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# Fighting the Double Front: The Military Rights Movement of the World War II Era

*Erin McGowan*

On July 6, 1863, Frederick Douglass said, “Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters US, let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on earth or under the earth which can deny that he has earned the right of citizenship in the United States.”<sup>1</sup>

For most of history, military service has been directly linked to citizenship and the rights that come with it. Although African Americans have been involved in every American conflict since the Revolutionary War, they were particularly limited to support units because of the connection between fighting in military combat and civilian rights. During the First World War, there was hope that honorable service of African Americans in Europe would help secure more rights in the military. This would not be the case. African Americans learned during World War I that “you don’t do your duty and hope for reward. You make your demand, strike your bargain, and then go fight.”<sup>2</sup> The Second World War would see active, organized resistance to the racial discrimination faced by those African Americans seeking to participate in the war effort. While some historians have pointed to this time as the foundation of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, others have attributed this time to disillusionment and futile struggle, brushing aside words like “watershed” and “turning point” to place emphasis on the later Civil Rights Movement. This view, however, fails to recognize the impact the World War II experience had on African American society, the U.S. military, and American society as a whole. To view this time exclusively in the shadow of the larger, more overt movement of the 1960s is to take away the very tangible effect these efforts had. By changing the lens through which we view the struggle of African Americans in the World War II Era, we can see it not as a lead in to the Civil Rights Movement but as a stand-alone conflict with strategic and organized efforts to change the African American’s place in the military and war industries. Though undoubtedly linked to later movements, this unnamed fight of the 1940s is not simply the prelude to a bigger, better story. This struggle of the 1940s can be identified as a Military Rights Movement with its own agenda, tactics, and palpable results, including the integration of American troops by President Truman in the years immediately following the conflict.

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1 Neil A. Wynn. *The African American Experience During World War II*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010. 1.

2 Marc Parry. "Roots of Freedom." *Chronicle Of Higher Education* 60, no. 36 (May 23, 2014): B10.

The history of how the African American experience in World War II is perceived has been one that has seen vast changes since it first became a topic of interest to historians. In many ways, it is one that is still under debate and study, as historians have yet to come to a clear consensus on the effects that the experiences of the Second World War had on the African Americans that served in the armed forces and those that remained on the home front. The early accounts of the African American experience were those written by white officers, which exclude, limit, or outright misreport both the achievements and the experiences that the African American troops encountered during service.<sup>3</sup> Those works written by black writers were often only read by a black audience.<sup>4</sup> These include firsthand accounts of the subpar conditions and the racism soldiers encountered like the former NAACP director Walter White's *Rising Wind* (1945).<sup>5</sup>

As time distanced historians from the events of World War II, the world saw the passage of the Civil Rights Movement, which dramatically affected the way the struggles of African Americans were perceived. While some saw the Civil Rights Movement as coming out of nowhere, historians of the late 1960s were connecting the events to the struggles of the 1930s and 1940s. During this time, the 1940s were seen as a "watershed" for African Americans and equality. Historians claimed major advances in areas such as work equality, particularly in the war industries as well as in the armed services. They claimed during this time that "communities see a rise in black social activism and political participation".<sup>6</sup> Richard M. Dalfiume's formative article, published in 1968, went so far as to call the 1940s "the forgotten years of the Negro Revolution," titling his work with that very name. He claims that a "search for a watershed" in African American history ends in the years of World War II and that these years "prepared the ground" for the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>7</sup>

A different look at the impact of the war years on African Americans began to emerge in the 1970s and persisted through much of the decade. The enthusiasm for the strides made during the 1940s was tempered somewhat after the 1960s. Ulysses Lee pointed out in his book,

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3 Helen K. Black, and William H. Thompson. "A War Within a War: A World War II Buffalo Soldier's Story." *Journal Of Men's Studies* 20, no. 1. 32.

4 Ibid., 34.

5 Arvarh E. Strickland and Robert E. Weems Jr. "African Americans in the Military of the United States ." *The African American Experience : An Historiographical and Bibliographical Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000.) 6.

6 A. E. Kersten. "African Americans and World War II." *OAH Magazine of History* 16, no. 3 (2002). 13.

7 Richard M. Dalfiume. "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution." *The Journal of American History* 55, no 1 (June, 1968): 90.

