black-ruled nations, and black communities throughout the United States organized to send it aid. In New York, black nurses under the leadership of Salaria Kee raised money to purchase medical supplies, and black physician John West volunteered to treat wounded Ethiopians at a hospital supported by black American donations. Mass meetings to support the Ethiopians were held in New York City under the auspices of the Provisiional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia and the Ethiopian World Federation. Similar rallies occurred in other large cities while reporters from black
newspapers, such as J. A. Rogers of the Pittsburgh Courier, brought the horror of this war home to their readers. Although American law forbade citizens to engage in active combat in Ethiopia, over 17,000 African Americans indicated a desire to help Emperor Haile Selassie (r. 1930–1974) resist the Italians. Despite fierce resistance, the Italians won the war in 1936, in part by using poison gas. The conflict alerted many African Americans to the dangers of fascism, reawakened interest in and identification with Africa, and fanned the flames of black internationalism, which was destined to become more pronounced after World War II.

Civil war in Spain stimulated renewed activism among leftist African Americans. In 1936 a fascist-conservative movement led by General Francisco Franco (1892–1975), supported by Germany and Italy, started a civil war to overthrow the left-leaning Spanish Republic. About a hundred African Americans traveled to Spain in 1936–1937 to serve with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, an integrated fighting force of 3,000 socialist and communist American volunteers. Among the African Americans were two women: Salaria Kee, who nursed the wounded on the battlefield, and Thyra Edwards, who worked for the Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. Support of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade reflected a commitment by a few African Americans to the communists’ vision of internationalism. Mobilization for war, however, would soon bring most black people and their organizations into the fight against fascism abroad and for equality and justice in the United States (the “Double V” campaign).

A. PHILIP RANDOLPH AND THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON MOVEMENT

In 1939 and 1940, the American government, along with the governments of France and Britain, spent so much on arms that the U.S. economy was finally lifted out of the Depression. But the United States mobilized its economy for war and rebuilt its military in keeping with past practices of discrimination and exclusion. As unemployed white workers streamed into aircraft factories, shipyards, and other centers of war production, jobless African Americans were left waiting at the gate. Most aircraft manufacturers, for example, would hire black people only in janitorial positions no matter what their skills were. Many all-white American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions enforced closed-shop agreements that prevented their employers from hiring black workers who were not members of the labor organization. Indeed, many working-class whites were also excluded because of closed-shop agreements. Government-funded training programs regularly rejected black applicants, often reasoning that training them would be pointless given their poor prospects of finding skilled work. The United States Employment Service (USES) filled “whites-only” requests for defense workers. The military itself made it clear that although it would accept black men in their proportion to the population, about 11 percent at the time, it would put them in segregated units and assign them to service duties. The navy limited black servicemen to menial positions. The Marine Corps and the Army Air Corps refused to accept them altogether.

When a young African-American man wrote the Pittsburgh Courier and suggested a “Double V” campaign—victory over fascism abroad and victory over racism at home—the newspaper adopted his words as the battle cry for the entire race. Fighting this struggle in a nation at war would be difficult, but the effort led to the further development of black organizations and transformed the worldview of many African-American soldiers and civilians. Embodying the spirit of the “Double V” campaign, African-American protest groups and newspapers criticized discrimination in the defense program. Two months before the 1940 presidential election, the NAACP, the Urban League, and other groups pressed President Roosevelt to act. The president listened to their protests, but aside from a few token gestures—appointing Howard University Law School dean William Hastie as a “civilian aide on Negro affairs” in the Department of War and promoting Benjamin O. Davis, the senior black officer in the army, to brigadier general—he responded with little of substance. As a result, during late 1940 the NAACP and other groups staged mass protest rallies around the nation. With the election safely won, the president—anxious not to offend white southern politicians—he responded even to meet with black leaders.

In January 1941 A. Philip Randolph, who was president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and who had been working with other groups to get Roosevelt’s attention, called on black people to unify their protests and direct them at the national government. He suggested that 10,000 African Americans march on Washington under the slogan “We loyal Negro-American citizens demand the right to work and fight for our country.” In the following months, Randolph helped create the March on Washington Movement (MOWM), which soon became the largest African-American organization since Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association of the 1920s. The MOWM’s demands included a presidential order forbidding companies with government contracts from engaging in racial discrimination,
Horace Pippin’s (1888–1946) *Mr. Prejudice* (1943) hammers a wedge of racism through a giant V (the sign of victory). It is a powerful expression of black Americans’ ongoing struggle against racial discrimination, segregation, and violence even within a nation at war against fascism and Nazism and the spread of communism. Oil on canvas. 18” × 14”. Philadelphia Museum of Art, gift of Dr. and Mrs. Matthew T. Moore. Horace Pippin (1888-1946), “Mr. Prejudice,” 1943. Oil on canvas, 18 × 14 inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Matthew T. Moore. Photo by Graydon Wood. 1984-108-1

eliminating race-based exclusion from defense training courses, and requiring the USES to supply workers on a nonracial basis. Randolph also wanted an order to abolish segregation in the armed forces and the president’s support for a law withdrawing the benefits of the National Labor Relations Act from unions that refused to grant membership to black Americans. Unlike the leaders of most other African-American protest groups of the time, Randolph prohibited white involvement and encouraged the black working class to participate.

Many African Americans who had never taken part in the activities of middle-class-dominated groups like the NAACP responded to Randolph’s appeal. Soon he alarmed the president by raising the number expected to march to 50,000. Roosevelt, fearing the protest would undermine America’s democratic rhetoric and provide grist for the German propaganda mills, dispatched First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia to dissuade Randolph from marching. Their pleas for patience fell on deaf ears, compelling Roosevelt and his top military officials to meet with Randolph and other black leaders. The president offered a set of superficial changes, but the African Americans stood firm in their demands and raised the stakes by increasing their estimate of the number of black marchers coming to Washington to 100,000. By the end of June 1941, the president capitulated and had his aides draft Executive Order 8802, prompting Randolph to call off the march. It was a grand moment. “To this day,” NAACP leader Roy Wilkins wrote in his autobiography, “I don’t know if he would have been able to turn out enough marchers to make his point stick . . . but, what a bluff it was. A tall, courtly black man with Shakespearean diction and the stare of an eagle had looked the patrician Roosevelt in the eye—and made him back down.”

**EXECUTIVE ORDER 8802**

On the surface at least, the president’s order marked a significant change in the government’s stance. It stated in part,

> I do hereby affirm the policy of the United States that there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in the defense industry or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin.

The order instructed all agencies that trained workers to administer such programs without discrimination. To ensure full cooperation with these guidelines, Roosevelt created the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) with the power to investigate complaints of discrimination. The order said nothing about desegregation of the military, but private assurances were made that the barriers to entry in key services would be lowered.

Executive Order 8802, although it was the first major presidential action countering discrimination since Reconstruction, was no new Emancipation Proclamation. Black excitement with the order soon soured as many industries, particularly in the South, made only token hirings of African Americans. What the black community learned in this instance and what it would witness repeatedly in the decades to come was that merely articulating antidiscrimination principles and establishing commissions and committees did not eradicate inequalities. Moreover, the order did not mention union discrimination. Nonetheless, the threat of the march, the issuance of the executive order, and the creation of the FEPC...
Posters like this sought both to attract black support for A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement and to convince political leaders of the strength of the movement.

marked the formal acknowledgment by the federal government that it bore some responsibility for protecting black and minority rights in employment. Black activists and their allies would have to continue their fight if the order was to have meaning. Randolph sought to lead them but would find it difficult to do so because of the opposition of key government agencies—notably the military—as well as the power of southern congressmen and a belief among white people that winning the war took precedence over racial issues.

**Race and the U.S. Armed Forces**

The demands of A. Philip Randolph and other black leaders and healthcare professionals to end segregation in the armed forces initially met stiffer resistance than their pleas for change in the civilian sector. Black men were expected to serve their country, but at the beginning of the war, most were assigned to segregated service battalions, relegated to noncombat positions, kept out of the more prestigious branches of the service, and confronted by tremendous obstacles to becoming officers. This was particularly galling because military segregation was a symbol of the rampant discrimination black men and women encountered in their daily lives.

