

World War II and the Origins of the Freedom Struggle

For African Americans, the ultimate aim of politics, either protest or electoral, has been liberation. Seeking emancipation from the bondage of white supremacy, disfranchised southern blacks challenged the political system for admission, even as they hoped to transform it by their participation. Civil rights proponents have long believed that blacks could not be free without obtaining the right to vote. At the turn of the century, W. E. B. Du Bois set the standard for rejecting racial solutions that excluded the exercise of the franchise. Attacking Booker T. Washington for his strategy of postponing black participation at the ballot box, Du Bois insisted that the right to vote was intimately connected to first-class citizenship. Without it blacks would never command respect, protect themselves, and feel pride in their own race. To Du Bois, a scholar of the freedom struggle after the Civil War, Reconstruction provided vivid evidence that black elected officials could transform the lives of their constituents. From this experience they derived the historical lesson, summarized by Eric Foner, that “it was in politics that blacks articulated a new vision of the American state, calling upon government, both national and local, to take upon itself new and unprecedented responsibilities for protecting the civil rights of individual citizens.”

The long history to obtain the right to vote suggests that reenfranchisement was considered the decisive first step toward political equality. Civil rights proponents expected participation at the polls to yield the kinds of basic benefits that groups exercising the franchise customarily enjoyed. Yet, for black Americans, much more was at stake. With their systematic exclusion from the electoral process, the simple acquisition of the vote constituted an

essential element of liberation from enforced racial subordination. The political scientist Charles V. Hamilton, who studied the voting rights struggle both as a participant and as a scholar, found this passion for the ballot very understandable. “White America had spent so much effort denying the vote to blacks,” he observed, “that there was good reason to believe that they must be protecting some tool of vast importance. Perhaps it was reasonable to put so much emphasis on the one fundamental process that clearly distinguished first-class from second-class citizens.”

Victory at Home and Abroad

Going off to war in the months after Pearl Harbor, black GIs might very well have pondered the connection between politics and freedom. They had many reasons to wonder about the principles of the democratic creed and their promise of first-class citizenship for all. Like their white counterparts they remembered December 7, 1941, when Dorie Miller, a black sailor, performed heroic deeds that would win him the Navy Cross; but they also carried with them the memory of Sikeston, Missouri, where on January 25, 1942, a black prisoner named Cleo Wright was taken out of the local jail and cruelly burned and lynched by a white mob. Unlike Japan and its Axis partners, which were eventually defeated on the battlefield and forced to accept unconditional surrender, the killers of Cleo Wright were never brought to justice. Helping to combat fascism abroad, black fighting men and the families they left behind also demanded unconditional surrender from the forces of racism at home. Blacks failed to persuade the American government to wage total war in their behalf, but they did lay the groundwork for continuing the battle in the decades to come.

This determination to stand up for their rights, strengthened by World War II, grew out of both disillusionment and optimism. In response to Woodrow Wilson’s pledge during World War I to make the world safe for democracy, blacks had followed the advice of Du Bois to “close ranks [and] while this war lasts, forget our special grievances.” Rather than freedom, the end of the war produced bloody race riots and a continuation of Jim Crow practices. At the same time, African Americans refused to plunge into despair and experienced instead a heightening of racial consciousness. The Harlem Renaissance and the black nationalist movement spearheaded by Marcus Garvey explored the roots of black identity and helped forge renewed racial solidarity. A. Philip Randolph organized workers into the



Figure 1 Dorie Miller receiving the Navy Cross from Admiral Chester Nimitz. Miller was later killed in action. (Photo courtesy US National Archives)

Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and not only fought for economic benefits from employers but also challenged racial discrimination within the trade union movement. In addition, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an interracial organization founded in 1909, kept alive the battle for equal rights by lobbying Congress to enact an antilynching bill and petitioning the Supreme Court to outlaw disfranchisement measures such as the white primary.

The Great Depression provided unexpected opportunities for black advancement. Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal extended economic relief to the one-third of the nation that was ill housed, ill clothed, and ill fed, which included blacks as well as poor whites. Blacks profited from these programs because of their poverty, not because of their race; in fact, many New Deal agencies, especially in the South, were administered to preserve prevailing racial practices that maintained blacks in a subordinate position. For example, programs for federal housing construction contained provisions guaranteeing segregation in the North as well as the South. Despite

the perpetuation of racial discrimination and the unwillingness of President Roosevelt to fight for special civil rights measures, African Americans welcomed federal assistance. "Any time people are out of work, in poverty, have lost their savings," Du Bois remarked, "any kind of a 'deal' that helps them is going to be favored."

Blacks showed their appreciation by abandoning their traditional allegiance to the Republican Party of Abraham Lincoln and hopping aboard the Roosevelt bandwagon. This realignment was facilitated by the appointment of blacks to federal posts, a sufficient number to convene an informal "black kitchen cabinet" in Washington. Whites sensitive to racial concerns headed several New Deal agencies and worked to see that relief was distributed more fairly. Furthermore, Roosevelt's selections to the Supreme Court after 1937 paved the way for a constitutional revolution that augured well for NAACP attorneys preparing a legal assault upon racial discrimination. Most of all, the President's wife, Eleanor, nurtured the growing attachment African Americans felt toward the Roosevelt administration. Mrs. Roosevelt's commitment to civil rights was far greater than her husband's, and she served as an ally in the White House to see that complaints of black leaders received a hearing in the Oval Office. This combination of racial gestures and economic rewards led the majority of the black electorate to vote for Roosevelt beginning in 1936.

On the eve of World War II, blacks stood poised to consolidate their gains and press ahead for full equality. Their political agenda included an end to job discrimination, which helped keep black unemployment at a high 11 percent in 1940; legislation to empower the federal government to prosecute lynchers and to abolish the poll tax on voting imposed by eight southern states; the destruction of the lily-white Democratic primary; and the abandonment of the principle of "separate but equal" that actually produced segregated and unequal treatment in the armed forces, public education, and public accommodations. As the prospect of war increased, black aspirations collided with the reality of pervasive discrimination in a country where mobilization for war came first.

National defense took priority over racial equality in the armed services. As the nation inched closer to the side of the Allies and prepared to join them in war, the army maintained its customary policy of segregation, the navy recruited blacks only as messmates, and the marines and Army Air Corps generally excluded them. When pressed by black leaders for integration of the military in the fall of 1940, President Roosevelt refused to alter practices that had "been proved satisfactory over a long period of

years.” Instead, he directed the utilization of “the services of negroes ... on a fair and equitable basis.” To do otherwise, he and his advisers believed, would risk upsetting white soldiers and would lower their morale, thereby jeopardizing the war effort.

The attempt to make the system of racial separation operate more equally failed to solve the problem. Black GIs assigned to military bases in the South encountered segregation both on and off the bases. Conforming to the law and customs of the surrounding communities, the military enforced segregation in recreation clubs, theaters, and post exchanges. In one camp, a sign on a chapel announced religious services for “Catholics Jews, Protestants, Negroes.” When they received passes to travel into town, black soldiers rode on segregated buses and used Jim Crow facilities. With the population of many towns swollen with servicemen, an intolerable strain was placed on public transportation and accommodations. Crowded transit systems often led to pushing and shoving between black and white passengers, frequently ending in violence. In July 1942, a black army private in Beaumont, Texas, refused to vacate his seat in a section of a bus reserved for whites. After his arrest, he was shot by white patrolmen while in their custody. Racial incidents such as this were becoming increasingly commonplace throughout the South that year, culminating in a riot in Alexandria, Louisiana, in which 28 blacks were wounded and nearly 3,000 arrested.

