

# World War II, the Cold War, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement

## FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHT TO FIGHT AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCES IN WWII

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In the years leading up to World War II, racial segregation and discrimination were part of daily life for many in the United States. For most African Americans, even the most basic rights and services were fragmented or denied altogether. To be black was to know the limits of freedom—excluded from the very opportunity, equality, and justice on which the country was founded.

Yet, once World War II began, thousands of African Americans rushed to enlist, intent on serving the nation that treated them as second-class citizens. They were determined to fight to preserve the freedom that they themselves had been denied. This is their story.

### Before the War

In a country divided along racial lines, the fixtures of everyday life—schools, shops, public transportation—were deemed “separate but equal” by Jim Crow. But for those entering through the “Blacks Only” door, little was equal. Racism and discrimination created an atmosphere of mistrust, injustice, and, for many, fear for their very lives.



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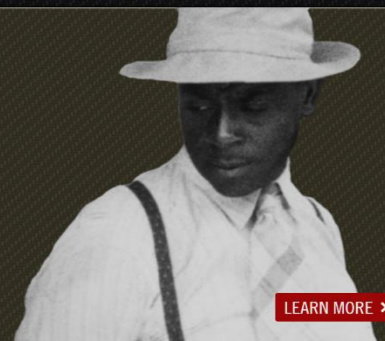
### During the War

President Roosevelt, who saw the need for engagement on an unprecedented scale, pushed to open doors for African Americans in the military and on the Home Front. More than 1 million black servicemembers would take part in World War II, risking their lives on behalf a country that treated them as second-class citizens.

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### After the War

Victorious over history’s most racist regimes, many black servicemembers returned home with hopes of a more tolerant nation. Most were bitterly disappointed. Segregation was still the law of the land; racism was alive and well. For many black veterans, disappointment became determination to fight discrimination with the same sense of purpose that had defeated the Axis.



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# Before the War

## Racism & Segregation



The NAACP flew this flag at its New York headquarters to report lynchings until the building owner threatened to evict the organization in 1938. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-09705

At the end of **World War I**, black soldiers returned home to find that the country they served still saw them as second-class citizens. In the South, Jim Crow "separate but equal" laws relegated African Americans to "black only" drinking fountains, bus seats, and schools. Jobs were harder to find for African Americans than for whites, and paid less. Discrimination was a daily part of American life. For black Americans, so too was the threat of violence: Operating largely in shadows, the Ku Klux Klan was at the height of its power during the 1920s.



Jim Crow, a racist stereotype personified by white actor Thomas D. Rice in the 1830s, was meant to emphasize the inferiority of African Americans. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ds-00886.



The Ku Klux Klan marches in Washington, D.C. at the height of its resurgence in the 1920s. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppoc-16219.



Segregated drinking fountains, such as this one in Halifax, North Carolina, were a part of life in the Deep South. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-fsa-8a03278.



Signs such as these were a part of life in the American South for decades. Many African American men and women from the northern or western United States first experienced segregation after joining the military during World War II and being sent south for training. The National WWII Museum, 2015.079

## Activism

Activists including W.E.B. Du Bois, A. Philip Randolph, and many others spoke out in protest of discriminatory practices, helping workers organize into unions to lobby for fair wages, publicizing the struggle of African Americans, and arguing for change in the books and newspapers that made up the "Black Press."



# During the War

THE ARMY

THE ARMY AIR FORCES

THE NAVY

THE MARINE CORPS

THE COAST GUARD

THE MERCHANT MARINE

THE HOME FRONT

As war drew near, it was clear that a massive need for production of arms and armaments to support US allies would require many hands, of every color. On June 25, 1941, President Roosevelt created Executive Order 8802, banning racially discriminatory hiring practices in any industry that held government contracts for national defense.

With the attack on Pearl Harbor came an ever greater sea change: The country found itself committed to a war that it was grossly unprepared to fight, and that required total mobilization to win. Beginning in 1942, Roosevelt began to issue directives to increase opportunities for black enlistment in the armed forces.