During the prewar mobilization period (1940–1941), black physicians and leaders of their black professional organization, the National Medical Association, remembering the segregation they had experienced during World War I, queried the War Department about their status. In a new war, would black physicians be integrated into the medical corps or required to practice in separate facilities set aside for sick and wounded black soldiers? In a 1940 speech, Dr. G. Hamilton Francis underscored the black doctors’ concerns: “Our nation is again preparing to defend itself against aggression from without. Today, we are ready and willing to contribute all of our skill and energy and to wholeheartedly enlist our services as members of the medical profession, but we must be permitted to take our right places, as evidenced by our training, experience, and ability.”
P R O F I L E : Steven Robinson and the Montford Point Marines

When 17-year-old Steven Robinson joined the military in May 1942, he was among the first African Americans to become a marine. From its founding in 1798 until World War II, the Marine Corps accepted only white men. President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802 ended that racial exclusion but did not outlaw segregation in the military.

With grim reluctance, the Marine Corps began to accept black men. The commandant of the corps, Major General Thomas Holcomb, disdained the prospect of black marines: “If it were a question of having a Marine Corps of 5,000 whites or 250,000 Negroes, I would rather have the whites.” The corps would not allow black men to train with white recruits at Parris Island in South Carolina. Instead, it established a separate training facility for black men at Montford Point in North Carolina. Robinson immediately encountered hostility as he traveled south for basic training. For the first time, he experienced segregated railroad coaches and stations. He inadvertently entered a white waiting room in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, and was curtly instructed to leave: “So I went out the door and as I went out the door, something [said], look, look back and I looked back. I looked over at the station, at the entrance to the station, and I saw a sign. It had to be three feet in width and maybe five feet in length and it says ‘For White Only.’”

During basic training Robinson impressed white drill instructors and officers, and he was promoted to platoon sergeant before departing for the war in the Pacific. On the troop train to the West Coast, black marines were refused service when they tried to buy soda in Arizona. They saw German and Italian prisoners of war enjoying the company of American women in restaurants, bars, and clubs that excluded African Americans.

Doubting their fitness, the Marine Corps did not want black men in combat, and most of the Montford Point marines were assigned support roles in ammunition and depot companies. Nevertheless, the black marines participated in several major amphibious operations in the Pacific, including Iwo Jima.

Robinson and a contingent of black marines went ashore on Iwo Jima on February 19, 1945, and took part in some of the fiercest fighting of World War II. One of Robinson’s close friends, Jimmy Wilkins, was mortally wounded: “Jimmy was on my right shoulder about two feet [away] when he got hit. And he was killed... everybody liked him in the platoon, I mean, he was just a likable seventeen-year-old young teenager. And I might add, a good Marine.” Wilkins was also one of the marines who had not been able to buy a Coke in Arizona.

Robinson and other marines were aware that they were fighting to defeat two enemies: “We were fighting the war against the bigotry at home and fighting the war against the bigotry overseas. And we were fighting the war to liberate people who had more liberty than we had.”

Photographers and filmmakers generally avoided documenting the activities of the black marines, but Robinson and other black marines witnessed the famous flag raising on Iwo Jima’s Mount Suribachi. Robinson would spend 106 days on Iwo Jima. More than 6,000 marines and 21,000 Japanese troops died on the small volcanic island before the Americans gained control.

Nearly 20,000 black men trained at Montford Point during and immediately after World War II. In 1949, as a result of President Harry Truman’s Executive Order 9981, the Marine Corps began to integrate, and the separate training facility at Montford Point closed. Black marines would be trained and would fight alongside white marines in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Taking advantage of the G.I. Bill of Rights after World War II, Steven Robinson graduated from the University of Pittsburgh and earned a law degree. He practiced law for more than 50 years in Warren, Ohio, where he was active in state and local politics. Robinson died in 2006.

These are among the very first African-American men to serve in the U.S. Marine Corps. Beginning in 1942 they trained at a separate facility at Montford Point near Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.
This World War II War Department recruitment poster recognizes the heroism of Dorie Miller (1919–1948) at Pearl Harbor. His bravery, however, did not alter the navy’s policy of restricting black sailors to the kitchens and boiler rooms of navy vessels.

**THE COSTS OF MILITARY DISCRIMINATION**

Although the War and Navy departments held to the fiction of “separate but equal” in their segregation programs, their policies gave black Americans inferior resources or excluded them entirely. Sick and injured black soldiers were treated in segregated wards in military hospitals. Black physicians could treat only black military personnel. At army camps black soldiers were usually placed in the least desirable spots and denied the use of officers’ clubs, base stores, and base recreational facilities. Four-fifths of all training camps were located in the South, where black soldiers were harassed and discriminated against off base as well as on. Even on leave, black soldiers were not offered space in the many hotels the government leased and had to make do with the limited accommodations that had been available to black people before the war. For southern African Americans, even going home in uniform could be dangerous. For example, when Rieves Bell of Starkville,
Mississippi, was visiting his family in 1943, three young white men cornered him on a street and attempted to strip off his uniform. Bell fought back and injured one of them with a knife. The army could not save him from the wrath of local civilian authorities who sentenced Bell to three and a half years in the notorious Parchman state penitentiary for the crime of self-defense.

Perhaps most galling was seeing enemy prisoners of war accorded better treatment than African-American soldiers. Dempsey Travis of Chicago recalled his experiences at Camp Shenango, Pennsylvania: “I saw German prisoners free to move around the camp, unlike black soldiers who were restricted. The Germans walked right into the doggone places like any white American. We were wearin’ the same uniform, but we were excluded.” In 1944 black servicemen stationed at Fort Lawton in Washington State objected to living and working conditions that were inferior to those granted to Italian prisoners of war (POWs). Not only did the Italians receive lighter work assignments than the black Americans, but some Italian POWs were allowed to go to local bars that refused to admit African Americans. The resentment erupted into a riot on August 14, 1944, when black soldiers stoned the barracks housing the Italians. One prisoner was killed, and 24 others were injured. A court-martial convicted 23 black servicemen.

Because of the military’s policies, most of the nearly one million African Americans who served during World War II did so in auxiliary units, notably in the transportation and engineering corps. Soldiers in the transportation corps, almost half of whom were black, loaded supplies and drove them in trucks to the front lines. Operating in the Red Ball Express or the later White Ball Express—the names for the trucking operations used to supply the American forces as they drove toward Germany in 1944 and 1945—African Americans braved enemy fire and delivered the fuel, ammunition, and other goods that made the fight possible. Black engineers built camps and ports, constructed and repaved roads, and performed many other tasks to support frontline troops.

Black soldiers performed well in these tasks but were often subject to unfair military discipline. In Europe, many more black soldiers than white soldiers were executed even though African Americans made up only 10 percent of the total number of soldiers stationed there. One of the most glaring examples of unfair treatment was the navy’s handling of a “mutiny” at its Port Chicago base north of San Francisco. On July 17, 1944, in the worst home-front disaster of the war, an explosion at the base killed 320 sailors, of whom 202 were black ammunition loaders. In the following month, 328 of the surviving ammunition loaders were sent to fill another ship. When 258 of them refused to do so, they were arrested. Eventually the navy charged 50 men with mutiny, convicted them, and sentenced them to terms of imprisonment ranging from 8 to 15 years at Terminal Island in California. The NAACP’s Thurgood Marshall filed a brief arguing that the men had been railroaded into prison because of their race, but to no avail.

SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS PROTEST MILITARY DISCRIMINATION

In military segregation, black American leaders identified a formidable but vulnerable target. Employing a variety of strategies, they mobilized the black civilian workforce, black women’s groups, black college students, and an interracial coalition to resist this blatant inequality. They provoked a public dialogue with

William H. Hastie earned his L.L.B. in 1930 and his S.J.D. in 1935 at Harvard Law School. He taught at Howard University Law School, where he, along with Charles Hamilton Houston, trained the first generation of civil rights lawyers, the most illustrious of whom were Thurgood Marshall and Oliver Hill. In 1943, the NAACP presented Hastie with the Spingarn Medal. Appointed by President Harry Truman in 1949, Hastie became the first black American to serve as a federal judge. He sat on the Third Circuit Court of Appeals until 1971.
VOICES

WILLIAM H. HASTIE
RESIGNS IN PROTEST

In January 1943 William H. Hastie, who had been on leave from his post as dean of the Howard University Law School, resigned as civilian aide to Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson to protest the failure to outlaw discrimination in the military. Hastie had taken the position in 1940, but throughout his tenure he had experienced frustration and hostility in attempting to secure equal treatment for black men and women in uniform. In his letter of resignation, which he published in the Chicago Defender, he explains that the Army Air Forces’ reactionary policies and discriminatory practices were the catalyst to his resignation:

The Army Air Forces are growing in importance and independence. In the post war period they may become the greatest single component of the armed services. Biased policies and harmful practices established in this branch of the army can all too easily infect other branches as well. The situation had become critical. Yet, the whole course of my dealings with the Army Air Forces convinced me that further expression of my views in the form of recommendations within the department would be futile. I, therefore, took the only course which can, I believe, bring results. Public opinion is still the strongest force in American life.