*Employment of Negro Troops* (1966), that if it had not been for the rush and sense of urgency that followed the attack on Pearl Harbor, black service men would have been stuck in noncombat roles throughout the war instead of seeing the shift to segregated combat units.<sup>8</sup> Need paved the way for gain. Historical writings in this time argued that the social, political, and economic gains achieved in the war years were actually lost in the post-war era.<sup>9</sup> In the 1980s, a deeper exploration of the African American's personal views on their experiences in World War II again shifted the waters. In classic works like Phillip McGuire's *Taps for a Jim Crow Army* (1983) and Graham Smith's *When Jim Crow Met John Bull: Black American Soldiers in World War II Britain* (1987), historians delved into how the African Americans themselves felt about their experiences during the war, the impact it had on their views on their place in American society, and ultimately how they were going to change that place.<sup>10</sup>

In 1976, Neil A. Wynn published what would become the seminal classic *Afro Americans and the Second World War*. Wynn's work walks the middle line by definitively connecting the experiences of African Americans during World War II to the Civil Rights Movement without declarations of "turning points" and "watersheds." The book was a path-setter in that it not only chronicled the experiences of African American soldiers during the war, but it also explored its impacts upon them to create continuity in the historiography. While Wynn, in another book, *The African American Experience During World War II* (2010), hesitates to go so far as calling the World War II experience a turning point, he does not dispute it as a crucial point in the African American's seemingly endless fight for equality. He states that while the efforts may not have been a watershed, they were unprecedented.<sup>11</sup> This particular view opens up the door to examining the experiences and impacts of African Americans during the war in a slightly different light that reveals more about the World War II experience of African Americans and its ultimate impact on their campaign for equality. In further exploration and research, we can see how to ultimately connect aspects of previous views to create a more comprehensive and complete view that shows a definable struggle, movement, and era of results obtained by African Americans during this time.

Since the foundation of the United States military, both black and white Americans have consistently linked the concepts of military service and the rights of full citizenship.<sup>12</sup> It is because of this, and the fear held by white Americans of armed African Americans, that African

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8 Strickman, 6.

9 Kersen, 13.

10 Strickman, 7.

11 Wynn, 13.

12 George White Jr. "I Am Teaching Some of The Boys:" Chaplain Robert Boston Dokes and Army Testing of Black Soldiers in World War II." *Journal Of Negro Education* 81, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 203.

Americans were mostly limited to support units and were consistently and systematically discriminated against by the United States military. Despite the contributions of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, the first segregated black combat unit in World War I, and General Pershing referring to the unit as “one of the best of the American Expeditionary Force,” the efforts of these men were marginalized or completely ignored.<sup>13</sup> Coming into the World War II years, African Americans had to fight the reputation that in combat they were “cowardly, lacked resourcefulness, and incompetent.”<sup>14</sup> In the face of such abysmal prospects in the years approaching World War II, African Americans recognized the importance of serving their country as a road to equality, but they would face great discrimination in the quest for it.

Racism had quieted considerably in the 1930s and 1940s and the army would end up becoming an “engine of change” when it came to race relations.<sup>15</sup> But the conditions faced by African Americans did not reflect a society ready for change. Although the Selective Service and Training Act of 1940 prohibited racial discrimination, this did not do much to limit the discrimination in the actual system of the draft and the military. African Americans served on only 250 of the 6,442 Draft Boards in the U.S.<sup>16</sup> Only 3 served in the southern states. Just over half of African American draftees were put into Class I for immediate service compared to only 32.5 percent of white draftees.<sup>17</sup> Even more frustrating were the non-combat service roles black draftees had to fill. African Americans felt they were “drafted to be drivers.”<sup>18</sup> Even those entering service voluntarily faced discrimination. Eugene Tarrant was turned away from both the Marines and the Army because of his skin color before being able to enlist in the Navy.<sup>19</sup> Medal of Honor recipient Vernon Baker was told by the first recruiter he met that “we ain’t got no orders for you people.”<sup>20</sup>

Institutional racism began immediately after entering the forces. The Army General Classification Test (AGCT) determined where soldiers served, and their promotions, pay grades,

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13 Carolyn Ross Johnston. *My Father's War : Fighting with the Buffalo Soldiers in World War II*. Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 2012. 20

14 White, 203

15 Thomas A. Bruscino. *A Nation Forged in War : How World War II Taught Americans to Get Along*. Knoxville: Univ Tennessee Press, 2010. 47.