## The Army

When World War II began, the Army held a deep distrust in the quality of black soldiers. The critical need for manpower forced the Army to field several African American combat units during the war, but the overwhelming majority of the 900,000 African Americans that served in the Army during the war were limited to logistical jobs.



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## The Army Air Forces

The prewar Army Air Corps was more vehement than most of the services regarding the inferiority of African Americans. The Air Corps was adamant that blacks could not serve as combat pilots. However, bowing to a presidential decree in 1941, the Air Corps began training a limited number of pilots at Tuskegee, Alabama—the legendary Tuskegee Airmen.



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## The Navy

The tradition-bound Navy initially resisted accepting black servicemembers . . . then enlisted African Americans but denied them proper combat training and limited them to the roles of stevedore, steward, or cook. Nevertheless, recruitment surged: more than 160,000 African Americans would serve in the Navy during World War II.



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## The Marine Corps

Initially, the Marine Corps strongly resisted the inclusion of African Americans, and limited black troops to supply and logistical roles. In reality, black Marines found themselves in some of the fiercest fighting of the Pacific War, including Peleliu and Iwo Jima.



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## The Coast Guard

Of nearly 5,000 African American Coast Guardsmen who served during the war, half of them received billets at shore stations or as beach patrolmen. The other half went to sea, most of them as officer's stewards, though they also manned battle stations as gunners, loaders, and ammunition passers.



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## The Merchant Marine

The Merchant Marine was technically outside of the military, and was much more lenient in employing African Americans. Black mariners were allowed to sign on to any billet in which they were qualified, though some shipping companies employed by the US government still required that crews be segregated by race.



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## The Home Front

With tens of thousands of former workers called up for service, Home Front employers sought a new work force—and black men and women traveled across the country in search of new opportunities and a steady wage.



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Executive Order 8802 had prohibited some discriminatory practices during hiring, but after hiring, companies were free to segregate. Cafeterias and restrooms were segregated. Black workers entered work through separate doors and lived in separate, often inferior housing. African Americans were frequently paid less, assigned more menial jobs, and denied the chance for advancement.



Juanita E. Gray, a former domestic worker, learns to operate a lathe at the National Youth Administration training center in Washington, DC. National Archives, 208-NP-20000-1.



African American workers assemble aircraft cockpits soon after completing a war industry training course. National Archives, 208-NP-20V-2.

# The Return Home



African Americans carry a casket down the street under a banner reading "Here Lies Jim Crow." Library of Congress, LC-10262-10568

With the war against two of the most racist regimes in history won, hundreds of thousands of black servicemembers returned home with expectations of a more tolerant nation. Most were bitterly disappointed to discover that very little had changed at home. Segregation was still the law of the land, and racism was alive and well.

# Seeds of the Civil Rights Movement

For many African American veterans, that disappointment became determination to create change. They fought against segregation and discrimination with the same sense of purpose that had defeated the Axis. It is no coincidence that many of the leading figures of the Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 1960s were veterans.



He did not join the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Though he would clearly follow the lead example of the "Father" of the Civil Rights Movement, he was not the first African American to do so. He was the first African American to be elected to the NAACP's Board of Directors in 1944, becoming the first African American to be elected to the NAACP's Board of Directors. He served as the NAACP's first African American vice president in 1948. He was also the first African American to be elected to the NAACP's Board of Directors in 1948. Library of Congress, LC-10262-130148



Growing up in the South, Walter Evers was routinely subjected to discrimination, including routine acts of violence. In the Army, he met many men who fought back against injustice. Evers returned home determined to continue the fight, and became one of Mississippi's first African American lawyers. Early on the morning of June 10, 1960, Evers was assassinated by white supremacists. Evers' De La Reuther, also a 1995 veteran, who escaped conviction until 1994. Library of Congress, LC-10262-199608

In December 1946, President Truman ordered the creation of the President's Committee on Civil Rights, which looked at the service of African American men and women in World War II. Its findings disproved the post-WWI War College study that had declared African Americans unfit to serve. They also stated officially what was already widely felt: black Americans did not enjoy the freedoms and liberties that they had fought and died to grant to others around the world.