To the Negro soldier and those who influence his thinking, I say with all the force and sincerity at my command that the man in uniform must grit his teeth, square his shoulders and do his best as a soldier, confident that there are millions of Americans outside of the armed services, and more persons than he knows in high places within the military establishment, who will never cease fighting to remove every racial barrier and every humiliating practice which now confront him. But only by being, at all times a first class soldier can the man in uniform help in this battle which shall be fought and won.

When I took office, the Secretary of War directed that all questions of policy and important proposals relating to Negroes should be referred to my office for comment or approval before final action. In December, 1940, the Air Forces referred to me a plan for a segregated training center for Negro pursuit pilots at Tuskegee. I expressed my entire disagreement with the plan, giving my reasons in detail. My views were disregarded. Since then, the Air Command has never on its own initiative submitted any plan or project to me for comment or recommendation. What information I obtained, I had to seek out. Where I made proposals or recommendations, I volunteered them.

This situation reached its climax in late December, 1942, when I learned through army press releases sent out from St. Louis and from the War Department in Washington that the Air Command was about to establish a segregated officer candidate school at Jefferson Barracks, Mo., to train Negro officers for ground duty with the Army Air Forces. Here was a proposal for a radical departure from present army practice, since the officer candidate-training program is the one large field where the army is eliminating racial segregation.

Moreover, I had actually written to the Air Command several weeks earlier in an attempt to find out what was brewing at Jefferson Barracks. The Air Command replied as late as December 17, 1942, giving not even the slightest hint of any plan for a segregated officer candidate school. It is inconceivable to me that consideration of such a project had not then advanced far enough for my office to have been consulted, even if I had not made specific inquiry. The conclusion is inescapable that the Air Command does not propose to inform, much less counsel with, this office about its plans for Negroes.

- Why did African Americans fight so relentlessly to end segregation in the U.S. military? What did the military represent or symbolize to the nation?
- Under what circumstances did African Americans appear to accept segregation and the establishment of separate programs such as the Tuskegee Airmen? Why, then, did African Americans object to the military’s efforts to provide equal but separate facilities and educational programs?

government and military officials at a pivotal moment when America’s leaders most wanted to present a united democratic front to the world.

Examples of black protest abound. In 1942 the NAACP’s journal the Crisis and the National Urban League’s Opportunity published many editorials denouncing military segregation. Walter White traveled across the country and throughout the world visiting camps and making contacts with black soldiers and their white officers. He inundated the War Department and the president with letters citing examples of improper, hostile, and humiliating treatment of black servicemen by military personnel and in the white communities where bases were located. Frustration with continued military intransigence, however, forced William Hastie to resign as an adviser on Negro affairs on January 5, 1943.

BLACK WOMEN IN THE STRUGGLE TO DESEGREGATE THE MILITARY

The role of black women in the struggle to desegregate the military has often been overlooked, but their militancy contributed to the effort. A 1942 editorial in the Crisis suggested why:

The colored woman has been a more potent factor in shaping Negro society than the white woman has been in shaping white society because the sexual caste system has been much more fluid and ill-defined than among whites. Colored women have worked with their men and helped build and maintain every institution we have. Without their economic aid and counsel we would have made little if any progress.

The most prominent example of black women’s struggle is found in the history of the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses. Mabel K. Staupers, its executive director, led an aggressive fight to eliminate quotas in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps. Although many black nurses volunteered during World War II, the navy refused to admit them, and the army allowed few to serve. To draw attention to the unfairness of quotas, Staupers met with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in November 1944 and described black nurses’ troubled relationship with the armed forces. She told Mrs. Roosevelt that 82 black nurses were serving 150 patients at the all-black hospital at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, at a time when the army was complaining of a nursing shortage and debating the need to draft nurses. Staupers cited the practice of using black women to care for German POWs and asked if this was to be the special role of the black nurse in the war: “When our women hear of the great need for nurses in the Army and when they enter the service it is with the high hopes that they will be used to nurse sick and wounded soldiers who are fighting our country’s enemies and not primarily to take care of these enemies.”

Soldiers and sailors also resisted segregation and discrimination while in the service. They mounted well-organized attempts to desegregate officers’ clubs. At Freeman Field, Indiana, for example, one hundred black officers refused to back down when their commanders threatened to arrest them for seeking to use the officers’ club. In other bases African-American soldiers responded with violence to violence, intimidation, and threats. Their actions, although quickly suppressed, prompted the army brass to reevaluate their belief in the military efficiency of discrimination.

THE BEGINNING OF MILITARY DESEGREGATION

In response to the militancy of black officers, civil rights leaders, and the press, the War Department made changes and began to reeducate soldiers, albeit in a limited fashion. The Advisory Committee on Negro Troop Policies was charged with coordinating the use of black troops and developing policy on
social questions and personnel training. In 1943 the War Department also produced its own propaganda film—*The Negro Soldier*, directed by Frank Capra—to alleviate racial tensions. This patronizing film emphasized the contributions black soldiers had made in the nation’s wars since the American Revolution and was designed to appeal to both black and white audiences.

The War Department also attempted to use propaganda to counter black protest groups and the claims of discrimination reported in the black press. The key to this effort was boxer Joe Louis, whom the army believed was “almost a god” to most black Americans. “The possibilities for using him,” a secret internal report stated, “are almost unlimited, such as touring the army camps as special instructor on physical training; exhibition bouts, for use in radio or in movies; in a movie appearance a flashback could be shown of Louis knocking out Max Schmeling, the champion of the Germans.” The same report also mentioned other prominent black men and women who had “great value in any propaganda programs. Other athletes like Ray Robinson, also track athletes, etc.; name bands like Cab Calloway, [Jimmy] Lunceford; stage, screen and concert stars like Ethel Waters, Bill Robinson, Eddie Anderson, Paul Robeson, etc.” This propaganda did little to counter the prejudice and discrimination that most black Americans experienced in their daily lives.

Racism remained strong throughout the war, but the persistent push of protest groups and the military’s need for soldiers gradually loosened its grip. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the services had to relax their restrictions on African Americans. The navy, previously the most resistant service, began to accept black men as sailors and noncommissioned officers. By 1943 it allowed African Americans into officer training schools. The Marine Corps, exclusively white throughout its history, began taking African Americans in 1942. Black officers were trained in integrated settings in all services except the Army Air Corps. The War Department even compelled recalcitrant commanding officers to recommend black servicemen for admission to the officer training schools, and soon over 2,000 a year graduated.

Many African Americans also saw combat, although under white officers. Several African-American artillery, tank destroyer, antiaircraft, and combat engineer battalions fought with distinction in Europe and Asia. Military prejudice seemed to be borne out by the poor showing of the all-black 92nd Combat Division in the Italian campaign in 1944–1945, but investigation revealed that its failure was the result of poor training and leadership by its
white commander, General Edward M. Almond, who had no confidence in his men. After the Battle of the Bulge, a massive German counterattack in Belgium in December 1944, 2,500 black volunteers fought in integrated units. The army did not repeat the experiment during the rest of the war, but its success laid the groundwork for the eventual end of segregated units. Although subject to many of the same kinds of discrimination as African-American men, African-American women also found expanded opportunities in the military. Approximately 4,000 black women served in the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps.

