

Patriotism Crosses the Color Line: African Americans in World War II

by Clarence Taylor

Although African Americans have been the victims of racial oppression throughout the history of the United States, they have always supported the nation, especially during wartime. When World War II erupted, over 2.5 million black men registered for the draft and one million served as draftees or volunteers in all of the branches of the Armed Forces during conflict. Most black men who served were in the Army and were relegated to segregated combat support groups. More than 12,000 black men who served in the segregated 92nd Division received citations and were decorated for their effort, and the all-black 761st Tank Battalion received the Presidential Unit Citation for “extraordinary heroism.”

By 1944, 145,000 black men served in the US Army Air Force, including the 99th Fighter Squadron, popularly known as the Tuskegee Airmen. The Tuskegee Airmen became legendary for their heroic feats during the war and received a Distinguished Unit Citation, several silver stars, 150 distinguished flying crosses, fourteen bronze stars, and 744 air medals. Although the Navy put up great resistance and had only allowed blacks to serve as mess attendants, pressure from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and civil rights organizations forced the Navy to start recruiting blacks in April 1942 for service. However, its policy of relegating blacks to segregated units led black leaders to accuse the Navy of practicing Jim Crow. Despite its goal of recruiting 14,000 volunteers in the first year, blacks never made up more than 5 percent of the entire Navy.

Black women also came to the defense of the nation by enlisting in the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC). Black women in WAAC were labeled “ten percenters” because they made up 10 percent of the women recruited. Like black men in the Armed Forces, they were placed in segregated units, lived in segregated housing, ate at segregated tables in the mess hall, and received segregated training. Although black WAAC officers received officer cadet training in integrated units, all other aspects of life in the corps were segregated. More than 6,200 black women served in WAAC. In spite of serving in segregated units and facing harsh discrimination, black women served with distinction.

Although African Americans supported their government during WWII, they were not silent about racial practices in America. In fact, some even noted the similarities between the way Jews were treated in Germany and the way blacks were treated in America. The poet Langston Hughes, for example, expressed this sentiment in his piece “Nazi and Dixie Nordics.”

“The Germans are the victims of a mass psychosis,” says an American sociologist. “It will take drastic measures to control them when peace comes.” These people were talking about Germany. To a Negro, they might just as well have been speaking of white Southerners in Dixie. Our local Nordics have a mass psychosis too, when it comes to race. As the Hitlerites treat the Jews, so they treat the Negroes, in varying degrees of viciousness ranging from the denial of educational opportunities to the denial of employment, from buses that pass Negroes by to jailers who beat and torture Negro prisoners, from the denial of the ballot to the denial of the right to live.

Hughes, like millions of African Americans, was fully conscious of the gap between the stated ideals of the United States and its practices at home. African Americans were also aware that the war created an opportunity to press US leaders for full citizenship.

DOUBLE V CAMPAIGN

The Pittsburgh Courier, one of the nation’s largest black newspapers, stepped to the forefront in the struggle for racial equality by launching its “Double V” campaign. Responding to a January 31, 1942, letter to the editor by James G. Thompson of Wichita, Kansas, urging for a double V campaign, the paper published two interlocking Vs with the theme “Democracy: Victory at home, Victory Abroad” in its February 7, 1942, edition. The major objective of the campaign was to encourage blacks to support the war effort but fight for civil rights. The Courier’s advocacy of patriotism was in part to prevent critics from accusing it of pushing its own agenda ahead of the nation’s objective.

According to the Courier the response to the introduction of its campaign was “overwhelming.” Its office had been swamped with telegrams and letters of support proving that its slogan represented the “true battle cry of Colored Americans” and that they were determined to protect their nation and the freedoms that they cherished. It argued that African Americans would wage a “two-pronged attack” against those who would enslave us “at home and those who abroad would enslave us. WE HAVE A STAKE IN THIS FIGHT . . . WE ARE AMERICANS TOO!”

The Double V campaign became intertwined with popular culture. During the war, pinup models, usually glamorous movie stars considered sex symbols, were featured in magazines, postcards, and newspapers. In its February 14, 1943, edition, the Courier also began to feature photos of pretty young women. Labeled the “Double V girl,” the young women were college educated, were usually artistically talented, and were in support of the campaign. In addition to using glamorous women to attract supporters for its campaign, the paper also had photos of people dressed in the Double V fashion wear such as Double V dresses and Double V hats.

Besides the photos of the Double V Girls and Double V fashion, the Courier used numerous photos of whites standing alongside African Americans, emphasizing the point that the struggle for democracy was not a black issue but one that benefited the nation. The photos of blacks and whites flashing the Double V were to drive home the point that a unified country was essential for winning the war. Therefore, it urged the country not only preach democracy to the world but to practice it at home.

The Double V campaign was eventually adopted by other black newspapers, including the Los Angeles Sentinel, the Washington Tribune, and the Challenger of Columbus, Ohio. Despite the Courier's effort, by 1943, the paper provided less space in promoting the campaign and by September 1945 the paper stopped using Double V. Although the Courier could not claim any concrete accomplishments, the Double V campaign helped provide a voice to Americans who wanted to protest racial discrimination and contribute to the war effort.

THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON CAMPAIGN

Another crucial way that African Americans took advantage of America's involvement in WWII to push for civil rights was through mass protest. When Nazi Germany began invading and occupying countries in Europe, American industries began contracting with the government to increase production of ships, tanks, guns, and other items for defense. Despite the urgent need for tens of thousands of skilled workers to help in the production of these items, war production companies refused to hire blacks. Moreover, the federal government refused to take steps to end the racial discriminatory actions of these industries. In fact, the administration publicly announced that it would continue to segregate black and whites who enlisted in the armed services.

In response to the blatant discrimination on the part of industry and government, civil rights leader and labor organizer A. Philip Randolph launched the March on Washington Movement (MOWM), which helped organize thousands of people of African origin in the United States to march on the nation's capital in 1941, demanding that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issue an executive order banning discrimination in the defense industry. The March on Washington Committee was organized and headed by Randolph and consisted of prominent black leaders such as Walter White of the NAACP and Lester Granger of the Urban League. Although Eleanor Roosevelt met with Randolph and White to convince them to call off the march, Randolph refused, insisting that the President agree to ban discrimination in the defense industry. The threat of thousands of black people coming to Washington, DC, to protest convinced FDR to hold a meeting with Randolph and other march leaders in June 1941. Although the president attempted to convince Randolph to call off the march, Randolph refused unless an executive order was issued.

Eventually, FDR agreed that his close ally Mayor Fiorello La Guardia of New York, and others associated with the White House, work out a compromise with Randolph. The compromise was Executive Order 8802, which banned employment discrimination in defense industry and government. FDR also created a temporary Fair Employment Practices Committee to help ensure that defense manufacturers would not practice racial discrimination. Because of a major victory in forcing the government to take action against discrimination for the first time since Reconstruction, Randolph agreed to call off the march.

Randolph and the march organizers had won a major victory for racial equality and had laid the groundwork for the civil rights protests of the 1950s and 1960s.

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