

Module 07: Did World War II Advance Minorities, Women, and the Poor?

Context

Economic Stagnation

World War II irrevocably changed American society. It brought America out of the Great Depression, accelerated the migration from rural to urban areas, and provided unprecedented opportunities for African Americans and women. When World War II broke out in 1939, the American economy lay stagnant. Over ten million Americans were unemployed and the country was operating at only one-third of its industrial capacity. With the Two Ocean Navy Act, however, which authorized the doubling of the fleet and plans to increase the Army Air Force, U.S. industry kicked back into gear. Lend-lease aid to Britain and the Soviet Union also expanded the economy. Millions without work once again found jobs and relative prosperity.

War Production and Rationing

The U.S. entry into World War II accelerated war production, which necessitated centralized direction on a massive scale. To manage the process, President Roosevelt created a War Production Board with the power to allocate natural resources and regulate industrial production to ensure maximum support for armed services. Consumer goods, such as automobiles for civilian use and electrical appliances, were banned, as was all housing construction that did not directly benefit defense plant workers. Auto plants were converted to build warplanes, tanks, armored cars, army trucks, and jeeps. The newly established Office of Price Administration oversaw rationing and controlled wages, prices, and rents to prevent inflation. The Office of Price Administration also rationed gasoline, tires, meat, butter, sugar, and tobacco so that armed forces maintained first priority for their use. The American people as a whole, however, suffered less during World War II than civilian populations in other combat areas. Except for Honolulu, no American city was bombed or invaded, and U.S. casualties remained low in proportion to the overall U.S. population. In fact, many Americans prospered as never before, although not all Americans shared equally in the wealth generated by the war effort.

African Americans and World War II

Although African Americans had participated in all U.S. wars, the military made no plans to use African Americans in either the domestic or the military sides of World War II. Racial exclusion and segregation characterized American race relations on the eve of World War II, and African Americans played an insignificant role in U.S. armed forces. The army, for example, confined its black enlistees to the all-black Twenty-Fourth and Twenty-Fifth Infantry regiments and the Ninth and Tenth Cavalries. Only two black commissioned officers existed in the regular army: Colonel Benjamin O. Davis and his son, Lieutenant Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. As for the navy, blacks were welcome only as messmen or stewards. Neither the U.S. Marine Corps nor the U.S. Army Air Force accepted black recruits. After protests by black newspapers such as the Baltimore *Afro-American*, the Pittsburgh *Courier*, and the Chicago *Defender*, and organizations such as the NAACP, the armed forces began to accept black enlistees and draftees.

The Tuskegee Airmen

The army assigned black enlistees and draftees to all of its branches, but within racially segregated units. By 1944, two all-black combat divisions, the Ninety-Second and Ninety-Third, had been sent to Italy and the South Pacific, respectively. The Women's Army Corps (WACS) accepted black female officers and enlistees, although they were segregated as well. As for other military services, the U.S. Marine Corps in 1942 accepted black enlistees for the first time, although it employed black Marines predominantly in service battalions. The Army Air Force established a flight school at Tuskegee Institute, a black college, to train black pilots and aircrew. There it created the all-black 99th Pursuit Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group, whose pilots became known as the "Tuskegee Airmen."

African Americans and the Navy

The U.S. Navy rescinded its policy of enlisting African Americans only for the messmen branch and began accepting black recruits in other shipboard and shore ratings. In 1944, the navy also created an officer candidate school to train black naval officers. In practice, however, the Navy did not assign African Americans to any great extent to its combat ships in ratings other than steward or messmen, although it did commission a submarine chaser and a destroyer escort with callback crews to see if black sailors could handle at-sea combat jobs. For the most part, the navy confined its few black radio operators, boatswain mates, radar operators, gunner's mates, and the like to shore duty in racially segregated units. As in other services, the navy tended to assign most of its African Americans to service battalions, particularly to those that loaded ammunition. The Port Chicago

Mutiny remains a notorious example of the navy's mistreatment of African Americans. After an ammunition explosion on July 17, 1944, at the navy's Port Chicago ammunition base in California that killed over 200 black ammunition handlers, 258 black sailors refused to return to work when ammo handling operations resumed a few days later, citing racism and unsafe conditions. All but forty-four were persuaded to return to duty; those who refused were court-martialed and received harsh sentences. Only hard lobbying by the black press and the NAACP after World War II got their sentences overturned.

