Peace & Change

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WAR AND RACIAL PROGRESS

The African American Experience during World War II

by Neil A. Wynn

Fifty years ago a wave of race riots swept across America. This may not seem unusual today, but the fact that this racial discord erupted at the height of the Second World War may be pause for thought. Recent studies of the riots of 1943, and the conjunction of war and race conflict, are part of the wider history of Black Americans and the Second World War that is now a subject of considerable interest and debate among historians. This was not always the case. Before 1968 there was surprisingly little material available in print. Today that has all changed, and any student beginning research in this area would find not only my work but books and journal articles by Richard Dalfiume, Russell Buchanan, Lee Finkle, Harvard Sitkoff, and others, not to mention the many chapters on the subject in general studies of American society in wartime. Most of these writers see the war as having a special significance in Black history. According to A. Russell Buchanan, "Black Americans especially felt the impact of World War II." Others have claimed that the war "brought massive changes" and "altered the political, economic, and social status of Negro Americans," or that it marked "the watershed of Afro-American history" and was "a turning point in the Negro's relation to America," serving "as the catalyst in the struggle for equal rights." Certainly no longer can it be said, in Richard Dalfiume's much-quoted phrase, that the war years were "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution." If anything, those who "discovered" the forgotten years may have overstated the era's significance, and some views may need modification and qualification. War often creates an appearance and expectation of change that only masks underlying continuities. World War II was certainly no exception. Everyone at the time was aware of the general effects of the conflict and expected change as a result of what the Black sociologist Charles S. Johnson described as the "social upheaval of war." He and many others suggested that the war would particularly affect the status of African Americans. The Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, in his classic study, An American Dilemma (1944), predicted that "there is bound to be a redefinition of the Negro's status in America as a result of this war." Even earlier, novelist Paul Murray could write to President Franklin Roosevelt, "It is my conviction that the problem of race, intensified by economic conflict and war nerves will eventually occupy a dominant position as a national domestic problem." Such statements were more a reflection of hope than reality. The fact that it took almost another twenty years for race relations to assume the "dominant position as a national domestic problem" only points to the need to place the war years in perspective and to modify grandiose claims for the period as a watershed. As Adam Fairclough has pointed out, some historians "see no great break through" occurring during the war.
Rarely, if ever, does war produce change not already begun in some way—the preconditions for change are usually already evident. Thus Black participants in World War II brought memories of earlier experiences with them and used them to shape their responses to the new conflict. The First World War was a constant source of reference and comparison as African Americans recalled their high hopes and expectations as well as the sense of disillusionment that had followed. For many African Americans, World War I brought back memories of the race riots in East St. Louis in 1917 and other cities in 1919, most notably Washington, D.C., and Chicago. Just a few days after Pearl Harbor, the Chicago Defender reminded readers of previously unkept promises—a theme that singer Josh White would still recall as late as 1944 in “Defense Factory Blues.”

Nonetheless, the mood of the Black leadership was far different from the apparent moderation of Du Bois’s famous “Close Ranks” editorial in 1917. Even before actual U.S. involvement in 1941 there was an attempt to secure the inclusion of African Americans in the defense effort. Almost all Black organizations and publications linked the campaign for civil rights with the struggle overseas and adopted the “Double V” slogan of the Pittsburgh Courier—for victory at home and abroad. As a Black woman wrote with regard to discrimination in the defense effort in April 1941, “Now this doesn’t seem to be the Democratic way unless you can find a different meaning for the word Democracy.” The Crisis in 1942 stated categorically that the war was no time to remain quiescent about America’s democratic failings.

It was, of course, in the area of defense employment that A. Philip Randolph’s threatened March on Washington seemingly produced a significant breakthrough with the establishment of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) by Executive Order 8802 in 1941. The March on Washington Movement (MOWM) has often been seen as representative of new militance and as the forerunner of the nonviolent protests of the 1950s and 1960s. However, August Meier and Elliot Rudwick have argued that it was as much the culmination of past developments as the start of new ones. Blacks had protested against race violence by marching in New York following the 1917 riot in East St. Louis. The 1930s had witnessed a considerable rise in Black protest in the form of picketing and the widespread “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaigns, anti-lynching protests, court actions against segregation, and a march to the White House by some 5,000 protestors in defense of the Scottsboro boys. Randolph himself built on a base established as a leading Black trade unionist and the organizer during the 1920s of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had grown in the 1930s and, more important, had gained access to the White House through the “Black cabinet,” sympathetic New Dealers, and the good offices of Eleanor Roosevelt. A number of studies have drawn attention to the significance of the New Deal for African Americans, and it may well be that the 1930s and 1940s ought properly to be seen together.