The members of the President's Committee on Civil Rights pose at the group's first public hearing. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-hoc-27566.

ESTABLISHING THE PRESIDENT'S COMMITTEE ON  
EQUALITY OF TREATMENT AND OPPORTUNITY IN  
THE ARMED SERVICES

WHEREAS it is essential that there be maintained in the armed services of the United States the highest standards of democracy, with equality of treatment and opportunity for all those who serve in our country's defense:

NOW, THEREFORE, by virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States, by the Constitution and the statutes of the United States, and as Commander in Chief of the armed services, it is hereby ordered as follows:

1. It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin. This policy shall be put into effect as rapidly as possible, having due regard to the time required to effectuate any necessary changes without impairing efficiency or morale.

2. There shall be created in the National Military Establishment an advisory committee to be known as the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services, which shall be composed of seven members to be designated by the President.

3. The Committee is authorized on behalf of the President to examine into the rules, procedures and practices of the armed services in order to determine in what respect such rules, procedures and practices may be altered or improved with a view to carrying out the policy of this order. The Committee shall confer and advise with the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary

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of the Army, the Secretary of the Navy, and the Secretary of the Air Force, and shall make such recommendations to the President and to said Secretaries as in the judgment of the Committee will effectuate the policy hereof.

4. All executive departments and agencies of the Federal Government are authorized and directed to cooperate with the Committee in its work, and to furnish the Committee such information or the services of such persons as the Committee may require in the performance of its duties.

5. When requested by the Committee to do so, persons in the armed services or in any of the executive departments and agencies of the Federal Government shall testify before the Committee and shall make available for the use of the Committee such documents and other information as the Committee may require.

6. The Committee shall continue to exist until such time as the President shall terminate its existence by Executive order.

THE WHITE HOUSE,  
July 26, 1948.

Executive Order 9981 was introduced by President Truman in 1948 to end segregation in the armed forces. Courtesy of the National Archives.

## Medal of Honor Recipients

No African American servicemen received the Medal of Honor during World War II. However, thousands of black soldiers did see combat, and many distinguished themselves.



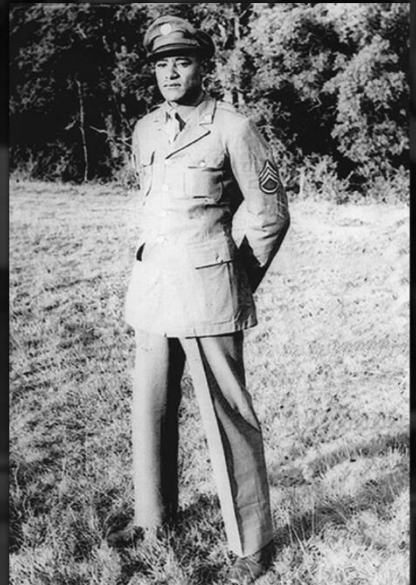
The Congressional Medal of Honor. Courtesy of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society

Several of these servicemen were recommended for the Medal of Honor during the war, but the recommendations were lost or rejected due to an unwritten practice of denying the nation's highest military medal to African Americans.

More than 50 years after the war, President Bill Clinton ordered an investigation into this discriminatory practice. The result was a 1997 ceremony that awarded the medal belatedly to these seven men.



When the freighter on which he was being transported was sunk, Private Watson pulled many men to life rafts before he became exhausted and drowned. He was originally awarded a posthumous Distinguished Service Cross, the first awarded to a black man in World War II. He was the only African American to receive the Medal of Honor for service in the Pacific Theater. Courtesy of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.



Staff Sergeant Ruben Rivers distinguished himself in his first days in combat by jumping out of his tank to dismantle an enemy roadblock singlehandedly. A week later, Rivers was seriously wounded when his tank struck a mine—but he refused evacuation and continued to lead his tanks in an attack on the French town of Geisling. Courtesy of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.