16 Wynn, 44.

17 Ibid.

18 Black, 35.

19 Eugene Tarrant, interview by Tom Gibbs, *National World War II Museum*. 2013.

20 Vernon Baker, interview by National World War II Museum, 2008.

and benefits.<sup>21</sup> Most whites fell in Class III, which is average, while most blacks fell in Class IV, or inferior. 84 percent of African Americans fell into Classes IV or V where they could not be promoted to officers.<sup>22</sup> Grade V soldiers could also not be used in combat, thereby preventing African Americans from filling the combat roles that were linked with the ideas of patriotism and citizenship. Therefore, many black units were supplemented with white Commissioned and Non-Commissioned Officers to make up for those soldiers testing at Grade V. When Tarrant took his placement test, he received a perfect score. According to him, upon seeing this score, the recruiter said, “Too bad he’s colored.”<sup>23</sup> This institutional racism persisted despite Army pamphlets that boasted, “Great soldiers are made, not born.”<sup>24</sup>

Once enlisted, black soldiers truly were in a Jim Crow Army. Separate but equal treatment depended greatly on the commanding officer. Unfortunately for African Americans, 80 percent of them would be sent to the South for training.<sup>25</sup> This was not merely because most U.S. army bases were located in the Southern states, but because white Southern officers were reputed to “know how to handle” African Americans.<sup>26</sup> Medal of Honor recipient Vernon Baker said: “These white heirs of the plantation era commanded black men whom they were raised to disdain and distrust. At the same time, blacks who had been persecuted, whipped, and spit upon as soldiers had to defend these commanders and their culture to the death.”<sup>27</sup> This was, he said, “an unpalatable, unworkable mandate.”<sup>28</sup>

During their time in the South, African Americans were subject not only to Jim Crow Laws but to local civilian and law enforcement animosity. There are numerous accounts of violence toward uniformed African Americans by white civilians. On August 14, 1941, the African American 94<sup>th</sup> Engineers Unit conducted drilling practice on a roadside near Fort Lewis, Arkansas, because they could not use the same facilities as the white units. During their workout, they were attacked by a white mob that included Arkansas state troopers. Their weapons were unloaded, revealing the universal fear whites had of any armed black.<sup>29</sup> On July 8, 1944, Pvt. Booker T. Spicely was shot in the back while in uniform by a white bus driver for not moving to

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21 White, 206.

22 Ibid.

23 Tarrant.

24 White, 206.

25 Wynn, 47.

26 Johnston, 15.

27 Ibid., 40.

28 Ibid.

29 White, 208.

the back of the transport bus quickly enough.<sup>30</sup> In another instance, white police officers beat three black women in the Women's Auxiliary Corps for not moving from a white waiting room to a colored waiting room.<sup>31</sup>

Although African Americans were allowed to enter into segregated combat units during World War II, there was little sense of victory in this. Even with the creation of segregated fighting units like the famous 92<sup>nd</sup> and 93<sup>rd</sup> Divisions known as the Buffalo Soldiers, the Jim Crow Army served simply to extend the frustration that African Americans felt in civilian life. Of the 650,000 African Americans that would serve in the war, only 50,000 would ever actually see combat. Black soldiers were mostly confined to base to do manual labor.<sup>32</sup> They also endured inferior living quarters. Facilities were completely segregated and the black facilities sorely lacking. One report states that nine black companies were made to share facilities built to accommodate three.<sup>33</sup>

In 1939, there were a total of five black officers in the United States military and three of them were chaplains.<sup>34</sup> Because segregation was very expensive for the government, black officers trained with white officers.<sup>35</sup> Those that did get the chance to attend officer school were often referred to as "nowhere men," caught somewhere between the white and black worlds.<sup>36</sup> However to white officers, they were lumped in with enlisted men. African American officers were often passed over for promotion because they outnumbered the number of African American regiments.<sup>37</sup>

While this racism took place within the army, the U.S. government was overtly aware of the need for high morale in black troops.<sup>38</sup> On the one hand, white officers commanding black troops felt they had been cheated out of a higher command.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, they were under instructions to "avoid all practices tending to give the colored soldiers cause to feel that the

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30 Wynn, 47.