It is nonetheless still tempting to see the MOWM and Executive Order 8802 as a high point in civil rights activity because both the threat of direct protest and the promise of presidential action diminished thereafter. Although the MOWM continued in existence, groups such as the NAACP and National Urban League withdrew their support, and Randolph’s call for a civil disobedience campaign in 1941 was generally dismissed by other Black leaders. Lee Finkle has written critically of this apparent conservatism among Black leadership and suggested that the Black media lagged behind the masses. Declining attendance at MOWM rallies after 1941 suggests, however, that popular support had waned; yet membership in the NAACP (perceived by some White observers as one of the more militant and aggressive of Black groups) increased during the war years from 54,000 in 1939 to more than half a million in 1945. (In Detroit alone membership rose from less than 3,000 before the war to over 20,000 in 1945.) The weekly circulation of the Black press also rose by 43 percent.

Given the impact of early concessions combined with the reality of war and the arduous military campaigns in 1942 and 1943, it is perhaps not surprising that the tone of the Black press moderated. Equally, attention shifted to the work of the FEPC and to the shopfloor battles that took place throughout the war. The increas-
ingly unresponsive attitude of the government, which urged concentration on the war effort as a priority over domestic social concerns, was also significant. Roosevelt has been much criticized for his apparent unwillingness to listen to Black demands after 1941, but, in fact, he may have acted as a moderating influence. Patrick Washburn has argued that both Roosevelt and Attorney General Francis Biddle were called on to induce Black editors for sedition in 1942 but resisted. Moreover, when the Black press stood its ground, Biddle, mindful of the excessive use of sedition legislation in World War I, refused to bring the indictments that some Whites wanted. Indeed, the attorney general reflected the mood of liberals when he expressed concern about the "poor treatment of black servicemen, and the contradiction between our profession of faith in democracy and our acts." Biddle was still much more in favor of positive government action than Roosevelt even after the outbreak of racial violence in 1943.11

The year 1943 has been identified as the point at which a shift in Black protest occurred. Indeed, Alan Clive suggested that "the summer of 1943 was a turning point in the history of black America."12 The crucial event was, of course, the outbreak of racial violence that year. Throughout the early years of the war, race tensions had mounted as Blacks demanded more change, whereas some Whites demanded less. Such tensions, exacerbated by overcrowding in defense plant areas, competition for jobs, and the stresses of wartime, exploded in the riots in Detroit, Harlem, and elsewhere—a total of 242 racial incidents in 47 cities.13

As recent writers have argued, formal institutional/organizational protest and informal, spontaneous individual responses by African Americans to discrimination are inseparable. Cheryl Greenberg has pointed to the links between the early wartime protests and the Harlem riot of 1943, suggesting that the initial agitation helped to create a situation in which "anger became widespread and explicit." Given that the NAACP's statement—refusing "to listen to the weak-kneed of both races who tell us not to raise controversies during the war" during its Emergency War Conference in Detroit just weeks before the riot—was seen as contributing to the outbreak of violence, it was hardly surprising that the Black press sub-

sequently moderated its language and called for unity. To suggest, however, as has Harvard Sitkoff, that the "old-line Negro leadership retreated ... to entrust white liberals with the job of winning the Negro his rights" may be too severe.14 Although Truman Gibson, the Black civilian aide to the secretary of war, could say in December 1943 that "relations with the Negro press have never been better than they are at present," and report that Black servicemen were told "to be good soldiers in spite of the many things they hear about and see," racial incidents in the military and letters of complaint from Black soldiers were still published in African American newspapers.15 In 1944, there was a widespread call in the Black press for the resignation of Secretary of War Henry Stimson for apparent willingness to maintain discrimination and segregation despite the demands of war.16