Among the black soldiers encountering wartime discrimination was Jackie Robinson. Having attended the University of California at Los Angeles before entering the service, Robinson excelled in basketball, track, baseball, and football, a sport in which he was named as a college All-American. However, these accomplishments did not guarantee him an easy time in the army. When military officials attempted to keep him out of Officers’ Candidate School at Fort Riley, Kansas, he successfully complained and gained admission to the program. Despite his athletic prowess, Robinson was barred because of his race from playing on the baseball team at the army training camp. In protest, he refused to join the football team, which was open to blacks. In 1944, Lieutenant Robinson again challenged unfair racial treatment. While stationed at Ford Hood, Texas, he steadfastly refused to follow a bus driver’s order that he sit in the back of the vehicle with the other black passengers. Subjected to a military court martial for his defiance of local segregationist customs, the former All-American athlete was found innocent.

As a soldier, Robinson did not act alone in challenging racial discrimination in the armed forces. On the eve of America’s entry into the war, civil rights groups such as the NAACP and National Urban League,

along with the Negro press and black college officials, campaigned to break down the barriers that kept the Army Air Corps from accepting black pilots. The War Department believed blacks incapable of flying aircraft. One report claimed that the “colored race does not have the technical nor the flying background for the creation of a bombardment-type unit.” Nevertheless, persistent pressure and the negative publicity tarnishing the nation’s democratic war aims led the War Department in 1941 to agree to train African-American pilots. The black fighter squadron remained segregated from white pilots, prompting criticism from the NAACP and the black press, which favored the cessation of racial criteria in the military. The *Pittsburgh Courier* blasted the Jim Crow policy as “a citadel to the theory that there can be segregation without discrimination.” Yet, by the end of the war, the exploits of the Tuskegee Airmen had made African Americans swell with pride. Stationed at Tuskegee army airfield in Alabama, on the grounds of an abandoned graveyard, black pilots eventually took to the skies over Europe and proved their skills in fighting the Nazis.

However, both overseas and at home, the Tuskegee Airmen battled racial discrimination. They fought against the military command’s thinking that they could not make talented fighter pilots in combat, and they challenged segregated facilities on military posts in the United States. At the Tuskegee training center, the airmen conducted a successful sit-in protest to desegregate accommodations on the base. In response, Colonel Noel F. Parish discarded segregated signs, invited popular entertainers to lift the troop’s morale, and desegregated the mess hall. At other military posts black pilots were segregated in the mess halls and movie theaters, while German prisoners of war who were quartered at the camps took seats in the “whites only” areas of these accommodations, an outrage black soldiers protested. Indeed, enemy prisoners of war could attend shows, movies, and dances, sponsored by the United Service Organizations (USO) and local chambers of commerce, which were barred to black soldiers. The situation was much the same once the soldiers left the military posts. In one highly charged incident, black airmen taking leave from Walterboro army airfield in South Carolina stopped to eat in a racially restricted café in nearby Fairfax, and were denied service. Brimming with anger, they told the white owner to “go to hell,” brandished their service revolvers, and left the restaurant shouting the mock-salute, “Heil Hitler!” Slightly more successful, in November 1944, Walterboro airmen, spending a leave in Washington, DC, integrated the District of Columbia’s airport cafeteria after having been first turned away. They may have received service out of

deference to their military uniforms, because the airport resumed segregation in its accommodations once the war ended.

Protests also surfaced at Selfridge Field just outside of Detroit. On January 1, 1944, black officers teamed in groups of three at intervals throughout the day attempted to integrate the racially restricted officer's club. Although one group gained admission, the soldiers were soon ordered to leave by the base commander. The protest resumed the next day, but the club remained barred to blacks. One of the leaders of the challenge was Lieutenant Milton Henry from Philadelphia, who had had previous confrontations with segregation. In the spring of 1942, Henry had a run-in with a Montgomery, Alabama bus driver when he refused his order to sit in the rear of the vehicle. Henry demanded his nickel fare back and punched the driver in the mouth. The driver pulled out a gun, and the two began a struggle that spilled out onto the street. Henry managed to escape, but was sent to the military stockade for a brief period. A year later, he was stationed at Selfridge and helped plan the organized protests. The persistent Henry lodged a complaint with the War Department, which resulted in an investigation of racial discrimination at the airfield, under the direction of General Benjamin O. Davis, the military's highest ranking African-American officer. The report confirmed the protesters' charges, and the War Department ordered a reprimand for Selfridge's commander. However, Henry faced reprisals. In 1944, air force officials prosecuted him for insubordination in an incident unrelated to the officer's club demonstration. He was found guilty and discharged from the army on August 10.

An even more serious brouhaha occurred in April 1945, when Colonel Robert Selway ordered that the officers' club at Freeman Field in Seymour, Indiana, remain segregated. The policy sparked a challenge from members of the 477th Bombardment Group who were stationed there. Previously, black soldiers had staged a protest when Selway insisted on separating the races in the base's movie theater. Black airmen and their white sympathizers initiated "Operation Checkboard," and when the lights went down the soldiers switched seats so that they were sitting next to each other under cover of darkness. On April 5, 1945, several groups of black officers defied Selway's Jim Crow regulations and proceeded to enter the "whites-only" Club Number Two. In turn, the colonel had them arrested and proceeded to court-martial over one hundred African-American officers. The beleaguered airmen wired Secretary of War Henry Stimson that the continuation of segregation "can hardly be reconciled with the world wide struggle for freedom for which we are asked and are willing to lay down our lives." By

this point in the war, the army high brass, under pressure from the NAACP and the black press, had grown less tolerant of overt racial discrimination, especially within its officers' corps, and set nearly all the accused airmen free. Nevertheless, General Frank O. Hunter, the commander of the First Air Force and a Georgia native who supported Jim Crow, convinced the War Department to approve the court martials of three of the protesters, Lieutenant Robert Terry, Lieutenant Shirley Clinton, and Lieutenant Marsden Thompson. The military panels acquitted Clinton and Marsden, but found Terry guilty; however, he received a light fine. At the same time, the army punished Colonel Selway and relieved him of the command of Freeman Field.

Meanwhile, African-American women endeavored to open up the military to women. Mabel Keaton Staupers, the director of the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses (NACGN), tried to break down the rigid quota set by the military for employing African-American nurses. Despite a severe shortage of army nurses, the War Department refused to draft a large number of black nurses. By 1943, however, Staupers had managed to get the army to increase the number of military nurses from 56 to 160, chosen mainly to attend to black soldiers. Within the next two years, having recruited First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to her side, Staupers succeeded in persuading the War Department to draft all qualified nurses, regardless of race, to serve in the army Nurse Corps. Mabel K. Staupers, Darlene Clark Hine wrote in summing up her accomplishments, "played the ... active, highly visible role of 'interpreting the Negro nurse' to the general public and marshaling the mass support so essential to their short-run struggle for equal education, fair employment opportunities, and professional integration."

Black civilians also encountered blatant racial prejudice as they sought employment in wartime industries. Blacks had been especially hard hit by the Depression, and as the economy geared up for war production after 1940 they looked forward to taking their places in the booming factories. They had to wait in line, however, behind millions of unemployed white workers who were the first choice of employers. When African Americans showed up looking for work at aircraft plants, they were informed that "the Negro will be considered only as janitors and in other similar capacities." Of 100,000 aircraft workers in 1940, only 240 were black. In related electrical and rubber industries, black employees constituted a meager 1 percent and 3 percent of the workforce. The federal government, which let out war contracts and could have challenged discriminatory hiring practices, collaborated with employers in reinforcing them. According to the policy of the United States

Employment Service, “white-only” requests for defense labor would be filled in conformity with “the social pattern of the local community.”

That whites did not intend the war to alter race relations was demonstrated in several other ways as well. Though the process of storing blood plasma was developed by a black scientist, Dr. Charles Drew, the Red Cross refused to mix donations of whites and blacks in their blood banks. In Tennessee, those blacks who wanted to fight for their country experienced difficulty in getting enlisted by all-white selective service centers. Refusing to appoint blacks to sit on draft boards, the governor of the state explained: “This is a white man’s country. The Negro had nothing to do with the settling of America.” In neighboring Mississippi, to avoid any suggestion that the war against totalitarianism overseas was meant to affect the status of blacks at home, the state legislature ordered the deletion of all references to voting, elections, and democracy in textbooks used in black schools.