31 Ibid.

32 Black, 39.

33 Bert Babero. "Letter to Atty. Truman A. Gibson, Civilian Aide to Secretary of War." PBS. February 13, 1944.

34 Kersten, 15.

35 Bruscano, 140.

36 Black, 38.

37 Wynn, 45.

38 William L Dawson. "Letter to John J. McGoy, Assistant Secretary of War." Truman Library: Desegregation of the Armed Forces Online Research File. February 28, 1944.

39 Black, 40.

Army makes any differentiation between him and any other soldier.”<sup>40</sup> This directive is tragically ironic given that the black troops were already very aware of any differentiation given to the segregated units they were assigned to. Later in the same document, it is assured that officers will be alerted of colored troop movements to accord enough time to provide separate facilities.<sup>41</sup>

Further salt on the long festering wounds of African American soldiers was the treatment of Italian and German prisoners of war. Black soldiers were forced to stand by silently as they watched their imprisoned enemy receive better living conditions and medical treatment than they themselves received.<sup>42</sup> POWs even enjoyed greater freedom of movement around the camp than black guards.<sup>43</sup> The sentiments of frustration and despair over this situation are a theme commonly seen in letters from African American soldiers. Private Bert Babero can only use the word “disheartening” upon observing segregated latrines in a camp near Fort Barkley, Texas.<sup>44</sup> The latrines were not separated by prisoner and guard, but by black and white. Of this, Babero said, “The tyrant is actually placed over the liberator.”<sup>45</sup>

While most black soldiers were left to observe these insults on the home front, a limited number were also sent overseas to see combat. Prejudices followed them across the Atlantic. By August of 1944, some 200,000 African Americans had served in the European Theater of Operations.<sup>46</sup> They suffered racist injustices while there. Blacks accounted for 8 percent of American forces but represented 42 percent of those convicted for sex crimes while overseas.<sup>47</sup> Of the 91 military executions that took place, 80 percent of those executed were black.<sup>48</sup> The Buffalo Soldiers of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Division were sent to the front lines of Italy on what was perceived as a “doomed mission” designed purely to reinforce the idea that black soldiers were not fit for

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40 J.S. Leonard . "Digest of War Department Policy Pertaining to Negro Military Personnel." Truman Library: Desegregation of the Armed Forces Online Research File. January 1, 1944. 2.

41 Ibid.

42 Matthias Reiss (1). "Icons of Insult: German and Italian Prisoners of War in African American Letters During World War II." *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 49, no. 4 (2004): 544.

43 Matthias Reiss (2). "Solidarity Among "Fellow Sufferers": African Americans and German Prisoners of War in the United States During World War II." *The Journal of African American History* 98, no. 4 (2013): 539.

44 Babero.

45 Ibid.

46 Wynn, 55.

47 Ibid., 53.

48 Ibid.



combat.<sup>49</sup> The men were sent into the Italian mountains with no winter gear, calling to mind images of a modern Valley Forge, except that supplies were not lacking but instead withheld.<sup>50</sup>

Yet they also got a taste of freedom serving in Europe. They were heartily welcomed by British and Italian civilians who regarded them as saviors in the way that their own country did not. “They loved us and showered us with hugs, kisses, and wine. Our color was no issue at all, and they were not critics.”<sup>51</sup> During the Battle of the Bulge when replacements ran low, Eisenhower called upon black soldiers to volunteer to fill the gaps. Approximately 5,000 went and 2,500 of those served next to whites on the battlefield in integrated units.<sup>52</sup> Military surveys showed that prejudice decreased amongst white soldiers the longer they served with their black comrades.<sup>53</sup> The idea that African Americans could get equality through military service was reinforced. Those black soldiers brought back to America the feelings of freedom that they found in Europe.