Another influence moderating the tone of Black protest was the fact that by the end of 1943, despite the continuation of discrimination and the outbreak of race violence, African Americans could feel that some progress was being made as a consequence of both government policy and the exigencies of war. As a Black man later recalled, "For me the war period was a very compelling, very exhilarating era. There was a feeling that you had hold of something that was big and urgent and was not going to last forever. There were opportunities for change which could not exist after the war was over."17

The most obvious area of progress was in employment, where, according to one writer, the war brought "the greatest improvements ... than at any time before with the exception of the abolition of chattel slavery."18 Although not wishing to go quite that far—the First World War after all had seen a significant shift in Black employment—there can be little doubt that World War II did bring considerable economic progress. As a Black woman remembered, "The war and defense work gave black people opportunities to work on jobs they never had before. It gave them opportunity to do things they had never experienced before." She remarked significantly, "Their expectations changed. Money will do that."19

Even in Detroit, as Capecci and Wilkerson point out, most of the male Black rioters were employed, and weekly salaries in defense
industries had risen from under $40 in 1940 to over $50 in 1943. Most of these gains were the result neither of government declarations nor the work of the FEPC, but rather the "pressures of labor-market shortages" that "simply forced many employers to change their attitudes toward what they might call marginal workers." Eventually, almost one million Black workers entered the labor force during the war, and the numbers of skilled, semiskilled, and foremen doubled. Most of these gains came after 1942 and were concentrated in areas of acute labor shortage. The number of African Americans in defense plants rose from 3 percent in January 1942 to 6.4 percent in 1943 and 8.6 percent in 1945. There were variations from one city to another, region to region. Generally, employment patterns in northern cities were "good"; those in the South were "poor." In manufacturing, total Black employment rose by 135 percent, but it was concentrated in particular industries, notably older, hot, heavy, and dirty ones. The greater use of Black workers in large establishments also tended to obscure their limited advances in smaller firms. Nonetheless, overall earnings and employment opportunities for Black men increased during the war, and despite some slippage these gains were maintained in the postwar years.

The same positive comments cannot be made about the employment of Black women. Of the one million additional Black workers who joined the labor force during the war, 600,000 were female. Qualitative changes were, however, marginal. The increase in the number of Black women workers in manufacturing was half that of Black males, and most of the gains came late in the war and in particular occupational areas. As late as August 1943, 28,000 Black women were said to be the "largest neglected source of labor" in Detroit where "only an occasional firm employs women in any job other than matrons." Most of the new jobs that became available to Black women were in heavily male areas of work such as the foundries and shipyards; advances for African Americans in traditional categories of female employment were negligible.

Most Black women were still employed in the service sector, but there was a shift from private domestic service to public service. The loss of Black house servants was much bemoaned: one White Alabaman recalled her Black servant giving up her employment for $15 per week to earn $100 per month in the torpedo factory. In such instances it might be said that if "Lincoln freed the Negroes from cotton picking . . . Hitler was the one that got us out of the white folks' kitchens." Overall, however, as Karen Anderson rightly suggests, rather than a "Second Emancipation" what is significant about the war experience for Black women is "the extent to which barriers remained intact." The week-long strike by White women who refused to share toilets with African American workers at Baltimore Western Electric as late as 1944 is a revealing example of continued prejudice.

One of the most important and liberating consequences of the war for Black women and men alike was the movement of population. One Black woman recalled that during the war "we got a chance to go places we had never been able to go before," and another spoke for many Americans regardless of race when she said, "The impact of the war changed my life, gave me an opportunity to leave my small town and discover there was another way of life." Of course, African Americans had experienced a "Great Migration" during World War I, and the exodus from the South had quickened in the 1920s. During the depression the number of African Americans leaving the former Confederate states fell from 749,000 (between 1920 and 1930) to 400,000. In that sense, the movement of a half-million Blacks (17 percent of Black southerners as opposed to only 3 percent of Whites) during World War II was merely a resumption of the predepression trends.