African Americans in Combat

Despite mistreatment, black servicemen fought bravely when given the chance. Dorie Miller received the Navy Cross, the second highest naval award, for his bravery at Pearl Harbor, although it took over six months of pressure by African American community leaders and newspapers to ensure that Miller received proper recognition. The Tuskegee Airmen of the 99th Pursuit Squadron performed with valor in North Africa and later in Italy as part of the all-black 332nd Fighter Group. The P-51 unit escorted heavy bomber raids out of Italy into Germany and didn't lose a single bomber. Other notable black units included the 320th Barrage Balloon Battalion, the only black combat unit to land on Omaha Beach; the 76th Tank Destroyer Battalion, one of General Patton's spearheads into Germany; and the destroyer escort *Mason*, the only all-black warship, which valiantly escorted convoys across the U-boat-ridden Atlantic. Additional black heroes of World War II include:

- Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., who commanded the 99th Pursuit Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group;
- Pvt. George Watson, who died while rescuing several fellow soldiers from a sinking transport ship;
- SSgt. Ruben Rivers of the 761st Tank Destroyer Battalion, who single-handedly stopped a German tank attack before being killed;
- 1st Lt. Vernon Baker, who led a platoon assault on a German position in Italy that resulted in the destruction of six machine gun bunkers and the deaths of 26 German soldiers;
- 1st Lt. John Fox, who called down artillery fire on his own position and destroyed an attacking German force;
- SSgt Edward Carter, who killed six German soldiers in hand-to-hand combat;
- Pfc. Willy James, who died while rescuing his commanding officer;

- and 1st Lt. Charles Thomas, who, though mortally wounded, still directed the successful defense of his company's position.

All of the distinguished servicemen above were finally recognized for their valor in January 1997, when they received the Medal of Honor, the highest military award.

African Americans at Home

On the civilian side, defense contractors had no real plans to employ African Americans. An incensed black community led by A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Railway Car Workers, and the black press threatened to lead an all-black march on Washington, D.C., in protest. To head this off, President Roosevelt, in July 1941, issued Executive Order 8802, which forbade defense contractors from practicing racial discrimination and set up the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to monitor the order. Although the FEPC lacked the power of enforcement, the order did open doors, however slightly, to African Americans in the workplace. As time passed, and as more and more obtained lucrative employment in defense industries, hundreds of thousands of African Americans migrated from southern plantations to defense plants in the Midwest and along the East and West Coasts. The rural-to-urban migration caused immense racial tension, which culminated in the Detroit Race Riot in June 1943, in which thirty-four people died.

Internment of Japanese Americans

African Americans were not the only group mistreated in the United States during World War II. In the weeks and months after Pearl Harbor, all Americans of Japanese descent became targets of suspicion, hysteria, and hatred. Fear of a Japanese invasion and sabotage by fifth columnists motivated the persecution of Japanese Americans. General John DeWitt, commander of the U.S. forces on the West Coast, acting with the concurrence of the President, ordered all Americans of Japanese descent removed from the West Coast and relocated to concentration camps in Colorado, Wyoming, and New Mexico. The edict forced 112,000 Japanese Americans to leave their homes, jobs, businesses, and farms and caused immeasurable misery and economic loss. Such a blatant violation of the constitutional rights of American citizens was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1943. Some Japanese Americans, however, were allowed to enlist in the army, where, like African Americans, they were racially segregated. Nevertheless, many fought with distinction and bravery; the 442nd Regimental Combat Team fought in Italy and won the most medals of any U.S. combat unit.

Women in the War

Over fourteen million American men served in the armed forces during World War II, which necessitated the increased presence of women in the labor force. Millions of women filled non-traditional jobs, although they generally received less pay than men. In addition, over 215,000 women served in the four branches of the armed forces during the war. The army established a special section for women, called the Women's Army Corps (WACS), in which over 100,000 women served as nurses, office personnel, doctors, and other non-combatants. A few women aviators served as transport pilots during the war, and the navy established the WAVES for women who performed tasks similar to their army counterparts. The Coast Guard and Marines also had female contingents. The new skills and economic independence obtained by women during World War II, both at home and abroad, would have a lasting impact.

Financing World War II

For obvious reasons, the Federal Government expanded exponentially during the war years. Congress remained reluctant to raise excise or income taxes drastically, although it did approve a graduated increase in income and corporation taxes. All told, taxes paid 40% of the war's cost of \$300 billion (the equivalent of \$6 trillion today). Loans in the form of war bonds financed the rest. The federal deficit rose from \$49 billion in 1941 to \$259 billion in 1945, yet the United States was the only country to come out of World War II economically stronger than when it had entered. Such would not be the case for Great Britain, the Soviet Union, Germany, or Japan.