Despite these racist setbacks, most blacks supported the war effort and responded to the global conflict, as did other patriotic Americans. One survey revealed that 66 percent of blacks considered that they had a great stake in the outcome of the war and 43 percent felt that they would be better off than before. Though daring victories of nonwhite Japanese over Caucasians early in the war inspired admiration in many blacks, the majority realized what would happen if the Axis powers emerged victorious. “If Hitler wins,” the NAACP pointed out, “every right we now possess and for which we have struggled here in America for three centuries will be instantaneously wiped out.” At least if the Allies triumphed black Americans would be free to continue fighting for their democratic rights. Desiring full participation as American citizens, they had no real difficulty choosing which side they were on.

Nevertheless, blacks remained sorely troubled by the discrimination they encountered at home. Their loyalty was not at issue, but as one knowledgeable observer declared, many blacks displayed a “lack of enthusiasm for a war which they did not believe is being fought for true democratic principles.” Lloyd Brown, a black soldier stationed in Salina, Kansas, who was refused service at a restaurant that admitted German prisoners of war, poignantly expressed his disappointment: “If we were *untermenschen* [subhuman species] in Nazi Germany they would break our bones. As ‘colored’ men in Salina, they only break our hearts.” That a fascist victory would exact a higher price than an Allied one was acknowledged by African Americans; yet this awareness did not bring contentment. No greater slogan of despair over the gap between the democratic creed and discriminatory practice

existed than in the sardonic statement popular at the time: "Here lies a black man killed fighting a yellow man for the protection of a white man."

Cynical yet hopeful, African Americans used the war to pursue their own political aims. While blacks sought to defend their country on foreign battlefields alongside other American citizens, they also intended to open up a second front for freedom at home. Wartime ideology extolling the virtues of the "four freedoms" and denouncing the doctrines of Aryan racism was not lost upon blacks. On January 16, 1943, a black newspaper, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, published a "Draftee's Prayer," a poem that tersely summed up the twin goals black soldiers fought for:

So while I fight
Wrong over there
See that my folks
Are treated fair.

Black leaders agreed, and seized the opportunity to turn America's lofty pronouncements to their advantage. Shortly after Pearl Harbor, Walter White, the executive secretary of the NAACP, asserted that "declarations of war do not lessen the obligation to preserve and extend civil liberties here while the fight is being made to restore freedom from dictatorship abroad." These sentiments were echoed in the pages of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a black newspaper that mounted a campaign for the "double V," victory at home and overseas. In this way, the black press not only reflected the increasing militancy of its readers but also reinforced black support for the war against the fascists. Not willing to postpone their egalitarian demands as they had during World War I, blacks planned to attack "the principle and practice of compulsory segregation in our American society."

This new assertiveness on behalf of full equality had its most powerful expression in the March on Washington Movement (MOWM). Organized by A. Philip Randolph, the militant trade union leader, the MOWM represented both the exclusiveness of racial pride and the integration of blacks into the mainstream of American life. The group barred whites from participation not out of prejudice but because, as Randolph explained, an all-black movement would promote "faith by Negroes in Negroes." The main goals of the movement were the desegregation of the armed forces and the elimination of discrimination in employment by government contractors. To gain these ends, Randolph proposed a mass march on Washington by some 75,000 to 100,000 blacks to take place in

June 1941. Though this proposal had the endorsement of established black groups such as the NAACP, the MOWM derived its power from the black masses rather than middle-class reformers, who generally worked for change through the courts and legislatures. In this way, the MOWM foreshadowed the successful protest tactics of the later civil rights movement.

The MOWM timed its efforts well. The prospect of tens of thousands of blacks descending on the nation's capital as the United States prepared for war disturbed the President. Concerned about tarnishing the nation's image as well as about hampering attempts to rally support for the Allies, Roosevelt tried to get Randolph to halt the demonstration. Unsuccessful, the chief executive agreed partially to meet the movement's demands. Issuing Executive Order 8802, the President created the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) to investigate and publicize cases of employment discrimination. However, he left the policy of segregation in the military basically unchanged. Not getting all that he wanted, Randolph nevertheless called off the march, convinced that he had won an important political victory and confident that the movement would continue to apply pressure for social change. The MOWM did function throughout the war, but it never reached the same level of influence as it had during this first confrontation with the President.

Rising black militancy stimulated the growth of existing civil rights organizations. Foremost among them, the NAACP kept up the pressure to lower racial barriers along the color line. Although this oldest of civil rights groups had thrown its weight behind the MOWM, it preferred to operate in the traditional arenas of litigation, legislation, and lobbying. The national association's staff of dedicated attorneys prepared suits against white Democratic primaries in the South, segregation of passengers on interstate buses, and unequal educational facilities and teacher salaries. The NAACP functioned as a clearinghouse for complaints from black soldiers and civilians experiencing discriminatory treatment and directed them to the attention of officials in Washington. It prodded the Justice Department to investigate and prosecute perpetrators of lynching and other forms of violence and joined with white liberals and labor unions in petitioning Congress and state legislatures to lift poll-tax restrictions on the ballot. As a reflection of both its increased activism and the rising expectations of blacks, NAACP membership soared from 50,000 in 1940 to over 450,000 in 1946. Of these new recruits an estimated 15,000 black GIs signed up while they were still in uniform.

In addition, black activism spawned the formation of new protest groups. Most important for the future was the creation of the Congress of Racial

Equality (CORE) in 1942. Like Randolph's March on Washington Movement, CORE believed in the tactic of direct action to spotlight racist problems and bring them to an immediate resolution; in contrast to MOWM, however, the group welcomed white participation. Founded in Chicago by pacifists committed to the principle of nonviolence, its interracial membership initiated sit-in and picketing campaigns to desegregate public accommodations in northern cities. These innovative techniques led to the desegregation of restaurants and movie theaters in Detroit, Los Angeles, Denver, and Chicago.

CORE partisans were not the only ones to devise innovative tactics for protest. In Washington, DC, students at Howard University conducted their own sit-ins against racial discrimination in restaurants. In January 1943, shortly before the CORE protests in Chicago, three undergraduate women, Ruth Powell, Marianne Musgrave, and Juanita Morrow, were refused service at the counter of a United Cigar store. After the police instructed the waitress to serve the trio, she overcharged them for cups of hot chocolate. They insisted on paying only the regular amount, which then led the police to make a turnabout and arrest them for refusing to pay the specified bill. Sparked by this action, Howard students formed a Civil Rights Committee under the auspices of the college chapter of the NAACP. It zeroed in on restaurants in the area that surrounded the campus. Pauli Murray, a student from North Carolina attending Howard Law School, served as adviser to the group, and on April 17 student volunteers marched to the Little Palace Cafeteria on Fourteenth and U Streets, NW. Teams of three entered the facility and were rebuffed. While they sat at the tables and read their textbooks, others picketed outside hoisting posters with slogans such as "We Die Together - Why Can't We Eat Together?" The owner closed the cafeteria after the police refused to arrest the peaceful demonstrators. After two more days of protest, the restaurant capitulated, and African Americans could eat a meal alongside whites.

The following year, again led by Murray and Powell, Howard students resumed their desegregation drive against a major Washington, DC, cafeteria chain - John R. Thompson. They chose the restaurant at Eleventh Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, because it was moderately priced, opened 24 hours a day, and was conveniently located for black government workers who were employed nearby. On Saturday, April 22, 1944, groups of black and white students entered the cafeteria and remained seated at tables after they were denied service. Outside, students walked a picket line. The demonstration received a big boost when six black soldiers came into the

cafeteria and joined the students seated in protest. Following a four-hour standoff and a sharp drop in business, the manager of Thompson's, after consulting with corporate headquarters in Chicago, instructed his staff to wait on the black customers. However, the students' joy proved short lived. A few days after this initial victory, Thompson's barred a Howard student from eating. Before the civil rights forces could spring into action, Howard's president, Mordecai Johnson, issued a directive to the NAACP chapter members "to desist from its program of direct action in the City of Washington." Funded by Congress, Howard administrators feared that hostile lawmakers, especially from the South, would retaliate and cut the university's appropriations if the demonstrations persisted.