The true importance of these experiences for African American soldiers in World War II does not lie in the fact that they happened but in the response of the African American community. It is false to assume that during this time black Americans were complacently waiting for whatever bones the American government would throw to them. In this time, resistance and activism was vibrant, flourishing, and having a real effect on the state of race in the American military and American society. Though some of the actions of resistance that challenged the racial status quo in America were the informal actions of individuals, many were part of an organized, preconceived movement with the determined goal of change.

The war in Europe became a rallying point around which African Americans would gather in order to enact change and create a sense of their own worthiness. Some black Americans felt a certain amount of resistance to what they believed was a “white man’s war.”<sup>54</sup> As one epitaph carved in a gravestone on a Pacific Island put it, “Here lies a black man killed fighting a yellow man for the protection of a white man.”<sup>55</sup> Such attitudes pushed the American government to believe that African Americans were a disgruntled group that would be easy for the enemy to exploit. There was a certain amount of distrust towards black loyalty to the war effort. In 1941, J. Edgar Hoover pushed President Roosevelt to indict editors of the black newspaper, *The Afro-American*, for sedition based on publications of works denouncing the

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49 Black, 39.

50 Ibid., 77.

51 Johnston, 106.

52 Wynn, 55.

53 Ibid.

54 Kersten, 15.

55 Wynn, 50.

inability of African Americans to fully participate in the war effort.<sup>56</sup> The FBI's Racial Conditions in America (RACON) Report found that in the early war years, the black community was in fact mostly in support of the war, but there was certain amount of cynicism which led to difficulty unifying with whites.<sup>57</sup> One anonymous soldier wrote, "Should our sons, brothers, loved ones, and friends die to preserve white supremacy?"<sup>58</sup>

The war did, however, serve to greatly unify blacks, as most of the community was invested in aiding the war effort. Was this for the sake of their country? Yes. But they also had their eyes set on a bigger prize farther down the road. This goal pushed aside many feelings of complacency when it came to serving in the military. Informal actions of resistance to injustice by individuals and groups of soldiers sought to challenge the military for fair treatment. Very early in the war years, black Americans resisted being drafted into a Jim Crow Army where they surely faced nothing except humiliation and maltreatment. Some did so by extreme measures. Three recorded suicides of black men are attributed to avoiding the racism of the military after being drafted.<sup>59</sup> A total of 2,208 African Americans evaded the draft, contributing to 18.1 percent of all violations.<sup>60</sup>

Others, nevertheless, saw military service as an opportunity to gain some equality. Only through service could they begin to demand equal treatment within the military. As Earnest Colloway said in 1942, he was "simply a colored American, who insists on his Constitutional rights to serve his country as a citizen, unsegregated and un-humiliated in a Jim Crow Army."<sup>61</sup>

Resistance sometimes took the form of confrontation, particularly while black troops were training in the South. Between 1942 and 1945, there were 208 recorded racial confrontations in the U.S. Army.<sup>62</sup> In 1943 alone, there were 68.<sup>63</sup> One record shows that 740 members of the 94<sup>th</sup> Engineers Battalion stationed in the South went AWOL, only to turn up in Michigan, leaving behind their military duty to avoid racism.<sup>64</sup> Famously, Jackie Robinson was

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56 Antero Pietila and Stacy Spaulding. "The Afro-American's World War II Correspondents: Feuilletonism as Social Action." *Literary Journalism Studies* 5, no. 2 (Fall2013 2013): 41.

57 Kersten, 17.

58 Anonymous Soldier to Afro American Publishing Company. Fort Bragg, North Carolina. November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1944.

59 Wynn, 29.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., 48.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., 49.

put to trial for refusing to move to the back of a military transport bus. He was acquitted and sent to Kentucky to serve as a sports instructor.<sup>65</sup> Black officers of the 477<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group repeatedly entered a “whites only” officer club, on one instance refusing to leave in a curious foreshadowing to the sit-ins of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. A total of 160 black soldiers were arrested for their resistance.<sup>66</sup> In July of 1944, black seamen of the Navy refused to load munitions they were not trained to handle under dangerous conditions. Previously, the same conditions had killed 320 black seamen after one of the munitions detonated.<sup>67</sup> Seen as disposable, the African Americans were ordered to load the munitions again. The soldiers were imprisoned and dishonorably discharged for mutiny. The title of “mutineers” followed these men for 50 years until President Bill Clinton pardoned them in 1999.<sup>68</sup>