While leading a patrol towards Climbach, France, Charles Thomas and his men were ambushed by Germans. Despite serious injuries, Thomas pulled his men to safety, deployed the rest of his patrol in covered positions, then refused evacuation for over an hour while he briefed his replacement and made sure that his men were in good positions. Courtesy of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.



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John Fox was serving as a forward artillery observer attached to the 366th Infantry Regiment when his position in Sommacolina, Italy, came under attack. When his company abandoned the town, Fox stayed behind to call down artillery fire, and give the US forces time to get away. Fox crawled forward closer and closer to his position, knowing that he would be killed. When the 30th Infantry Division retask Sommacolina, they found Fox's body surrounded by more than 100 dead German soldiers. Courtesy of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.



Edward Carter, Jr.'s unit came under attack while advancing toward Speyer, Germany. Carter led a patrol toward the town, but all of his men were killed or wounded. Despite being hit five times, Carter destroyed two enemy positions, killed several German soldiers, and captured two others who provided valuable intelligence that allowed US forces to advance. Courtesy of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.



Vernon Baker was ordered to take an enemy position at Castello Aghimelli, Italy, on April 5, 1945. He was ordered to hold the position by his white commander, who soon fled the battlefield. Cut off and nearly surrounded, Baker exposed himself to enemy fire to cover the evacuation of his wounded men. By the time he abandoned the position on April 6, Baker had only six men left of the 26 he led into battle.

Vernon Baker was the only living Medal of Honor recipient in 1997. Courtesy of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.



# Did World War II Launch the Civil Rights Movement?

**Centuries of prejudice and discrimination against blacks fueled the civil rights crusade, but World War II and its aftermath were arguably the main catalysts.**

By Annette McDermott

**The civil rights movement was a fight for equal rights under the law for African Americans during the 1950s and 1960s.** Centuries of prejudice and discrimination fueled the crusade, but World War II and its aftermath were arguably the main catalysts.

A. Philip Randolph's crusade against discrimination prodded Roosevelt into action.

On January 6, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave a State of the Union speech outlining the need for America to help Europe fight against Hitler's tyranny.

He spoke famously of **Four Freedoms for all**: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear. It was an admirable vision, but few American blacks of the era enjoyed true freedom of any kind.

As America prepared for war, civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph threatened to organize a march on Washington to protest segregation and discrimination in the armed forces and defense industries.

The threat brought increased attention to race relations and compelled Roosevelt to issue **Executive Order 8802** which prohibited, "discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries and in Government because of race, creed, color, or national origin."

### **Blacks served admirably in the war.**

Prior to World War II, about 4,000 blacks served in the armed forces. By the war's end, that number had grown to over 1.2 million, though the military remained segregated.

Black Americans served their country with distinction: At first, they worked as support troops, but as casualties increased many became infantrymen, airmen, medics and even officers.

All-black or mostly black units such as the 320th Anti-Aircraft Barrage Balloon Battalion, the 761st Tank Battalion and the Tuskegee Airmen fought their way through Europe and earned reputations as courageous, honorable soldiers.

Yet, according to John C. McManus, Ph.D., Curators' Distinguished Professor of U.S. Military History at the Missouri University of Science and Technology, "... quite commonly black

soldiers found themselves confronted with ugly discrimination and segregation during off-duty hours in military towns, especially in the South.

“Probably the most famous instance of this was when Lt. Jackie Robinson refused to comply with the bus segregation at Ft. Hood. Many other incidents led to confrontations and significant violence and much social activism. At times, there were riots between white and black soldiers, even overseas as well.”

As whites at home went to war, blacks left behind had access to manufacturing jobs previously unavailable to them. They learned new skills, joined unions and became part of the industrial workforce.

### **The ‘Double V Campaign’ fought for victory at home and abroad.**

In 1942, African American James G. Thompson wrote a letter to the Pittsburgh Courier titled, “Should I Sacrifice to Live Half American?” which questioned if he should fight for a country that discriminated against him.