The students' campaign, however, eventually bore fruit. At the time of the sit-ins, Pauli Murray discovered an old District of Columbia statute from 1872 that prohibited racial discrimination by restaurants, ice-cream parlors, soda fountains, hotels, barbershops, and bathing establishments. In subsequent codifications of local statutes this antidiscrimination law had been omitted but not repealed. Murray suggested bringing a court case based on this long-forgotten, Reconstruction-era provision, but she did not find any backing at the time. Nevertheless, nine years later in 1953, the Supreme Court ruled that the 1872 law was still in effect to protect the rights of African Americans to obtain equal access to public accommodations. The suit had been initiated by Mary Church Terrell, the nonagenarian founder of the National Association of Colored Women, against Thompson's cafeteria for its ongoing policy of excluding blacks from dining.

African Americans also encountered racial difficulties in the West, where they had traveled outside of the South in search of wartime jobs in aircraft factories and shipyards. Furthermore, many blacks were stationed there in military camps. The black population of the region swelled during the 1940s by 33 percent, or some 443,000 people. Most of the migrants congregated in California, which absorbed about 75 percent of the increased number of minority residents. The San Francisco Bay area alone saw the size of its black population leap 798 percent; Los Angeles followed with 168 percent. Seattle, Washington, and Portland, Oregon, experienced huge growth as well. Throughout the West Coast blacks encountered employment discrimination and segregated housing. Ironically, African Americans took up residence in the homes of Japanese Americans, who had been relocated during the war, and remained in them once peace returned. Blacks and Latinos managed generally to coexist peacefully, but violence in crowded cities did erupt between African Americans and whites. Fights broke out

between black and white soldiers in Seattle and San Luis Obispo, California. In 1943 interracial confrontations occurred in Portland and Los Angeles shipyards, and in the following year black civilians and white sailors brawled in Oakland.

Within these surroundings, African Americans encountered discrimination in public accommodations. Although buses and theaters were not segregated, restaurants and other establishments did exclude blacks, sometimes in subtle ways. A woman who migrated from Pine Bluff, Arkansas, to Oakland remembered: "They didn't have 'No Colored' signs or anything like that, but they had ways of telling you they didn't want you." Her memory may have been a bit faulty, because in 1946 the Oakland Institute on Human Relations reported that many businesses in the city displayed signs reading "We Refuse Service to Negroes" and documented instances of black patrons unable to obtain service in East Bay hotels, bars, and restaurants. The Alameda branch of the NAACP, which included Oakland and Berkeley, brought litigation against businesses that denied access to black customers. Even those African Americans who managed to have a meal in a restaurant found themselves subject to rude treatment by the staff. Despite these frustrations, the greatest problems black migrants along the West Coast faced concerned jobs, housing, and treatment by the police more than public accommodations.

As blacks actively confronted Jim Crow and pushed for their rights they often came into sharp conflict with hostile whites. The friction did not result as much from legal battles in the courts and in legislatures and along picket lines as from the increasing daily contact between blacks and whites in the overcrowded communities the war had produced. The influx of blacks into urban areas in search of jobs brought them into direct competition with older white residents and newer white migrants for employment, housing, and recreational facilities. By 1943, 50,000 southern blacks and 500,000 whites had swarmed into Detroit to find work. Instead, many of them found substandard housing and high rates of tuberculosis and infant mortality. These deplorable conditions fell hardest upon blacks, and when attempts were made to provide some measure of relief whites resisted them. On June 20, 1943, this explosive situation finally erupted in a bloody race riot over a fracas at an amusement park, and after the smoke cleared 34 people had been killed, 700 injured, and \$2 million in property destroyed. Only the intervention of federal troops restored peace to the "Motor City." By the end of the year, another 241 racial disturbances in 47 cities had broken out, though none as severe as in Detroit.

With violence spreading throughout American cities, civil rights leaders became alarmed. Following a riot in Harlem, New York City's black newspaper, the *Amsterdam News*, warned that only by making blacks "feel that they are part of this country" would the violence cease. The way to achieve that, most black leaders believed, was to continue to press for the "double V" through peaceful channels. The NAACP called upon its chapters to step up the campaign for racial equality in the courts, legislatures, and ballot boxes, thereby removing potentially incendiary conflicts from the streets. This preference for seeking social change in a deliberate and orderly fashion diminished support for the tactics of direct mass action. After 1943, the once popular MOWM received criticism from the black press as "just Ku Kluxism in reverse" for its all-black policy, and a poll of black newspaper readers showed that 70.6 percent opposed the March on Washington Movement. Established civil rights leaders and their organizations did not retreat from the goal of securing full equality, but their strategy of measured militancy helped defuse the appeal of more confrontational approaches toward achieving that end.

To combat racial discrimination, they increasingly put a premium on attracting sympathetic whites. Before the war, white liberals thought primarily in economic rather than racial terms. They figured that the New Deal's recovery programs would lift blacks out of poverty along with whites and improve black chances of gaining acceptance for civil and political equality. However, the end of the Depression had not significantly extended first-class citizenship. Wartime ideals and the persistence of racism exposed by the 1943 riots persuaded liberal whites to assign a higher priority to civil rights. Fighting Hitler's atrocities abroad shifted the focus of racism at home from an economic to a moral issue, prompting liberals to try to prove that their society did not behave like Nazi Germany. Accordingly, they joined with blacks to set up interracial committees in scores of communities to open up better lines of communication and avoid the type of situation that engendered racial violence. The increasing presence of whites in the civil rights movement after 1943 had a further moderating effect on black militancy and reinforced those who favored the tactics of cooperation over confrontation, legalism over disruption, the ballot over direct action. The most prominent of all white liberals, Eleanor Roosevelt, endorsed this approach in contending that blacks should strive for complete equality but should "not do too much demanding [or] try to bring those advances about any more quickly than they were offered."

Mrs. Roosevelt's husband had the power to influence the pace of racial change, and he chose to act cautiously. According to the historian Harvard Sitkoff, President Roosevelt held a paternalistic view toward racial affairs, believing that the "Negro" was "an unfortunate ward of the nation to be treated kindly and with charity as a reward for good behavior." Ordinarily preferring gradualism and education to promote racial toleration, FDR felt even more inclined toward those methods at a time when winning the war was his chief concern. Though he disapproved of any racial prejudice that lowered black morale, he also took into account the position of southern white politicians who opposed any change in the racial status quo and whose legislative support for war appropriations he greatly needed. Black voters had joined the New Deal Democratic coalition, but their political clout remained weaker than that of Dixie politicians. In offering encouraging words to African Americans, "Dr. Win-the-War" Roosevelt never forgot that, while the overseas conflict lasted, "the long-range problems of racial and minority-majority antagonism cannot be settled.... the war must be won first."

The experience of the Fair Employment Practice Committee demonstrated this point. Created by Roosevelt to head off the proposed June 1941 march on Washington, the FEPC was authorized to investigate discrimination in defense-related employment but lacked the power of enforcement. Instead of coercion it relied on publicity and persuasion to expose and alter biased practices. Reflecting the President's philosophy, committee members believed that winning the war should take precedence over the pursuit of racial equality. One commentator summed up their thinking: "For the government to terminate an important war contract by reason of the contractor's indulgence in discriminatory employment would be highly impractical."