Mabel Staupers’s efforts finally bore fruit in 1945. When the War Department claimed there was a shortage of nurses, Staupers mobilized nursing groups of all races to protest the discrimination against black nurses in the Army and Navy Nurse Corps. There was an immediate groundswell of public support to

PROFILE: Mabel K. Staupers

Mabel K. Staupers was born in Barbados, in the British West Indies, on February 27, 1890, to Thomas Clarence and Pauline (Lobo) Doyle. Mother and daughter emigrated to New York in 1903. Mabel’s father joined them later. In 1917 Mabel became a U.S. citizen. In short order, she married James Max Keaton, from whom she was later divorced, and received her R.N. diploma from Freedmen’s Hospital School of Nursing in Washington, D.C. She worked as a private-duty nurse in Washington and New York City, where she helped to organize and served as the superintendent from 1920 to 1922 of the Booker T. Washington Sanatorium, an inpatient clinic for African Americans with tuberculosis. This was one of the few facilities in New York that permitted black physicians to treat their patients when they were hospitalized. Most other hospitals denied black medical professionals attending or staff privileges and positions. Staupers further honed her organizing and leadership skills when she became executive secretary of the Harlem Committee of the New York Tuberculosis and Health Association from 1922 to 1934. In 1935, Staupers joined with Mary McLeod Bethune to found the National Council of Negro Women. In 1934 Staupers became the first executive director of the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses (NACGN) and served until 1949, when she was named the organization’s president. Under her stewardship the NACGN officially dissolved in 1951, after black nurses gained membership in the American Nursing Association.

Staupers’s organizing and leadership talent was put to its greatest test during World War II. With verve and perfect timing, she mobilized wide-ranging support to end quotas that the military had established to limit the numbers of black nurses in the armed forces nurse corps. While the army initially indicated that it would accept 56 black nurses to work in the hospital units at Camp Livingston in Louisiana and Fort Bragg in North Carolina, the navy refused to accept any black women nurses. The matter came to a head when, in January 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced his support of legislation to draft nurses. Staupers was appalled that the government would entertain such a notion when hundreds of black women nurses were eager to serve. She led the struggle to end quotas and discrimination against black women nurses in the armed forces. Staupers published her account of this struggle in No Time for Prejudice: A Story of the Integration of Negroes in Nursing in the United States (New York: Macmillan, 1961). In recognition of her courageous struggle against racial discrimination, the NAACP awarded Staupers the Spingarn Medal in 1951. An array of honors followed. In 1967, New York Mayor John V. Lindsay gave her a citation that read, “To an immigrant who came to the United States and by Individual Effort through Education and Personal Achievement has become an Outstanding American Leader and Distinguished Citizen of America.” She died of pneumonia at her home in Washington, D.C., in 1989.
A Tuskegee Airman Remembers

Virgil Patterson was a Tuskegee Airman. In an oral history told to historian Ben Vinson III, Patterson recalled both the excitement of being an airman and the racism the Tuskegee Airmen endured: “Between December of 1944 and March of 1945 we saw more action. After having muscled into France, the Allies were preparing to make their final thrust at Hitler. I remember when we flew escort for over 1,000 bombers on their way to Germany. It was an awesome sight, seeing bombers in every direction for a 150-mile stretch. Looking down into the sea we saw still more activity, throngs and throngs of ships. During these months our planes bombarded German factories and troop positions that were preparing to repel the Allied invasion. Thankfully, the Germans didn’t have use of the French fleet, which had been scuttled. But the Germans did have friends amongst the French, which made the Allied job more difficult.”

“Part of our responsibilities included strafing radar installations along the coast of France. On one sortie, I was part of a mission of four planes led by a man named Ballard. My wingman was Jefferson. His wingman was a pilot named Daniels. As we came in towards the ground from an altitude of almost 15,000 feet, I suddenly looked back to find Jefferson and noticed that Daniels, who was flying front of me, was going up in smoke. I pulled up and started following Ballard, who didn’t look back. That’s when I noticed that Jefferson was being shot down as well. Ballard and I went in as close to the coast as we dared and fired furiously at our targets. One, two, three . . . fire! One, two, three . . . fire! That was the interval. I shot short bursts while flying above the ocean at nearly 500 miles an hour.”

“We lost a number of pilots that day. When I returned to base I learned that Faulkner, our squadron leader, who had been flying at 30,000 feet, turned over and went down. They radioed him, knowing that something must have gone wrong. He was probably unconscious because he didn’t respond. A poor oxygen connection apparently caused him to pass out during flight. As for Daniels, I learned many years later that he had survived his ordeal and had become a POW. Ironically, once behind enemy lines, the Germans treated him with proper respect. He was an officer, not a black officer. It seemed interesting to me to see how black soldiers had to be in the clutches of the enemy before being bestowed some of the honor that they deserved.”

What emotions did combat evoke in Patterson?
What do his comments about the German treatment of black POWs imply about racism in the U.S. military?
Do you think Patterson and the other Tuskegee Airmen wanted to be treated as officers or as black officers?


As for Daniels, I learned many years later that he had survived his ordeal and had become a POW. Ironically, once behind enemy lines, the Germans treated him with proper respect. He was an officer, not a black officer. It seemed interesting to me to see how black soldiers had to be in the clutches of the enemy before being bestowed some of the honor that they deserved.

THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

The most visible group of black soldiers served in the Army Air Force. In January 1941 the War Department announced the formation of an all-black pursuit squadron of fighter planes and the creation of a training program at Tuskegee Army Air Field, Alabama, for black pilots.

Unlike all other units in the army, the 99th Squadron and the 332nd Group, made up of the 100th, 301st, and 302nd Squadrons, had black officers. The 99th went to North Africa in April 1943 and flew its first combat mission against the Italian island of Pantelleria in the Mediterranean on June 2. Later the squadron participated in the air battle over Sicily and supported the invasion of Italy. The squadron regularly engaged German pilots in aerial combat. General Benjamin O. Davis Jr. commanded the 332nd Group when it was deployed to Italy in January 1944. In July the 99th was added to the 332nd, and the group participated in campaigns in Italy, France, Germany, and the Balkans.

The Tuskegee Airmen gained an impressive record. They flew over 15,500 sorties and completed 1,578 missions and escorted 200 heavy bombers deep into Germany’s Rhineland. They accumulated 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses, a Legion of Merit, a Silver Star, 14 Bronze Stars, and 744 Air Medals. Coleman Young (1919–1997), mayor of Detroit from 1973 to 1993, was a proud Tuskegee Airman and retained fond memories of his military service.

TECHNOLOGY: THE TUSKEGEE PLANES

To fly and participate in combat, the Tuskegee Airmen and the black ground troops who looked after their planes had to overcome more than the racism that cast doubt on black soldiers’ ability to fight. They also had to master the technology of complex machines. The 332nd Fighter Group flew more different kinds of fighter planes than any other group of pilots during World War II. They were initially equipped with P-40 Warhawks, then with P-39 Airacobras, later
with P-47 Thunderbolts, and finally with the P-51 Mustang, the airplane with which they became most identified. Keeping these different kinds of planes in top form placed extreme pressure on the black mechanics who serviced them. The mechanics had to master the schematics of completely different engines and repair them. Despite the challenges this presented, the Tuskegee mechanics acquired the respect of the airmen and were recognized for their exceptional mechanical abilities during the war. They frequently worked round-the-clock, sleeping and eating in shifts in the airplane hangars.

Standardization was impossible because each type of plane was designed differently from the others. For example, while the P-39’s engine was behind the pilot, the P-40’s engine was in front of him. Virgil Richardson, one of the Tuskegee mechanics, talked about servicing the P-39: “First of all, you entered the cockpit through a door, as if you were getting into a car. The plane’s motor was located behind the pilot, and there was a propeller shaft that came from the motor, under the pilot’s seat, to the three-blade metal propeller. P-39s were equipped with a 37-millimeter cannon in the propeller hub. There were also two .50-caliber machine guns in each wing, and two more in the nose. That was substantial armament! The plane had wide, tricycle landing gear was a joy to fly, since there was no torque.”

THE TRANSFORMATION OF BLACK SOLDIERS

A new generation of African Americans became soldiers during World War II, and the experience gave many of them an enhanced sense of themselves and a commitment to the fight for black equality. They returned home with a broader perception of the world and a transformed consciousness. Unlike the black soldiers in World War I, a greater percentage of those drafted at the outset of World War II had attended high school, and more of them were either high school or college graduates. Some black soldiers brought so-called radical ideas with them as they were drafted and sent to segregated installations. The urban and northern black servicemen and women and many of the southern rural recruits had a strong sense of their own self-worth and dignity. In their study of Chicago, sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton noted,

At least half of the Negro soldiers—and Bronzeville’s men fall into this class—were city people who had lived through a Depression in America’s Black Ghettoes, and who had been exposed to unions, the

Communist movement, and to the moods of racial radicalism that occasionally swept American cities. Even the rural southern Negroes were different this time—for the thirty years between the First and Second World War has seen a great expansion of school facilities in the South and distribution of newspapers and radios.