While these informal acts of resistance were significant to changing race relations, the real importance of the World War II era came in the form of the organized movement by African Americans and white sympathizers to bring change to racial policies and attitudes. As early as 1937, the NAACP held organized protests to open the military to African Americans for active combat service and to end discrimination in all branches.<sup>69</sup> These outcries were heard in the establishment of the Committee for the Participation of Negroes in National Defense, headed by African American Rayford W. Logan.<sup>70</sup> The Committee was successful in gaining the use of non-discriminatory language in the Selective Service Act of 1940. Section 4(a) stated, “in the selection and training of men under this act, there shall be no discrimination against any person on account of race or color.”<sup>71</sup> The act made no reference, however, to segregation.

African Americans also fought for their piece of the defense industries, which began booming as Roosevelt geared up the nation for war. Ravaged by the Depression, black Americans wanted equal opportunity to work in the newly created jobs, but 144,583 of defense jobs were strictly reserved for whites only.<sup>72</sup> A. Philip Randolph took up the torch for greater African American participation both in the war industries and in the military. President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, he, along with Walter White, the Executive Secretary of

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65 Ibid., 48.

66 Ibid., 49.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 Wynn, 26.

70 Kersten, 15.

71 Wynn, 27.

72 Kersten, 15.

the NAACP, and T. Arnold Hill of the National Urban League, met with President Roosevelt.<sup>73</sup> On September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1940, Randolph laid a list of six demands before President Roosevelt on behalf of the African American community. They included assignments on merit, not race, more black officers trained, African Americans admitted to the Army Air Corps, blacks allowed in the Selective Service process, African American women trained as nurses, and no segregated military units.<sup>74</sup> Roosevelt seemed receptive to these demands but then turned and signed a policy reaffirming segregation in the military and limiting African American participation to 9 percent of the total military population.<sup>75</sup>

Spurred by this set back, Randolph called on African Americans to march on the White House, demanding more participation. He set up the “necessary machinery” in many parts of the country to mobilize 100,000 African Americans to march on July 1, 1941.<sup>76</sup> Local committees were established to recruit marchers for not only the demonstration in Washington but also marches held in major cities to call on mayors and city counsels to urge the President to act.<sup>77</sup> The march in Washington would include a rally at the Lincoln Memorial, and Randolph petitioned the First Lady to attend and speak to the crowd. Randolph implored,

I am sure that nothing has arisen in the life of the Negro since Emancipation which has gripped their hearts and caught their interest and quickened their imagination more than the girding of our country for national defense without according them the recognition and opportunity as citizens, consumers, and workers they feel justified in expecting.<sup>78</sup>

The world would have to wait, however, to see such a march on Washington. On June 25, 1941, Roosevelt signed Executive order 8802, allowing African Americans full participation in defense industries.<sup>79</sup> In response to this compromise, Randolph called off the march and pledged full loyalty and support to the war effort.

From within the White House, calls for change began to be heard. William H. Hastie, a black civilian aide to the Secretary of War, was appointed in 1940. He would become a particularly vocal player within the White House. He issued memo after memo urging for the integration of black soldiers, the training of more black officers, and for black officers to be able

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73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 A. Philip Randolph to Eleanor Roosevelt. Washington D.C. June 3rd, 1941.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Parry, B12.

to lead white troops.<sup>80</sup> Many within the Department saw him as an agent of the NAACP, acting as a puppet for their agenda. He was purposefully kept uninformed to inhibit his ability to call for equality.<sup>81</sup> Eventually the Advisory Committee on Negro Troops was created to completely bypass his authority. He resigned in January of 1943 in protest of the lack of equality still in the military.<sup>82</sup>

Artists were particularly reactive to the social situation in America at the time. Black artists published and recorded works of protests, which served as poignant monuments around which black Americans could rally. Blues singer Josh White recorded many songs protesting the Jim Crow Army including “Uncle Sam Says.” In this song, White emphasizes the irony of the call from the American government for unity while still enforcing segregation in the military: “Two camps for black and white, but when the trouble starts, we’ll all be in the same big fight.”<sup>83</sup> Similarly, Constance C. Nichols brought a woman’s perspective to this same issue in her poem “Civil Service.” She brings up the undeniable link that war created between all Americans, a link that white Americans seem unable or unwilling to acknowledge.<sup>84</sup> “Only In America,” by Rhoza A. Walker, a poem published in *The Crisis*, lulls the reader into glittering feelings of patriotism and pride in the long list of opportunities available to those in America, before the jolting last lines that echoed feelings African Americans had daily:

And Opportunity lends to ALL

A Free and Equal hand...