Unable to compel compliance and unwilling to alienate powerful employers, the FEPC achieved mixed success. Of 8,000 complaints submitted to the committee, two-thirds were dismissed as without merit and only one-fifth were settled in the South. Employers and unions, which were also covered under the executive order, ignored 35 of 45 compliance decrees. For example, the railroad brotherhoods and southern railway lines signed an agreement restricting employment opportunities for blacks and then disregarded an FEPC order against it. The government did not dare take action that might provoke a crippling strike by a powerful union and also antagonize the white South. In contrast, the President sometimes backed the committee when the political risks were not so great. In

Philadelphia, a strike by a dissident union faction in protest at an FEPC ruling upgrading black jobs on streetcars triggered President Roosevelt's decision to send in federal troops to resume normal operation of the transit system. In this instance, a stronger rival union supported the black position, and the residents of the "City of Brotherly Love" did not threaten a political revolt over the settlement. Even the lukewarm record of the FEPC proved too much for southern members of Congress, who succeeded in 1944 in enacting a provision that paved the way for the committee's legislative funding to be cut off two years later.

Although blacks did obtain some benefits from the FEPC, their main economic gains resulted from labor shortages during the war. As millions of whites marched off to battle and industrial production expanded, blacks helped plug the job holes on the home front. Black employment rose by over 1 million; the number of unemployed dropped from 937,000 to 151,000; union membership doubled; and the percentage of blacks in defense work climbed from 4.6 to 8.3. African Americans found jobs in factories where employers had initially resisted hiring them. Under the strain of war, the number of black employees increased from 6,000 to 14,000 in shipyards and from zero to 5,000 in aircraft plants. The federal government itself gave black employment a big boost, increasing its rolls from 60,000 to 200,000 African-American workers. On the down side, most of the blacks entering the labor force took jobs at low levels as janitors and custodians. Consequently, blacks made up only 3.6 percent of craftsmen and foremen, 2.8 percent of clerical and sales personnel, and 3.3 percent of professional and technical staff. Concentrated in low-paying jobs, black families on the average earned about half the income of whites. Nevertheless, the improvements in their economic condition whetted black appetites for more and raised expectations that opportunities would continue to grow once the war ended.

African Americans also beefed up their political muscle as a force for freedom. In the North, where voting booths were open to blacks, both the Democratic and Republican parties courted them. In 1940 the GOP presidential candidate, Wendell Wilkie, campaigned hard for the black vote and made slight inroads in a losing effort. In lining up behind Roosevelt's third-term bid, the black electorate moved the victorious President to grant them concessions. Black support spurred FDR to add an antidiscrimination clause to the Selective Service Act, appoint Colonel Benjamin O. Davis as the first black (brigadier) general, select blacks as civilian aides in the War Department and Selective Service, and establish an Army Air Corps

training school at Tuskegee Institute. Four years later, though the Democrats did not draft a strong civil rights plank for their platform, FDR personally called for a permanent FEPC and elimination of restrictions on the ballot. Again, the black electorate responded enthusiastically.

Because black support for the President was much stronger than for the Democratic Party as a whole, the minority vote seemed very much up for grabs once the popular chief executive was no longer a candidate. In 1940, 67 percent of African-American voters had backed the President, though only 42 percent considered themselves Democrats. After the election in 1944, both Democrats and Republicans took note that a shift in the black vote in eight states would have defeated Roosevelt's reelection for a fourth term. Given their strategic location in major urban centers in northern states rich in Electoral College votes, blacks looked forward to wielding the balance of power in close presidential races in the future.

Meanwhile, in the South, where blacks remained largely disfranchised, wartime developments lifted hopes for change. In 1944 the Supreme Court's *Smith v. Allwright* decision struck down the Democratic white primary. Victory in these preliminary contests ordinarily determined the winners in subsequent general elections in the one-party South, and hence the destruction of the white primary would remove a major obstacle to black participation in the region. The assault on the primary had begun two decades earlier. In 1923, after the Texas legislature officially barred blacks from participating in Democratic primaries, the NAACP mounted a legal challenge that had great significance for blacks in the Lone Star State as well as for those in the rest of the South where the exclusionary practice also flourished.

Initially, the NAACP convinced the judiciary of its argument, but these triumphs neither settled the issue nor did they gain for blacks the right to vote. In 1927, and again in 1932, the Supreme Court ruled that a state could not officially authorize racial discrimination in the fashion of Texas without violating the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. However, in a pattern that would become increasingly common in the face of rising black protest, southern officials resisted attempts to dismantle segregation and disfranchisement by countering with measures purporting to conform with the law while at the same time managing to evade it. In this instance, the Texas legislature obeyed the court's pronouncement by repealing its white primary regulation, thereby leaving the state Democratic Party free to adopt rules denying blacks access to its internal affairs. Previously the high tribunal had struck down the white primary because the state had deliberately

created and maintained it, but the court had left open the question of whether a political party, operating as a private association, could deny blacks participation in its activities. Presented with another case in 1935, the Supreme Court decided that a political party had the constitutional right to fix its own qualifications for membership and therefore could legally exclude blacks if it so desired. In *Grovey v. Townsend* the justices argued that the conduct of a primary was strictly a private party matter and was immune from the guarantees of the Fifteenth Amendment, which forbade interference with the right of blacks to vote in general elections open to the public.

Before they could overcome this judicial blow to reenfranchisement, blacks first had to settle some differences that had hampered their legal battle. The main problem concerned the conflict for control of the case between local blacks and the NAACP, headquartered in New York City. Run in a hierarchical manner, the national association insisted on maintaining tight supervision of its programs from the top down. This style irritated some black attorneys and other leaders in Texas, who believed they should play a greater role in shaping policies and legal strategies directly affecting their community. They also wanted the NAACP to make a greater effort in recruiting black lawyers whenever possible to try suits and to rely less heavily on whites. These tensions had produced unfortunate results. Against the wishes of the NAACP, which considered the attempt premature, a group of black Texans had initiated the *Grovey* case and the cause of black voting rights had suffered a severe setback as a consequence.

Following this debacle, the NAACP sought to remedy the difficulties. Under the leadership of Charles Houston, the dean of Howard Law School, and his protégé, Thurgood Marshall, the national association assembled a talented staff of black attorneys and labored to work more closely and harmoniously with blacks in the local areas from which the legal challenges arose. This interaction between national and grassroots forces became the hallmark of the burgeoning civil rights struggle. In the wake of *Grovey*, the NAACP organized black Texans into a mass movement for first-class citizenship. Its state convention created a Democratic Primary Defense Fund, which galvanized black churches, civic leagues, fraternities, and business groups behind a fundraising campaign to finance a new court suit. "Brother, have you spared that dime for your liberation and freedom?" asked a black newspaper, and the response was generous. As Darlene Clark Hine has observed: "The white primary became a rallying cry for black Texans and assisted them in developing black solidarity." In addition to

contributing money and generating publicity, local blacks furnished the plaintiff to contest the white primary. Represented by Marshall, a Houston dentist and NAACP member named Lonnie Smith filed litigation against S. E. Allwright, a state election official who had refused to allow him to cast a ballot in the 1940 Democratic primary.

On this fourth attempt to wipe out the offensive and highly resilient discriminatory electoral procedure, African Americans finally triumphed. Drawing upon a recent opinion in a case brought by the federal government against voting fraud in a Louisiana primary, on April 3, 1944, the Supreme Court reversed *Grovey*. The justices held that where a primary was an integral part of the electoral process, as was the circumstance in Texas, blacks were entitled to the protection of the Fifteenth Amendment, which sheltered their right to vote from racial discrimination. Smith not only won for himself the right to participate in the crucial Democratic primary, but he greeted his victory as a second emancipation for blacks throughout the South. The Houston dentist gleefully commented that this ruling would affect the political history of the country more than any case since the infamous *Dred Scott* decision before the Civil War. If the joy of victory caused this happy plaintiff to exaggerate somewhat, many could still agree with the assessment of an NAACP attorney that the “Supreme Court released and galvanized democratic forces” which one day would transform the political life of the South and the nation.