The armed forces first exposed many African Americans to a world outside the segregated South and nurtured a budding internationalism among them. Haywood Stephney of Clarksdale, Mississippi, recalled that when he first encountered segregation in the military he simply thought it was supposed to be that way: “Because you grow up in this situation you don’t see but one side of the coin. Having not tasted the freedom or the liberty of being and doing like other folks then you didn’t know what it was like over across the street. So we accepted it.” Like many others, his experiences during the war quickly removed him from “total darkness” and raised fundamental questions about the nation’s racial system.

Douglas Conner, another Mississippi veteran, captured the collective understanding of the social and political meaning of the war shared by the men in his unit, the 31st Quartermaster Battalion stationed in Okinawa: “The air people in Tuskegee, Dorie Miller, and
the others gave the blacks a sense that they could succeed and compete in a world that had been saying that ‘you’re nothing.’” Conner insisted that “because of the world war, I think many people, especially blacks, got the idea that we’re going back, but we’re not going back to business as usual. Somehow we’re going to change this nation so that there’s more equality than there is now.” The personal transformation that Conner and others experienced, combined with a number of international, national, and regional forces, laid the foundation for a modern movement for freedom of opportunity.

Black People on the Home Front

Just as they did in the military, African Americans on the home front fought a dual war against the Axis and discrimination. Black workers and volunteers helped staff the factories and farms that produced goods for the fight while also purchasing war bonds and participating in other defense activities. The changes the war brought on also created new points of conflict while exacerbating preexisting problems and occasionally igniting full-scale riots. Throughout the war, protest groups and the black press fought employment discrimination and political exclusion.

BLACK WORKERS: FROM FARM TO FACTORY

The war accelerated the migration of African Americans from rural areas to the cities. Even though the farm economy recovered during the war, high-paying defense jobs and other urban occupations tempted many black farmers to abandon the land. By the 1940s the bitter experiences of the previous decades had made it clear there was little future in the cotton fields. Boll weevils, competition from other cotton-growing parts of the world, and mechanization reduced the need for black labor. Indeed, by the end of the war in 1945, only 28 percent of black men worked on farms, down from 41 percent in 1940. More than 300,000 black men left agricultural labor between 1940 and 1944 alone.

The wartime need for workers, backed by pressure from the government, helped break down some barriers to employing African Americans in industry. During the war the number of black workers in nonfarm employment rose from 2,900,000 to 3,800,000, and thousands moved into previously whites-only jobs. African Americans found employment in the aircraft industry, and tens of thousands were employed in the nation’s shipyards.

With so many of their men away at war, black women increasingly found work outside the laundry and domestic service that had previously been their lot. Nationally 600,000 black women—400,000 of them former domestic servants—shifted into industrial jobs. As one aircraft worker wryly put it, “Hitler was the one that got us out of the white folks’ kitchen.” Even those women who stayed in domestic work often saw their wages improve as the supply of competing workers dwindled.

The abundance of industrial jobs helped spur and direct the second phase of the Great Migration, in which some 1.5 million migrants—nearly 15 percent of the population—left the South, swelling the black communities in northern and western cities that had significant war industries. By 1950 the percentage of the nation’s black population living in the South had fallen from 77 percent to 68 percent. The most dramatic rise in black population was in southern California. Because of its burgeoning aircraft industry and the success of civil rights groups and the federal
government in limiting discrimination. Los Angeles saw its relatively small African-American community increase by more than 340,000 during the war.

Many unions became more open to African-American workers as black men and women took jobs in industries. Between 1940 and 1945, black union membership rose from 200,000 to 1.25 million. Those unions connected to the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), particularly the United Automobile Workers, were the most open to black membership, whereas AFL affiliates were the most likely to treat African Americans as second-class members or to exclude them altogether. Some white unionized workers continued to oppose hiring black workers, even going on strike to prevent it, but the union leadership, the government, and employers often deflected their resistance. The growth in black membership did not end racism in unions, even in the CIO, but it did provide African Americans a stronger foundation on which to protest discrimination in employment.

THE FEPC DURING THE WAR
After President Roosevelt issued the executive order banning job discrimination in defense industries with government contracts, thousands of impoverished black southerners rushed to cities in the Pacific Northwest, especially to Seattle. Wartime Seattle had offered jobs in its shipyards, in logging-truck manufacturing, and at the Boeing aircraft production plants. By 1945, Boeing employed over 1,200 black workers, approximately 3 percent of its labor force. African Americans also accounted for 7 percent of Seattle’s shipyard workers. By 1948 black families in Seattle boasted a median income of $3,314, a mere 10 percent lower than the median for the nation’s white families. But the economic good fortune of black workers on the West Coast was not typical of the rest of the country.

In the Midwest and on the East Coast, many African Americans criticized industry’s failure to end economic discrimination. In May 1943 President Roosevelt responded to the ineffectiveness of the FEPC. Executive Order 9546 established a new Committee on Fair Employment Practice, increased its budget, and placed its operation directly under the Executive Office of the President. Roosevelt appointed Malcolm Ross, a combative white liberal, to head the committee. Ross initiated nationwide hearings of cases concerning discrimination in the shipbuilding and railroad industries. These proceedings embarrassed some companies and increased compliance with the FEPC’s orders. Resistance, however, was more common. In Mobile, Alabama, for example, the white employees of the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company opposed the FEPC’s efforts to pressure the company to promote twelve of the 7,000 African Americans it employed in menial positions to racially mixed welding crews. The white workers went on a rampage, assaulting 50 African Americans. The FEPC thereupon withdrew its plan and acquiesced in the traditional Jim Crow arrangements for all work assignments. White workers retained their more lucrative positions. As a result of this kind of intransigence, the committee failed to redress most of the grievances of black workers. An effort to continue the committee after the war was defeated.

ANATOMY OF A RACE RIOT: DETROIT, 1943
One of the bloodiest race riots in the nation’s history took place in 1943 in Detroit, Michigan, where black and white workers were competing fiercely for jobs and housing. Relations between the two communities had been smoldering for months, with open fighting in the plants and on the streets. White racism, housing segregation, and economic discrimination were part of the problem. The brutality of white police officials was an especially potent factor. Tensions were so palpable that weeks before the riot, Walter White had warned that the city could explode.

The immediate trigger for the riot was a squabble on June 20 between white and black bathers at the segregated city beaches on Belle Isle in the Detroit River. Within hours, 200 white sailors from a nearby base joined the white mob that attacked black men and women. A rumor that white citizens had killed a black woman and thrown her baby over a bridge spread across the city. Soon the riot was in full swing and spread quickly along Woodward Avenue, the city’s major thoroughfare, into Paradise Valley, where some 35,000 southern black migrants had joined, by the spring of 1943, the city’s already crowded black population. By Monday morning white men in search of more victims had overrun downtown Detroit. The mayor refused to acknowledge that the situation had gotten out of hand, but by Tuesday evening he could no longer deny the crisis.

Six thousand federal troops had to be dispatched to Detroit to restore order. When the violence ended, 34 people had been killed (25 black and nine white people) and more than 700 injured. Of the 25 black people who died, the Detroit police killed 17. The police did not kill any of the white men who assaulted African Americans or committed arson. Property damage was extensive, and one million man-hours were lost in war production.

In the aftermath, the city created the Mayor’s Interracial Committee, the first permanent municipal body designed to promote civic harmony and fairness.
Despite the efforts of labor and black leaders, many white people in Detroit, including Wayne County prosecutor William E. Dowling, blamed the black press and the NAACP for instigating the riot. Dowling and others accused the city’s black citizens of pushing too hard for economic and political equality and insisted that they operated under communist influence. One report concluded that black leaders provoked the riot because they had compared “victory over the axis . . . [with] a corresponding overthrow in the country of those forces which . . . prevent true racial equality.” In contrast, black leaders, radical trade unionists, and members of other ethnic organizations, especially Jewish groups, blamed, “the KKK, the Christian Front, the Black Dragon Society, the National Workers League, the Knights of the White Camelia, the Southern Voters League, and similar organizations based on a policy of terror and . . . white supremacy.”