Although such migration clearly affected race relations in the North, Peter Daniel has pointed out that demographic change was also part of the wartime reshaping of the South. Many African Americans remained in the South, but a considerable number still moved from the country to the city as a consequence of the further disintegration of sharecropping and the increase in job opportunities elsewhere. The rising urbanization of southern Blacks contributed to a breakdown in traditional race relations and, with the wider effects of the war, created a mood of change. Robin Kelley cites a number of confrontations on the buses in wartime Birmingham, Alabama, and Jo Ann Robinson recalled that the Women's Political
Council began in Montgomery in 1946 after the arrest of people challenging segregation on the buses. "By 1953, we had members in every elementary, junior high, and senior high school, and in federal, state, and local jobs." Thus the foundation of the Montgomery bus boycott could be said to be laid in the postwar era.

Other evidence of the new Black mood in the South could be seen in the 10 percent rise in those registered to vote. Spurred on by the Supreme Court's decision against the all-White primary in Smith vs. Allwright in 1944 (the culmination of the NAACP campaign that began in 1923), African Americans in Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, Virginia, and South Carolina organized voter registration drives and other political campaigns. Such campaigns were often led by, or involved, returning servicemen, a group that has been seen as having a significant role in shaping the new postwar mood of Black Americans.

Nothing so encapsulated the ambivalence of the wartime experience for Blacks as military service, and the history of African Americans in the armed forces continues to be a subject of great interest. The combination of political pressures and the practical demands of winning the war helped bring about a considerable shift in military policy. The maintenance of segregation was declared to be official policy in 1940; and at a conference for the Black press in 1941 in Washington, D.C., War Department officials insisted that the military would not act as a "sociological laboratory." However, in practice, segregation proved to be inefficient, unworkable in some areas, and clearly harmful to Black morale. As George Flynn pointed out, "The armed forces could not build their Jim Crow facilities fast enough to cope with the inexorable operations of the draft's selection by numbers"; this slowed the recruitment of Black servicemen. The inability to provide segregated recreational facilities for all those in camps led to the beginning of an open access policy in 1944. The same year conflict over transportation between southern military bases and neighboring towns led to the introduction of a first come, first served policy with no segregation. The most radical departures came in the navy, where the wider use of Black personnel made segregation increasingly unworkable, and in

the army during the Battle of the Bulge, when a limited number of Black platoons were integrated with White companies.

By the end of the war, more than one million African Americans had served in different branches of the military. There can be little doubt that for many such service was a bitter and disillusioning experience. As one soldier wrote to civilian aide Truman Gibson, "When inducted I honestly believed that as a Negro I comprised an important part of this nation and it was my patriotic duty to avail myself when my country was in peril. My attitude now is really changed. I'm indifferent to the whole affair."

Despite such comments, however, a recent study of the attitudes of Black servicemen suggests that a much higher proportion of Blacks than Whites (41 percent to 25 percent) expected to be better off as a result of their service, and that for many African Americans service was "an eye opening experience." How are we to explain this apparent contradiction between the attitudes of Black servicemen and their experiences? It appears that whatever the limitations, and clearly there were many, military service gave many African Americans a modicum of self-respect and often provided training and skills. Service outside the South or even overseas (in Britain, for example) provided a first taste of equality that could have a lasting effect. John Modell and his associates have shown that Black veterans were twice as likely to have moved to a different region after the war than Whites; and by 1947 it was estimated that 75,000 Black veterans had left the South. There is also evidence of attitudinal change. Modell suggests that "the impact of military service influenced the structure of [Black] aspirations in a way that contributed to their unwillingness to accept the prewar structure of racial dominance." A former member of a Black tank crew expressed this more clearly when he said, "After the close of hostilities, we just kept on fighting. It's just that simple."

There was much left to fight for. Although many White Americans supported racial change, the occupational and demographic changes affecting African Americans almost always met with some resistance from Whites, particularly in the South. Such attempts "to keep Negroes in their place" in the South were hardly new—they were often evident amid the uncertainty and economic competition
of the depression years—but they reached new levels and were possibly even more widespread during the war years. The Rankins, Bilbos, and Talmadges were vociferous in their defense of White supremacy, and challenges to the color line were often met with violence. Pete Daniel lists "six civilian riots, over twenty military riots and mutinies, and between forty and seventy-five lynchings" occurring during the war. As Mark Ethridge, first chairman of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (and a southerner), declared, "All the armies of the world could not force southerners to end segregation."