Toward this end, suffragists had also aimed their attack at another troublesome obstacle to black voting: the poll tax. Confined to the South, this financial requirement differed from state to state but generally discouraged the poor of both races from going to the polls. In fact, it worked a greater hardship on whites than on blacks, as long as the white primary and the racially biased administration of literacy tests operated to chase southern blacks away from the ballot box. Encouraged by Roosevelt’s New Deal, progressive southerners tried to find ways of extending economic and political democracy to the region. Consequently, in 1941 they formed the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax, composed of labor, liberal, and civil rights groups. Actively cooperating with the NAACP and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the anti-poll-tax alliance lobbied national lawmakers to enact a measure repealing the restrictive levy in federal elections.

America’s entry into World War II provided proponents of abolition with fresh ammunition for their attack. Reformers claimed that the disfranchising effects of the tax hurt public morale, and they compared the decline of free elections in fascist-dominated Europe with the shrinking of the

electorate in the poll-tax South. Twice during the war, the repeal advocates convinced the House of Representatives to support their proposal, only to suffer defeat in the Senate. Though whites stood to gain more than did blacks from elimination of the tax, southern foes warned their constituents of the dangerous racial consequences of legislative repeal. "If the [anti] poll tax bill passes," Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi contended, "the next step will be an effort to remove the registration qualification, the educational qualification of the negroes. If that is done we will have no way of preventing negroes from voting."

Despite such fears, pressure from the progressive, interracial coalition encouraged Congress to take some limited but positive action to soften the burden of the poll tax. In 1942, lawmakers exempted soldiers from having to meet poll-tax requirements to vote in national elections. Reformers also made some progress at the local level. In 1945, Georgia abolished its franchise tax entirely, and at the war's end most of its neighbors in the region released their returning veterans from having to pay for casting a vote. Even with these wartime changes, most blacks remained disfranchised. Southern officials discriminated against black soldiers seeking to claim their poll-tax exemption, and the majority of blacks continued to encounter insurmountable suffrage barriers, such as literacy tests. Yet the easing of poll-tax restrictions, together with the Texas white primary ruling, had a liberating impact. Between 1940 and 1947, the proportion of southern blacks enrolled to vote climbed from 3 percent to 12 percent.

Taking advantage of these opportunities, blacks marshaled their forces at the local level to convert votes into power. To stimulate both greater registration and political involvement, grassroots organizations offered citizenship classes, conducted poll-tax payment drives, and initiated challenges to discrimination within state Democratic parties. In one imaginative move, black activists in South Carolina, in cooperation with the NAACP, formed a statewide Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), which attempted to unseat the regular Democrats at the 1944 national convention. Though unsuccessful, the PDP still managed to stimulate political activity, and by 1948 more than 35,000 blacks voted in the regular Democratic Party primary, a figure ten times greater than the turnout four years earlier.

The South Carolina campaigns received the enlightened guidance of three members of the state's black middle class. Segregation had produced unequal treatment and inferior public facilities for nonwhites, but it had also provided blacks with opportunities to develop separate religious, economic, and civic institutions under their exclusive control. Having

achieved a measure of independence within their business and professional spheres, some of them attempted to gain for the majority of blacks the right to participate in governing their own communities. The Reverend James Hinton held a managerial position with Pilgrim Life Insurance Company, a black-owned enterprise, and headed the Palmetto State's NAACP Conference. He was joined by Osceola McKaine, a native of Sumter and a World War I veteran who had established a successful restaurant business in Belgium before returning home shortly after the onslaught of Hitler's army. Rounding out the trio, John McCray provided valuable leadership as editor of the *Lighthouse and Informer*, a black newspaper in Columbia that editorialized against racial injustice and for first-class citizenship. As Hinton, McKaine, and McCray showed, middle-class blacks did not have to confine their egalitarian impulses to seeking change exclusively through the courts. They worked tirelessly to organize South Carolina blacks behind a variety of grassroots activities to regain the precious ballot snatched away in the late nineteenth century. McKaine, also an editor of the *Lighthouse and Informer*, saw the black masses aroused by the war against fascism and responsive to the renewed efforts to advance their political fortunes. In his view, the creation of the PDP marked a revolutionary beginning "to give the disinherited men and women of both races in South Carolina some voice in their government, [and] some control over their destinies."

To reinforce their local drives, black leaders requested federal assistance. They usually met with disappointment. An organizer of the South Carolina PDP held the national Democratic Party "as responsible as the state party for the denial of membership to Negroes in that it tolerates discrimination in the South." This policy would not change so long as white voters constituted the foundation of the Democratic Party in the South and their elected representatives played a key role in determining the outcome of legislation desired by the President. Based on this political calculation, Roosevelt's Justice Department refused to follow up *Smith v. Allwright* with criminal prosecutions against suffrage violators. When Senator Lister Hill of Alabama, a legislative ally of President Roosevelt, heard that such legal action was contemplated in his home state, he warned the White House that it would be "a very dangerous mistake." Worried about a political revolt at the polls in Dixie and concerned about getting along with the southern-influenced Senate Judiciary Committee, the Justice Department backed off with the President's blessing. For similar reasons the chief executive declined to give more than lip service in favor of congressional measures designed to repeal the remaining poll-tax requirements in the South.

While Roosevelt attempted delicately to balance the political wishes of southern whites and blacks, demographic forces were in motion that would eventually upset that equilibrium. During the war southern blacks voted with their feet and migrated northward, more than doubling the number of their race living above the Mason–Dixon line. Increased urbanization was propelled by changing labor patterns on the farm. The extension of mechanized agriculture, especially the use of the tractor, during the 1940s pushed blacks off the farm and sent them to northern cities in search of jobs. Remembering the plight of friends and relatives left behind, they intended to use their unfettered ballots to select candidates favoring civil rights measures. Some 750,000 blacks journeyed from rural areas to cities within the South, and there they usually encountered a less restrictive application of suffrage requirements. Moreover, the urban environment afforded wider social space to develop racial solidarity and community organizations for political and economic emancipation. Away from the tight regulations exacted by the plantation economy, they were more readily exposed to the wartime promises of democracy and became more determined to challenge enduring forms of racial discrimination. These demographic changes were a precondition for the building of a movement to transform race relations in the postwar South.

The tempo and direction of that change would be determined by the interconnected efforts of federal officials and local black communities across the South. Civil rights groups, including national associations and their local chapters, as well as civic, fraternal, and religious organizations, initiated the struggle to eradicate racial barriers, mobilize the black masses to confront these obstacles, and apply ongoing pressure on white officials to demolish them. In cities and towns throughout the region, blacks were joining together to transform their own lives economically, politically, and psychologically, seeking to liberate themselves totally from the bonds of oppression. The process of struggle could free blacks spiritually and forge racial pride and solidarity, but their liberation would not be completed without allies in Washington helping them crack potent southern white opposition and enacting their goals into law.

World War II was the seedtime of the racial and legal metamorphosis that was to sweep over the South. The war propelled a growth of racial consciousness and a burst of militancy that foreshadowed the assault on Jim Crow. It provided new economic and political opportunities and at the same time underscored the failure of the nation to allow African Americans to take full advantage of them. Having caught a glimpse of a better life and

frustrated by the resistance to achieving it, blacks did not intend to retreat. They had already seen some of the old hurdles tumble in the courts, and their nascent political influence had pressured the President into supporting limited reforms. By VJ Day, black troops had fought together with whites on an emergency basis in the European theater of war, and planning for integration had begun in the navy. Surveys showed that the more contact whites had with blacks in the military and in the workplace the more likely they were to oppose segregation. Buoyed by these initial advances and imbued with egalitarian wartime ideology, African Americans looked ahead with great expectations for the future.