THE G.I. BILL OF RIGHTS AND BLACK VETERANS

In 1944, President Roosevelt signed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (known as the “G.I. Bill of Rights”), legislation that would profoundly affect American life and society. It rewarded the sacrifices and accomplishments of black and white veterans in the war with college tuition allowances, stipends for books, and guaranteed loans of up to $2,000 (a substantial sum at the time) at low interest rates, with which to purchase homes or launch small businesses. Congress would eventually pay approximately $14.5 billion for the G.I. Bill’s provisions.

By 1947, veterans accounted for half of all college students. The G.I. Bill made possible the upward mobility of a generation of American men who entered professions and trades and purchased homes that would become the basis of future wealth. Between 1950 and 1960, Americans built more than 13 million new homes—11 million of them were in the suburbs, where one-quarter of the entire population relocated after the war. The G.I. Bill fueled the boom in higher education, transportation, and the construction industries that undergirded the postwar prosperity America enjoyed.

While many black veterans benefited from the G.I. Bill of Rights, they never received their fair share of funds and assistance. Mississippi Congressman John E. Rankin sabotaged the transformative potential of the G.I. Bill by insisting that state and local veterans’ administrators control the distribution of the benefits. The resulting racial disparities were predictable in southern states. In Mississippi, by the summer of 1947, local officials had approved over 3,000 Veterans Administration home loans, but only two went to African-American veterans. In northern urban areas, real estate agencies and banks practiced “redlining” and denied black men mortgages in desirable areas. The denial of loans and the violence that often erupted when black families attempted to move into suburban areas curtailed upward and outward mobility. Roosevelt may have thought he was signing a color-blind law, but its execution proved otherwise.

OLD AND NEW PROTEST GROUPS

ON THE HOME FRONT

The NAACP grew tremendously during the war, and by the war’s end it stood poised for even greater achievements. Under the editorial direction of Roy Wilkins, the circulation of the NAACP’s journal, the Crisis, grew from 7,000 to 45,000. During the war, the Crisis was one of the most important sources for information about black men and women. The NAACP’s membership increased from 50,000 in 1940 to 450,000 at the end of the war. Much of this growth occurred in the South, which by 1945 had more than 150,000 members.

Success, however, bred conflict and ambivalence. Leaders split over the value of integration versus self-segregation and questioned the benefit of relying so heavily on legal cases rather than paying more attention to the concerns and needs of working-class black men and women. Wilkins acknowledged the organization’s uncertainty and indecisiveness:

The war was a great watershed for the NAACP. We had become far more powerful, and now the challenge was to keep our momentum. Everyone knew the NAACP stood against discrimination and segregation, but what was our postwar program to be? Beyond discrimination and segregation, where would we stand on veterans, housing, labor-management relations, strikes, the Fair Employment Practices Commission, organizations at state levels, education? What would we do to advance the fight for the vote in the South? . . . We had a big membership . . . but we didn’t know how to use them.

In 1944 southern white liberals joined with African Americans to establish the Southern Regional Council (SRC). This interracial coalition, an important example of the local initiative of private citizens, was devoted to expanding democracy in a region better known for the political and economic oppression and exploitation of
its black citizens. The SRC conducted research and focused attention on the political, social, and educational inequalities endemic to black life in the South. Although the events of the 1950s and 1960s would soon overtake its patient, gradualist program, the SRC challenged the facade of southern white supremacy.

In 1942 a far more strident group called the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) had been

**PROFILE: Bayard Rustin**

Bayard Rustin, the preeminent strategist of nonviolent resistance, was born on March 17, 1910, in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Rustin worked behind the scenes to give shape and coherence to the modern civil rights movement. During his youth he belonged to the Young Communist League. But in the 1940s he, along with Pauli Murray and James Farmer, became staff members of the pacifist organization Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and experimented with Gandhian techniques of nonviolent resistance to racial injustice. In 1942, Rustin and Farmer were active in founding the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). A year later, Rustin refused to be drafted, rejecting even the traditional Quaker compromise of alternative service in an army hospital. Convicted of violating the Selective Service Act, he served three years in a federal penitentiary in Kentucky.

While in prison, Rustin honed the philosophy that would guide his life. Rustin wrote,

> There are three ways in which one can deal with an injustice. (a) One can accept it without protest. (b) One can seek to avoid it. (c) One can resist the injustice nonviolently. To accept it is to perpetuate it. To avoid it is impossible. To resist by intelligent means, and with an attitude of mutual responsibility and respect, is much the better course.

On release from prison, Rustin became race relations secretary for FOR and participated in countless protest organizations. He organized a Free India Committee to press for the end of British rule in India and directed A. Philip Randolph’s Committee Against Discrimination in the Armed Forces. He orchestrated CORE’s 1947 Journey of Reconciliation (a precursor to the Freedom Rides of 1961), in which 16 black and white men traveled by bus through the Upper South to test new federal laws prohibiting segregated services in interstate transportation. Outside Chapel Hill, North Carolina, the group was assaulted and arrested. Rustin and three of his colleagues were sentenced to 30 days on a road gang, of which he served 22 days. In the late 1950s Rustin was an adviser to Martin Luther King Jr. and one of the key figures in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Rustin, who was gay, fought oppression all his life. After the ebb tide of the civil rights movement, he shifted to combating homophobia. He declared shortly before his death on August 24, 1987, that “the barometer of where one is on human rights questions is no longer the black community, it’s the gay community. Because it is the community which is most easily mistreated.”
formed. It pursued different tactics from those of the NAACP, Urban League, and other existing civil rights groups. CORE began in Chicago when an interracial group of Christian pacifists gathered to find ways to make America live up to the ideals of equality and justice on which it based its war program. James Farmer and Bayard Rustin were key in getting the group off the ground. Unlike the NAACP, CORE was a decentralized, intensely democratic organization. CORE dedicated itself to the principles of nonviolent direct action as expounded by Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi. During the war this pacifist organization expanded to other cities and challenged segregation in the North with sit-ins and other protest tactics that the civil rights movement would later adopt.

African Americans fought discrimination in many ways. Women were central to these efforts. Throughout the 1940s, in countless communities across the South and the Midwest, black women organized women’s political councils and other groups to press for integration of public facilities—hospitals, swimming pools, theaters, and restaurants—and for the right to pursue collegiate and professional studies. Others were galvanized by the war and took advantage of the limited social and political spaces afforded them to create lasting works in the arts, literature, and popular culture. Women whose names would become virtually synonymous with the modern civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s helped lay its foundation in the World War II era. Ella Baker was accumulating contacts and sharpening her organizing skills as she served as the NAACP field secretary. Rosa Parks began resisting segregation laws on Montgomery, Alabama, buses during the 1940s.

Black college students also began protesting segregation in public accommodations. The spark that ignited the Howard University campus civil rights movement came in January 1943. Three sophomore women, Ruth Powell from Massachusetts and Marianne Musgrave and Juanita Morrow from Ohio, sat at a lunch counter near the campus and were refused service. They demanded to see the manager and vowed to wait until he came. Instead, two policemen arrived who instructed the waitress to serve them. When the check arrived, the trio learned they had been charged 25 cents each instead of the customary 10 cents. They placed 35 cents on the counter, turned to leave, and were arrested. Ruth Power later reported that “the policeman who arrested us told us we were being taken in for investigation because he had no proof that we weren’t ‘subversive agents.’” In fact, no charges were lodged against the women. The purpose of their arrest had been to intimidate them, but the incident instead fanned the smoldering embers of resentment in the Howard University student body.

**The Transition to Peace**

After the German surrender in May 1945 and the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the United States began the transition to peace. Many of the gains of black men and women were wiped away as the armed forces demobilized and the factories began reinstating the discriminatory hiring systems that were in place before the conflict. Access to fair, decent, and affordable housing remained a sore issue, as did the inequalities in educational opportunities and the continuing scourge of police brutality. Thus, as the country tried to regain its prewar footing, it was clear that segregation and discrimination would face a huge challenge in the coming years and that the African-American community was ready, willing, and able to fight in ways undreamed of in earlier eras.