The very fact of heightened White resistance was a sign that things were changing. In countless ways, White Americans were encountering Blacks in new roles at work, in cities North and South, in politics, and in the armed services. Many did not like it. Cepaci and Wilkerson point to the paradox of racial change when they suggest that a cause of the Detroit riot was the very fact that "both races had made enough gains to want much more." White rioters, they argue, represented "a working class threatened by black socio-economic advances." A theme that had its origins in the 1930s and that would reach greater intensity in the postwar era was already evident (and surfaced in Detroit), namely the charge that those demanding improvements in America's civil rights were "the crackpots, the communists, the parlor folks of the country." The more widespread mood, however, recognized the hypocrisy of fighting for freedom abroad while denying it to African Americans at home. Even Frank Dixon, the former governor of Alabama, acknowledged that "the Huns have wrecked the theory of the master race." As President Harry Truman declared in his message to Congress in February 1948, the "world position of the United States" now necessitated action in race relations.

Truman's record on civil rights is still much debated. For most historians his actions appeared more symbolic than real, calculated to gain the Black vote and yet not alienate the White South. Certainly any optimistic view of the postwar period has to be qualified. The incidence of racial violence in both North and South should not be ignored. Arnold Hirsch points out, for example, that in Chicago forty-six Black homes were attacked between 1944 and 1946, and a total of 485 racial incidents were reported to the Chicago Housing Association between 1945 and 1950. But Hirsch also points to a significant change in "mood and belief" among African Americans in Chicago, and it is clear that the response of both Blacks and Whites to postwar racial conflict was affected by wartime experiences and America's position in international affairs. No matter what the reservations, the catalog of racial progress made during the 1940s, coupled with employment gains, encouraged a mood of both optimism and determination among African Americans. The progressive editor of the Atlanta Constitution, Ralph McGill, could write ominously in April 1946, "There will be no mixing of the races in schools. There will be no social equality measures. Now or later." But it was not until after 1954 that the limits of change became apparent. The response of White southerners to Brown v. Topeka Board of Education made clear the limits of wartime gains and revealed the continued vitality of racism in American life. As an African American journalist observed to Studs Terkel in the 1980s, "The war brought some changes for the good. . . . We've come a long way. But racism is just as alive today, maybe even more virulent." If World War II should not then be seen as a turning point, it was something more than merely just a continuation of earlier developments. Harvard Sitkoff wrote that in the 1930s "Negro expectations rose, black powerlessness decreased, white hostility diminished," but "the basic conditions of life for blacks barely changed." During the war years, rising Black hopes were sustained by real economic progress, by heightened expressions of White support, and by significant shifts in federal policy. Most significant of all perhaps was the changing demography of race relations that ultimately helped to make civil rights an issue in both North and South. True, many advances were contested—it was, and always had been, the promise of improvement combined with continued discrimination that fueled civil rights—but, if race did not arrive at the center of the domestic stage during the war years, it had moved out of the wings. If there was indeed a "turning point," it was not to come for almost another twenty years; however, like all great moments of change, the uprising of the fifties and sixties would not have been
possible without what had gone before. The significance of the war years has been established, and attention is now shifting to the immediate postwar period to discern more direct links with the civil rights "revolt." As John Hope Franklin noted, writing about World War II, the struggle for racial equality was, and continues to be, an ongoing struggle.49

NOTES


Anderson, "Last Hired, First Fired," 97; Campbell, Women at War with America, 128.


30. Private Bert Barrow to Truman Gibson, February 13, 1944, Box 230, "Attitudes of Negro Soldiers," OASW, RG 107, NA.


38. Quoted in Polenberg, One Nation Divisible, 7.


40. Quoted in Southern, "Beyond Jim Crow Liberalism," 211.

41. Alfred Deakins in The Good War, 312.

42. Siskin, A New Deal for Blacks, 330.