Yet the war alone would not solve the manifold problem of racial inequality. One of the great rewards for veterans was congressional passage in 1944 of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights. Under this program the government provided educational benefits for returning soldiers as well as a year's unemployment compensation and loans to purchase homes and start businesses. However, in the South most black veterans encountered discrimination that deprived them from receiving the benefits due them. As one historian of this program noted, in April 1947, the Veterans Administration (VA) "found only 5 percent of all black veterans enrolled in courses and programs under the education benefit. This occurred at the same time that the total veteran enrollment at colleges throughout the country reached its peak during the postwar era." Housing also proved difficult for black veterans to obtain in integrated areas in the cities or suburbs. In places like Chicago and Detroit, biased real-estate brokers and bankers engaged in a variety of practices that steered African Americans away from homes in white neighborhoods. Taken together, the shortcomings in administration of the GI Bill of Rights along with housing, lending, and employment discrimination excluded most blacks from the postwar expansion of the middle class and widened the economic gap between blacks and whites.

A Troubled Peace

Black veterans marched at the forefront of those demanding unconditional surrender from the forces of fascism at home. Having fought for their country and demonstrated their worth on the battlefield, they returned to their communities intent on challenging the racist practices they had temporarily escaped from. On May 19, 1945, before shipping out of Okinawa,

Private Herbert W. Seward expressed the view of many of his black buddies in a letter to the *Pittsburgh Courier*:

Our people are not coming back with the idea of just taking up where they left off. We are going to have the things that are rightfully due us or else, which is a very large order, but we have proven beyond all things that we are people and not just the servants of the whiteman.

By reading black newspapers and letters from home they had kept track of the many incidents of racial discrimination and abuse that blacks experienced during the war. The “majority will return home,” Walter White of the NAACP predicted, “convinced that whatever betterment of their lot is achieved must come from their own efforts.”

One such veteran was Jackie Robinson. Having played on an integrated baseball squad in college, Robinson was determined to crack the color line

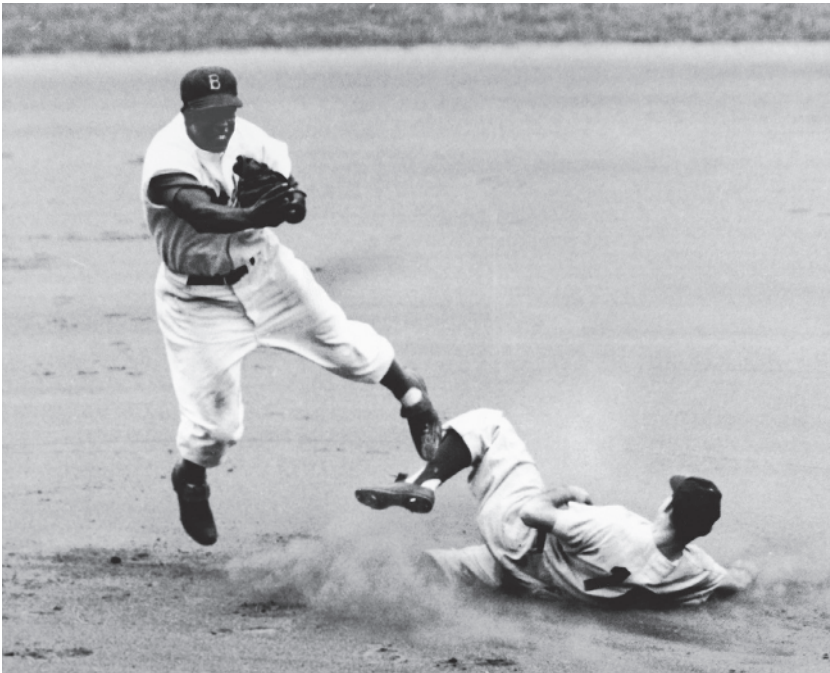


Figure 2 World War II veteran Jackie Robinson, who integrated major league baseball and became a star with the Brooklyn Dodgers. (Photo © B. Bennett / Getty Images)

that barred blacks from the major leagues. While playing professional ball with the Kansas City Monarchs in the Negro Leagues in 1945, he was spotted by the Brooklyn Dodgers' owner, Branch Rickey, who wanted to integrate the country's national pastime. Displaying the same fierce pride that pushed him to protest wartime discrimination, Robinson readily accepted the challenge. "I'm ready to take the chance," he declared, in anticipation of his task. "Maybe I'm doing something for my race." After playing a season in the minor leagues, in 1947 Robinson joined the Dodgers and succeeded in opening up one of America's most cherished institutions to blacks. Indeed, Robinson served as an enormous source of pride for all African Americans looking for expanded opportunities and equal rights in the postwar years.

At the same time, black southerners directed much of their energy toward extending the right to vote, which they considered the essential weapon in gaining and protecting the rest of their civil rights. Many black GIs had barely taken time to remove their uniforms before they marched to local courthouses to register to vote. In Birmingham, Alabama, about a hundred ex-soldiers paraded in double file through the main street of the city, ending up at the registrars' office. Veterans like these reasoned that as long as blacks did not determine who governed them they would continue to be victimized by racial discrimination. One discharged soldier from Georgia thought that conditions would be better in the future. "Now that the war has been won," he wrote, "the most difficult job ahead of us is to win the peace at home. 'Peace is not the absence of war, but the presence of justice' which may be obtained, first, by becoming a citizen and registered voter. If you become a registered voter we may be able to win the peace." Black leaders concurred. The *Pittsburgh Courier* predicted that "once Negroes start voting in large numbers ... the jim crow laws will be endangered and the whole elaborate pattern of segregation threatened and finally destroyed."

Southern officials tried to block this chain of events at the first step, resorting to a variety of racist subterfuges to perpetuate black disfranchisement. Even after the destruction of the white primary, registrars were able to exclude blacks from the suffrage by administering literacy tests for prospective voters. In the hands of bigoted clerks these examinations were manipulated to prevent qualified black applicants from enrolling and were interpreted to allow illiterate whites to pass. White registrars accomplished this biased feat by asking only blacks the meaning of highly technical clauses in state and federal constitutions or by asking them such absurd questions

as “How many bubbles are there in a bar of soap?” One Mississippi official frankly admitted that he “didn’t care which way the [Negroes] answered those questions, it wouldn’t come up to his satisfaction.”

Mississippi had long been a leader in reducing blacks to second-class citizenship. Combining the white primary, literacy tests, and the poll tax, with terror and coercion thrown in for good measure, the Magnolia State had created a “closed society.” Blacks lived at the bottom of a rigid caste structure, held down by a separate and unequal educational system, dependent upon white-controlled economic institutions for survival, and disciplined to remain in place by official and private acts of violence. Generations of white supremacists had sternly taught Mississippi blacks that participation in civic life was folly. Not surprisingly, in 1944, out of 350,000 adult black Mississippians only 2,500 had managed to register to vote.

However, for several years after World War II the idea that “politics is white folks’ business” was challenged by a small but determined group in the Magnolia State. In 1944, a small circle of middle-class blacks from Jackson, led by T. B. Wilson, the secretary of the local NAACP chapter, formed the Mississippi Progressive Voters League. Designed to stimulate black enrollment, the league attempted to educate black citizens to recognize the importance of the suffrage. This task was made a bit easier after *Smith v. Allwright*. Until that ruling, Wilson explained, blacks “were indifferent, disinterested, but when we worked up this case of registering and voting them because the Supreme Court decision gave us to understand that we could vote, then they began to register.” In addition, like most other southern states, Mississippi exempted veterans from payment of the poll tax for voting. Their racial and political consciousness heightened by the war, black veterans in Mississippi attempted to exercise their franchise rights.