**The Cold War and International Politics**

As the defeat of the Axis powers neared in early 1945, the United Nations began planning for the peace. Within a short time, however, the opposing interests of the Soviet Union and the United States led to a long period of intense hostility that became known as the Cold War. This conflict soon led to a division of Europe into two spheres, with the Soviets dominating part of Germany and the nations to its east and a coalition of democratic capitalist regimes allied with the United States in the west. Thereafter the overriding goal of the United States and its allies was the “containment” of communism. To this end, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was formed in 1949 to provide a military counterforce to Soviet power in Europe while American dollars helped rebuild Western Europe’s war-shattered economy. The United States forged a similarly close relationship with Japan. Much of the rest of the world, however, became contested terrain during the Cold War.

As the nations of Asia and Africa gained independence from colonial domination over the ensuing decades, the United States struggled to keep them out of the Soviet orbit. It did so through foreign aid, direct military force, and, occasionally, through clandestine operations run by the Central Intelligence Agency.
These interventions were matched by a rising diplomatic 
and propaganda effort to convince the emerging nations 
that the United States was a model to be emulated and 
an ally to be trusted.

The Cold War had an enormous influence on 
American society precisely when the powerful move-
ment for African-American rights was beginning to 
emerge. The long conflict resulted in the rise of a 
large permanent military establishment in the 
United States. The reorganized American military 
enlisted millions of men and women by the early 
1950s and claimed most of the national budget. The 
federal government also grew in power during the 
war and provided a check on the control that white 
southerners had exercised over race relations in 
their region for so long. American policymakers 
also became concerned about the nation’s ability to 
win the allegiance of Africans and other nonwhite 
people in the emerging nations. Soviet propaganda 
could discredit American sincerity by pointing to 
the deplorable state of race relations within the 
United States. Hence, during the Cold War, external 
pressures reinforced domestic efforts to change 
American racial policy.

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN WORLD AFFAIRS:
W. E. B. DU BOIS AND RALPH BUNCHE

The Cold War gave new importance to the 
optives of African Americans in world affairs. Two 
men, W. E. B. Du Bois and Ralph Johnson Bunche 
(1904–1971), represented alternative strategies for 
responding to this opportunity. Du Bois was highly crit-
ical of American policy. For half a century, he had 
linked the fate of African Americans with that of 
Africans, and by 1945 was widely hailed as the “Father 
of Pan-Africanism.” In that year he directed the Fifth 
Pan-African Congress, which met in Manchester, 
England. Africans who had been radicalized by World 
War II dominated the conference and encouraged it to 
denounce Western imperialism. Du Bois considered 
the United States a protector of the colonial system and 
opposed its stance in the Cold War. On returning from 
the Manchester congress, he declared,

We American Negroes should know . . . until Africa 
is free, the descendants of Africa the world over 
cannot escape their chains. . . . The NAACP should 
therefore put in the forefront of its program the 
freedom of Africa in work and wage, education 
and health, and the complete abolition of the 
colonial system.

In contrast to Du Bois, scholar-diplomat Ralph 
Bunche opted to work within the American system. 
Bunche held a Harvard doctorate in government and 
international relations and had spent much of the 
1930s studying the problems of African Americans. 
During World War II the American government 
found his expertise on Africa of tremendous value, 
and Bunche became one of the key policymakers 
for the region. His analysis of events and changes in 
Africa and the Far East after World War II led to his 
appointment as adviser to the U.S. delegation at the 
San Francisco conference that drafted the United 
Nations (UN) Charter. In 1948 he served as acting 
mediator of the UN Special Committee on Palestine, 
and in 1949 he negotiated an armistice between 
Egypt and Israel. He received the Spingarn Medal 
of the NAACP in 1949, and in 1950 he became the 
first African American to receive the Nobel Peace 
Prize. Although Bunche worked in concert with 
national policymakers, he was committed to winning
independence for African nations and freedom for his own people. As he wrote,

Today, for all thinking people, the Negro is the shining symbol of the true significance of democracy. He has demonstrated what can be achieved with democratic liberties even when grudgingly and incompletely bestowed. But the most vital significance of the Negro . . . to American society . . . is the fact that democracy which is not extended to all of the nation’s citizens is a democracy that is mortally wounded.

ANTICOMMUNISM AT HOME
The rising tensions with the Soviet Union affected all aspects of domestic life in the United States. Conservatives used fears of communist subversion to attack anyone who advocated change in America. This included people who were or had been members of the Communist Party, union members, liberals, and those who had fought for African-American rights. The Truman administration (1945–1953) responded to fears of subversion by instituting government loyalty programs. Government employees were dismissed for the merest suspicion of disloyalty. Militant American anticommunism reached a feverish peak in the immediate postwar years and ignited an explosion of red-baiting hysteria that led to the rise of Wisconsin Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy (1909–1957) and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). The relentless pursuit of “communist sympathizers” by McCarthy and HUAC ruined many lives. HUAC hounded people in the media and the entertainment industry. Even so prominent a figure as Du Bois was ripe for attack. On February 8, 1951, HUAC indicted him for allegedly serving as an “agent of a foreign principal” in his work with the Peace Information Center. In November a federal judge dismissed the charges. The government had been unable to prove Du Bois was an agent of communism. Despite his past contributions, fear and personal malice prevented most African-American leaders from defending him.

PAUL ROBESON
Paul Robeson (1898–1976) was one of the most tragic victims of these anticommunist witch hunts. This fine scholar and star collegiate athlete, Columbia Law School graduate, consummate performer, and star of stage and screen had always advocated the rights of African Americans and workers. During the 1930s he worked closely with the Communist Party (although he was never a member), becoming one of the most famous defenders of the Soviet Union. Many leftists of the time became disaffected with the Soviet Union after its 1939 pact with Hitler and its brutal repressiveness became clear. Robeson, however, doggedly stuck to his belief in Soviet communism.

In the late 1940s, Robeson’s pro-Soviet views and inflammatory statements aroused the ire of the U.S. government and its red hunters. A statement he made at the communist-dominated World Congress of the Defenders of Peace in Paris in 1949 provoked outrage. “It is unthinkable,” Robeson said, “that American Negroes would go to war on behalf of those [the United States] who have oppressed us for generations against a country [the Soviet Union] which in one generation has raised our people to full human dignity of mankind.” Later in 1949 crowds twice disrupted a Robeson concert in Peekskill, New York, the first time preventing the concert from being held, the second time terrorizing performers and audience members after the concert by throwing rocks at them.

Throughout the 1940s Robeson consistently linked the struggles of black America with the struggles of black Africa, brown India, yellow Asia, black Brazilians and Haitians, and workers throughout Latin America. Robeson also refused to sign an affidavit concerning past membership in the Communist Party. In response, the U.S. State Department revoked his passport in 1950 “because the Department considers that Paul Robeson’s travel abroad at this time would be contrary to the best interest of the United States.” The travel ban remained in effect until the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional in 1958.

Robeson had combined his art and his politics to attack racial discrimination, segregation, and the ideology of white supremacy and black inferiority in America. During the Cold War the state would tolerate no such dissent even by a world-acclaimed black artist.

HENRY WALLACE AND THE 1948 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION
Robeson’s struggles illustrate how conservative attacks choked off left-wing involvement in the struggle for black equality. The attacks destroyed Robeson’s brilliant singing career. The increasing importance of black votes to Democrats, however, meant that key elements of the African-American liberation struggle remained at the center of national politics. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the 1948 presidential election.

President Harry S. Truman was not expected to win this election because he faced a strong challenge from Thomas Dewey, the popular and well-financed Republican governor of New York. A challenge from his former secretary of commerce, Henry Wallace, who had been
Roosevelt’s vice president from 1941 to 1945, compounded Truman’s problems. Wallace ran on the ticket of the communist-backed Progressive Party, which sought to take the votes of liberals, leftists, and civil rights advocates disappointed by Truman’s moderation. Wallace also supported a peaceful accommodation with the Soviet Union. To undercut Wallace’s challenge, Truman began to press Congress to pass liberal programs.