Did I say ALL?

Well, that is ALL except the Negro Man.<sup>85</sup>

The element that became the driving force behind the organized equal rights movement of this time was the flourishing black press. The black press of the 1940s has been called “the most organized, identifiable, and powerful voice of black America.”<sup>86</sup> With a weekly readership of 4 million by 1941, the black press had the ear of black America and circulation was only growing.<sup>87</sup> In the black news media, the most recognizable image of the movement for equality at the time was born. The *Pittsburgh Courier* launched the “Double V” campaign in February of

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80 Wynn, 45.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Josh White. *Uncle Sam Says*. Recording. ARC Records 1941.

84 Constance C. Nichols. “Civil Service.” *The Crisis*, April 1, 1945.

85 Rhoza A. Walker. “Only In America.” *The Crisis*, February 1, 1945.

86 Reiss (1), 543.

87 Ibid.

1942.<sup>88</sup> Double V, or Double Victory, called on African Americans to fight for victory in two places: overseas against enemy troops and at home against racial injustice. The rallying call was “Remember Pearl Harbor and Remember Jim Crow.”<sup>89</sup> *The Afro* followed suit by printing a flag on one side of their masthead and a fist, for unity, on the other.<sup>90</sup> In their masthead, they printed, “Patriotism can function effectively only if all citizens, like all fingers of the hand, work together as partners.”<sup>91</sup> The black press and those behind the Double V campaign recognized that in order to get victory at home, they had to aid in victory overseas. Mirroring the efforts of Jews attempting to avoid extermination by showing their usefulness, African Americans attempted to show their right to equality by serving in the military and becoming essential to victory. Black newspapers and publications denounced rash, informal acts of resistance by African American soldiers, calling for all servicemen to “serve honorably.”<sup>92</sup> The military was a channel through which they were going to begin to gain freedom.

What is the importance of this struggle that the African American community went through during World War II? The post-war America that black veterans returned to was not the country of democracy they hoped it could be. While great strides had been made in the military, society was not yet accepting of notions of equality. Black veterans were often the targets of lynching in the Deep South.<sup>93</sup> War records were falsified as much as possible to keep black soldiers from receiving military honors.<sup>94</sup> One black veteran, stopped in the street by a white man, had his medals looked over and then was reminded that, “You’re still a nigger.”<sup>95</sup> Some veterans like Vernon Baker would wait 50 years to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor, presented to the forgotten Buffalo Soldiers in 1997 by President Clinton.<sup>96</sup> Baker was the only one of the seven who received the honor while still alive. Facts like these lead historians to believe that the efforts of African Americans during the World War II era were a wash, all progress rescinded after the troops returned home. However, this is a very limited view that fails to recognize the exact aims of the equal rights movement of the 1940s, which by the end of the

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88 Pietila, 51.

89 Wynn, 41.

90 Pietila, 51.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 Wynn, 84.

94 Black, 40.

95 Wynn, 84.

96 Black, 45.

war had forced a series of reforms that made the United States military “one of the most equitable employers of men and women.”<sup>97</sup>

The conflicting views that the 1940s were either a precursor to the Civil Rights Movement or a failed attempt at a Civil Rights Movement have failed to consider that the real intention and purpose was somewhere in-between. When looking at the primary sources of the time, one does not see a call for desegregated schools or stricter enforcement of equal voting rights. The discussions of equality were all centered around equal rights in military service. When Philip A. Randolph met with President Roosevelt, it should be noted that his demands were all demands of opportunities of military service, not of civil rights. This indicates that the true goals of the equality movement of the 1940s were not directly connected to civilian rights but mostly centered on gaining military rights. Thus, an attempt to brush this era aside as simply the foundations of the Civil Rights Movement is inaccurate. There is no doubt that many of the methods used during the Civil Rights Movement and many of the leaders who spurred it would be formed here, but we cannot forget the very real changes that this unnamed movement of the 1940s produced in its own right. There are those that consider the accomplishments of the 1940s to be negated by what seems to be a retreat to old ways after the war. This is based on the condition of civil rights after the war. If we recognize that civil rights were not the ultimate goal of the movement, we can see the great success that the military rights movement produced.