Thompson initiated the “Double V” campaign to encourage others to fight for victory and freedom abroad and at home.

The double V slogan took hold. “By serving their country, [black soldiers] earned a great deal of respect from fair-minded whites and blacks alike. This in turn gave them a greater political voice than they otherwise might have had,” said McManus.

### **Black veterans led the postwar civil rights charge.**

Blacks returned home from the war to a life of bigotry and injustice. “[Blacks] had just helped destroy some of the most homicidal, racist regimes in human history and yet they had served in an armed force that was segregated on the basis of race,” said McManus.

"They were victimized by the same sort of racist views that had animated America's enemies. This made zero sense and it created a powerful moral imperative for domestic change."

The blatant injustice motivated blacks and unprejudiced whites to fight discrimination. Many blacks moved to large cities to find jobs using skills they'd learned in the military.

Others became civil rights activists and lent their powerful voices to organizations such as the NAACP, CORE, the Regional Council of Negro Leadership and the Deacons for Defense and Justice. In 1948, their efforts paid off when President Harry Truman issued an executive order to desegregate the military.

According to McManus, "World War II led to an explosion of racial reform, issues that the Civil War failed to solve and that had been festering for nearly a century. In my opinion, World War II was the most significant event in American history, to a great extent because of the racial change it helped foster."

SOURCE: <https://www.history.com/news/did-world-war-ii-launch-the-civil-rights-movement>

## **Executive Order 9981**

is an executive order issued on July 26, 1948, by President Harry S. Truman that prohibited discrimination "on the basis of race, color, religion or national origin" in the United States Armed Forces.

## **The Cold War, Race, and Civil Rights**

In 1958, an African-American handyman named Jimmy Wilson was sentenced to die in Alabama for stealing two dollars. Shocking as this sentence was, it was overturned only after

intense international attention and the interference of an embarrassed John Foster Dulles. Soon after the United States' segregated military defeated a racist regime in World War II, American racism was a major concern of U.S. allies, a chief Soviet propaganda theme, and an obstacle to American Cold War goals throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Each lynching harmed foreign relations, and "the Negro problem" became a central issue in every administration from Truman to Johnson.

In [an] analysis of how international relations affected any domestic issue, Mary L. Dudziak [professor of law, history, and political science at the University of Southern California] interprets postwar civil rights as a Cold War feature. She argues that the Cold War helped facilitate key social reforms, including desegregation. Civil rights activists gained tremendous advantage as the government sought to polish its international image. But improving the nation's reputation did not always require real change. This focus on image rather than substance — combined with constraints on **McCarthy-era** political activism and the triumph of law-and-order rhetoric — limited the nature and extent of progress.

**Instructor question:** What was **McCarthyism**? Brief answer: An anti-communist hysteria (came to be known as the "Red Scare") engendered by an opportunistic politically corrupt demagogic politician in the U.S. Senate by the name of Joseph R. McCarthy, a Republican from Wisconsin, by means of a nation-wide witch hunt involving false accusations against individuals during the period 1950-1954. As a result of McCarthyism, the human and civil rights of hundreds of individuals were violated; including many even losing their jobs and livelihood. McCarthyism also had a negative impact on the civil rights movement because civil rights activists too, not surprisingly, were labeled communists or communist sympathizers. McCarthyism would end when the U.S. Army fought back after McCarthy accused many of its officers and civilians working for it of being communists too. Reminder:

communism is not illegal in United States because of First Amendment rights that protects freedom of speech (and thereby freedom of thought).

Archival information, much of it newly available, supports Dudziak's argument that civil rights was Cold War policy. But the story is also one of people: an African-American veteran of World War II lynched in Georgia; an attorney general flooded by civil rights petitions from abroad; the teenagers who desegregated Little Rock's Central High; African diplomats denied restaurant service; black artists living in Europe and supporting the civil rights movement from overseas; conservative politicians viewing desegregation as a communist plot; and civil rights leaders who saw their struggle eclipsed by Vietnam.

**SOURCE:** <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691152431/cold-war-civil-rights>