Black votes in key northern states were central to Truman’s strategy for victory. African Americans in these tightly contested areas could make the difference between victory and defeat, so Truman, to retain their allegiance, sought to demonstrate his administration’s support of civil rights. In January 1948 he embraced the findings of his biracial Committee on Civil Rights and called for their enactment into law. The committee’s report, “To Secure These Rights,” was a blueprint for changing the racial caste system in the United States. It recommended passage of federal antilynching legislation, ending discrimination at the ballot box, abolishing the poll tax, desegregating the military, and many other measures.

The reaction of white southern politicians was swift and threatening, causing Truman to pause. But as the election neared, fear of black disaffection at the polls became so great that the Democratic convention passed a strong pro-civil rights plank. Many white southerners, led by South Carolina’s Governor Strom Thurmond, bolted from the convention and formed their own States’ Rights, or “Dixiecrat,” Party. In the election, the Dixiecrats carried South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Wallace carried no state. Dewey carried 13 northern and midwestern states, but Truman won a plurality in the popular vote and a majority in the Electoral College. The failure of the bulwark of white supremacy to prevent the Democratic Party from advocating African-American rights, and Truman’s victory, despite the defection of hard-line racists, represented a turning point in American politics.

**DESEGREGATING THE ARMED FORCES**

The importance of the black vote, the fight for the allegiance of the emerging nations, and the emerging civil rights movement hastened the desegregation of the military. In February 1948 a communist coup in Czechoslovakia raised the possibility of war between the United States and the Soviet Union and heightened concerns among military leaders about African Americans’ willingness to serve yet again in a Jim Crow army. When Congress reinstated the draft in March 1948, A. Philip Randolph, who—in a replay of the March on Washington scenario—had formed the League for Non-Violent Civil Disobedience Against Military

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**African-American civilians** demonstrated firm resolve to end racial segregation at home while Americans fought to make the world safe for democracy. The NAACP Detroit branch’s 1944 “Parade for Victory” featured pallbearers with caskets as they marched behind a sign that proclaimed “HERE LIES JIM CROW.” It conveyed the sentiment, if not the reality. But Jim Crow’s days were numbered.

Segregation in 1947, warned the nation that black men and women were fed up with segregation and Jim Crow and would not take a Jim Crow draft lying down. Black New York Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. also supported this stance. There were not enough jails in America to hold the black men who would refuse to bear arms in a Jim Crow army, he declared. On June 24, 1948, the Soviet Union heightened tensions even further when it imposed a blockade on West Berlin.

On July 26 Truman, anticipating war between the superpowers and hoping to shore up his support among black voters for the approaching November elections, issued Executive Order 9981, which mandated “equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.” After Truman signed the order, Randolph and Grant Reynolds, a former minister and cochair of the League for Nonviolent Civil Disobedience Against Military Segregation, disbanded the organization and called off marches planned for Chicago and New York.

Not until 1950 and the outbreak of the Korean War, however, was Truman’s order fully implemented. The Korean War reflected the American Cold War policy of containment, which was intended to stop what American leaders believed to be a worldwide
conspiracy orchestrated by Moscow to spread communism. In 1950 the North Koreans, allied with the Soviets, attacked the American-supported government in South Korea and launched a “hot war” in the midst of the Cold War. After the North Koreans invaded South Korea, the United States under UN auspices intervened. Heavy casualties early in the war depleted many white combat units. Thus, early in 1951, the army acted on Truman’s executive order and authorized the formal integration of its units in Korea. By 1954 the army had disbanded its last all-black units, and the armed forces became one of the first sectors of American society to abandon segregation.

**CONCLUSION**

The years between 1940 and 1954 were a dynamic period of black activism and witnessed a rising international consciousness among African Americans. The quest for racial justice in the military and on the home front became an integral part of the ongoing struggle for economic, political, and social progress. President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802 was a significant victory for A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement and for black workers, who were able to appeal racial discrimination in defense industries to the FEPC. The rise of fascism in Europe alarmed black and white Americans who correctly perceived ideologies based on racial tyranny and state dominance to be hostile to individual freedom and democracy. World War II profoundly transformed black servicemen and servicewomen.

The Cold War created a climate in America that was both hospitable and hostile to the African-American freedom movement. Radicals such as Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois found no place in this movement or in American society. Instead, more moderate organizations, such as the NAACP’s Legal Defense and Educational Fund, pursued their goals within the ideological and legal constraints of the American political system and met with some success. The coming civil rights movement would, however, soon lead to a more varied, vibrant, and successful challenge to racism.

**RECOMMENDED READING**


### African Americans and the Military


### ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY


BLACK URBAN STUDIES


BLACK AMERICANS, DOMESTIC RADICALISM, AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS


AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND BIOGRAPHY


RETRACTING THE ODYSSEY

National Museum of the Tuskegee Airmen at Historic Fort Wayne (Detroit, Michigan). http://www.tuskegeeairmennmuseum.com/. This museum documents the achievements of the combat aviators who served as a segregated unit of the U.S. armed forces in World War II. They received their training at the Army Air Corps base in Tuskegee, Alabama. During World War II these black aviators shot down enemy aircraft, bombed barges and enemy power stations, and successfully escorted American bombers on their missions across Europe.


REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did World War II change the status of African Americans? What were some of the consequences of so many black servicemen fighting in Europe against fascism and Nazism? How did the Tuskegee Airmen contribute to the Allied victory in Europe?

2. How did black women participate in the campaign to desegregate the U.S. military and in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade? How did Mabel Staupers win acceptance of black women into the military nurses corps?

3. What did the “Double V” campaign accomplish? How did African-American civilians support black servicemen? What institutional resources were African Americans able to marshal in their campaign against racism at home?

4. How did World War II affect black workers in America? What was the significance of A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement, and how did President Roosevelt respond to it?

5. Why did the Cold War originate, and what was its significance for black activism? How did the World War II era promote the internationalization of African-American consciousness? How did the State Department attempt to downplay black dissent in America, and why?

6. Why did President Truman decide to desegregate the U.S. military?

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My History Lab Connections

Review what you’ve learned in this chapter and explore the many documents, images, research tools, and activities for this chapter to learn more about African-American history.

READ

- Executive Order 8802 (1941)
- A. Philip Randolph, “Why Should We March” (1942)
- Thurgood Marshall, The Legal Attack to Secure Civil Rights (1942)
- Jim Crow in the Army Camps, (1940); Jim Crow Army (1941)
- Henry Wallace, Radio Address (1948)
- Executive Order 9981: Desegregation of the Armed Forces (1948)

LISTEN

- “Roosevelt and Hitler”: Buster Ezell’s Wartime Song
- Pearl Harbor

RESEARCH

- The Desegregation of the Military and Blacks in Combat
- Hitler and Roosevelt
- Population Shifts (1940–1950)

EXPLORE

- “Roosevelt and Hitler”: Buster Ezell’s Wartime Song
- Pearl Harbor

See the Map
African-American Soldiers in World War II

Nearly one million African Americans served during World War II. Soldiers in the transportation corps, almost half of whom were black, loaded supplies and drove them in trucks to the front lines. Black engineers built camps and ports, constructed and repaved roads, and performed many other tasks to support frontline troops. A number of African-American artillery, tank destroyer, anti-aircraft, and combat engineer battalions fought with distinction in Europe and Asia. African-American women also found expanded opportunities in the military. Approximately 4,000 black women served in the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps. The most visible group of black soldiers served in the Army Air Force. 

In January 1941, the War Department announced the formation of a training program at Tuskegee Army Air Field, Alabama, for black pilots. This squadron was also the first to have black officers.

Members of the African-American Seabee Battalion rush ashore during an assault training exercise, December 1942.

Pilots of an American P-51 Mustang fighter-bomber group learn their “target for today” during a briefing at a base in Italy, September 1944.

Benjamin O. Davis Jr. commanded the 332nd Group of Tuskegee Airmen, who participated in campaigns in Italy, France, Germany, and the Balkans.
Two American orderlies escort a German soldier captured at Normandy during World War II.

Soldiers pose with mortar shells scrawled with anti-Hitler messages, Europe 1943.

Willa Beatrice Brown was the first African-American woman to receive a commission as a lieutenant in the U.S. Civil Air Patrol. She trained pilots for the U.S. Army Air Force.

The 1st African American Division in Arizona take aim from a slit trench during World War II.

This World War II recruiting poster shows African-American and white laborers working side by side beneath an American flag, even though the armed forces were a segregated reality for African Americans.