The military saw great changes during this time, thanks to the efforts of African Americans demanding the right to serve their country. In 1941, the Army Air Corps opened the Tuskegee College Army Air Field in Alabama to begin training the first black pilots.<sup>98</sup> In 1942, African Americans were accepted for general service for the first time in the Navy and the Marine Corps.<sup>99</sup> Benjamin O. Davis, who was promoted to be the first African American general, was rising rapidly through the ranks at this time and he, along with all other African American officers, received officer training and education in an integrated setting.<sup>100</sup> In general, the number of blacks serving in the armed forces rose from 98,000 in 1941 to 468,000 by 1942.<sup>101</sup> This jump is significant considering that the white public and military officials did not initially consider African Americans fit for service.

Many military officials did not want the military to become a “laboratory of reform,” but through the efforts of the military rights movement, by the end of the war it served as a model of what was possible for African Americans.<sup>102</sup> Military documents from the time called for

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97 Ibid., 44.

98 Wynn, 44.

99 Ibid.

100 Kersten, 16.

101 Kersten, 16.

102 Wynn, 44.

“utilization of negro troops.”<sup>103</sup> By the war’s end, all branches of the military were called upon to review their policies.<sup>104</sup> As official White House documents admitted, “The Army is open to severe and just criticism for this wasted manpower.”<sup>105</sup>

By considering the era of the 1940s to be the era of the “Military Rights Movement,” one fully recognizes and respects the great accomplishments that were made in this step towards equality. The goals of this movement were fully recognized with the issue of Executive Order 9981 by President Truman in 1948, completely integrating the United States military to achieve the “highest standards of democracy.”<sup>106</sup>

Through this examination of the primary sources and true conditions of the African American soldiers of World War II, new insight is found to the movement for equality during this time. While traditionally viewed one of two ways, either as a watershed or complete wash, this paper would argue that through the evidence we find a new perspective. By separating the 1940s from the 1960s, we can recognize both movements in their own terms, each with individual goals and individual successes.

Those who see it as watershed limit the movement to the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement. While this notion is very true, this perspective fails to recognize the very real results that the Military Rights Movement produced in its own right. It is not merely a stepping-stone but more of a launching platform toward civil rights, one that had to be won before civil rights were possible.

Those who would disregard the movement as a failed attempt at civil rights do not look closely. All efforts during the World War II era were geared at increased military participation and military rights. While civil rights may have been the ultimate goal on the horizon, the immediate goals and actions of advocates and leaders during this time were very military-oriented. There was a recognition that gaining rights in the military was one step forward that had to be taken individually, and through persistent work African Americans achieved those goals of full military integration by 1948.

We cannot limit, diminish, or disregard the Military Rights Movement and its accomplishments. By failing to recognize the importance of the struggle of thousands of African Americans during this time, we fail to honor their contributions to equality. Their struggle was real, their goals realized, and their success undeniable. The next movement in the sequence would take a larger stage, understandably given the resistance and violence that would have to be overcome to

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103 "Survey and Recommendations Concerning the Integration of the Negro Soldier into the Army" Truman Library: Desegregation of the Armed Forces Online Research File. September 22, 1941. 2.

104 Wynn, 61.

105 "I.H.E. to Chief of Staff: President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services." Truman Library: Desegregation of the Armed Forces Online Research File. March 12, 1943.

106 Harry S. Truman. "Executive Order 9981." Library of Congress. July 18, 1948.



finally achieve full civil rights. But it would be a mistake to forget the Military Rights Movement that came before, for the acquisition of full military rights would make the struggle and success of the 1960s possible.

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