In doing so, they ran up against Senator Theodore “The Man” Bilbo. An outspoken bigot whose storehouse of invectives was plentiful enough to smear racial, religious, and ethnic minorities alike, Bilbo had few peers to match the virulence of his antiblack tirades. In the midst of his reelection campaign in 1946 he encouraged white Mississippians to keep the ballot boxes shut to the growing number of blacks who were seeking to register. “The Man” unabashedly suggested to the registrars that if “there is a single man or woman serving ... who cannot think up questions enough to disqualify undesirables then write Bilbo or any good lawyer, and there are a hundred good questions which can be furnished.” Bilbo was confident that the Magnolia State’s brand of racial justice would not pose a hazard to these biased attempts. “How many registrars do you think can be convicted here

in the state of Mississippi?” he asked rhetorically. If such chicanery did not do the trick, the senator informed his audiences, “You and I know what’s the best way to keep the nigger from voting. You do it the night before the election. I don’t have to tell you more than that.” Apparently getting his not too subtle message, one county clerk refused to register a black veteran because “niggers don’t vote in this county.” To add injury to insult, the rejected ex-GI was abducted and flogged by white vigilantes as he left the courthouse. Given these potent lessons in repression, fewer than 1 percent of adult blacks registered to vote, and a majority of white electors cast their ballots to return Bilbo to the Senate.

Meanwhile, Bilboism did not go unchallenged. Aided by the NAACP and sympathetic whites in the North, the Progressive Voters League compiled affidavits documenting the racist nature of the senator’s demagoguery. Sufficient evidence was accumulated to convince the Senate to send a special committee to conduct public hearings in Jackson on the charge that Bilbo’s election was tainted with fraud and corruption. Because the five-member investigation team contained a Democratic majority including three southerners, and because it was chaired by Allen Ellender, an avid defender of white supremacy in Louisiana, blacks did not expect a favorable report. Instead, they hoped to expose how disfranchisement operated in Mississippi and to arouse northern senators to block Bilbo from taking his seat.

On December 2, 1946, blacks journeyed from all over the state to puncture the myth of their contentment with race relations in Mississippi. They jammed the hearing room to testify before a mixed gallery of friends, hostile whites, and the national press. With veterans in the forefront, they braved the danger of possible retaliation from angry whites resentful of the unfavorable publicity the proceedings trumpeted throughout the country. An observer compared the plight of the black witnesses to that of a “pedestrian in any typical American city or community, attempting to cross the street with a green light and the law in his favor but who, nevertheless, is seriously injured or killed in the process.”

For three days courageous black veterans recounted their frustrated attempts to enroll and vote. They detailed stories of threats, beatings, and police brutality. The testimony revealed that the registrars misused the literacy exam to prevent them from qualifying to vote. Amazingly the registrars themselves corroborated the damaging testimony. One official admitted that he had told a black not to cast his ballot, because “in the southern states it has always been a white primary, and I just couldn’t conceive of this darkey going up there to vote.” The candor of this testimony

prompted an NAACP representative on the scene to remark: "Sometimes I think Jesus Christ must be ill at ease in Mississippi."

Although these revelations proved that blacks were disfranchised on racial grounds, the Ellender committee voted to exonerate Bilbo of any personal guilt. Instead, the Democratic majority blamed the blacks' failure to vote on the white primary tradition and on lethargy. However, the challenge was not over. As the NAACP had hoped, when the matter reached the Senate floor, in early January 1947, a bipartisan coalition of Republicans and northern Democrats succeeded in postponing consideration of Bilbo's credentials. Suffering from jaw cancer, the Mississippi senator agreed temporarily to withdraw his claim to his seat while he sought treatment for his ailment. This solution turned out to be permanent: on August 21 "The Man" died.

Incipient black militancy in Mississippi yielded limited short-run returns, but it raised promising expectations for the long run. Although Bilbo had departed, the white supremacist system lived on. When John Stennis replaced Bilbo, only the cruel rhetoric and not the underlying policy of disfranchisement changed. Behind the Magnolia Curtain, blacks continued to encounter most of the old difficulties and a few new ones in trying to vote. Yet they benefited from having stood up to Bilboism. The public hearings demonstrated rising political awareness, especially among younger blacks. Despite persistent obstacles in front of ballot boxes, nearly 20,000 blacks added their names to registration lists in the decade after the war's end. This modest increase revealed the development of tiny chinks in the armor of the closed society. White politicians who justified their racial policy on the basis that African Americans were content with their lot had that explanation graphically disputed by black veterans and their friends who defied white hostility to appear in Jackson. As a matter of fact, the Senate investigation documented only part of the rising tide of black protest. A former soldier not called to testify about his own encounter with Bilboism, Medgar Evers later became state field secretary of the NAACP and worked tirelessly to organize blacks against racial discrimination and disfranchisement. In that capacity, working alongside a new breed of blacks, he helped breathe life into the civil rights movement in Mississippi until additional recruits and allies were mobilized.

Black Mississippians were not alone in their struggle to obtain the franchise. Throughout the postwar South, blacks campaigned to break down suffrage barriers. The NAACP, while concentrating its energies in the courts, was among the groups promoting the use of the ballot. After *Smith v. Allwright*, many of its branches created citizenship schools to teach blacks

how to fill out registration forms properly and to answer typical questions that the clerks posed. The national association made cash awards to those who took up this work; in 1947, for example, the organization presented a prize to its chapter in Monroe, Louisiana, for having conducted a drive that added over 600 names to the voter lists. Assistant secretary Roy Wilkins expressed the value to blacks in creating these voter education classes: "The issue of civil rights is politics. If we are to win the fight for civil rights we must use our political strength."

African Americans also organized voter leagues to supplement the efforts of the NAACP. These groups solicited support from various organizations in the black community – civic, fraternal, religious – and thus they recruited many individuals outside of the national association's orbit of influence. In 1946, an Atlanta All Citizens Registration Committee was formed because "previously NAACP registration drives had failed to reach the masses." Within four months, this committee assisted in bringing out some 17,000 blacks to sign up to vote. C. A. Bacote, a historian at Atlanta University, chaired the committee, and Grace Towns Hamilton, the executive director of the Urban League, coordinated the day-to-day activities, which included mass distribution of flyers and door-to-door canvassing. Hamilton came from a civic-minded family and she had attended Atlanta University. She worked for the YWCA for several years before taking over leadership of the Urban League in 1943. The league stressed community self-development and worked on improving housing and employment conditions for Atlanta blacks.

While male faculty members from Atlanta University and ministers such as the Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr., played an important role, the presence of Hamilton shows that women were as critical to the success of the drive as were men. Women's groups lent their expertise and personnel to the effort. For example, a group called the MRS Club, comprised mainly of young teachers, succeeded in registering all of its members. One of them, Narvie J. Harris, believed that citizenship education had to extend beyond the classroom to the larger community, and she established a PTA Council to promote adult education. Her extensive involvement in the social networks of her community proved invaluable in reaching potential voters throughout Atlanta's black neighborhoods. The drive also benefited from the participation of Ruby Blackburn. From a more humble background than Hamilton and Harris, Blackburn had worked as a maid at a black school and later became the owner of Ruby's Beauty Shoppe. Beauty parlors were an important meeting place for black women during the era of segregation and provided an independent space for discussion and

dissemination of information. When the operators were as political as Blackburn, who also was active in the NAACP, the shops furnished a way to reach many women outside the middle-class social orbit of professionals like Hamilton and Harris.

In Winston-Salem, North Carolina, an alliance of blacks and organized labor succeeded in electing a black to the city council. In Richmond, Virginia, a similar coalition supporting the election of a black veteran to the state legislature only narrowly failed. Elsewhere, in union halls, business establishments, farm groups, and small county associations, men and women gathered to plan suffrage crusades. Joining them, representatives of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW), an interracial group of New Deal liberals formed in 1938, carried on voter registration drives throughout Dixie. In addition, from church pulpits ministers urged their congregants to go to the polls. During the Atlanta registration drive the Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr., preached for the cause of enfranchisement, thereby providing a role model for his son to follow.

The situation in Winston-Salem especially illustrated new possibilities for black political advancement stirred by the war. A drive by Local 22 of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers, a CIO affiliate, to gain a collective bargaining agreement with R. J. Reynolds Company boosted union membership among blacks and stimulated efforts to challenge racial discrimination within their community. This interracial union chapter, with Communists actively in the lead, mobilized working-class blacks to take part in the freedom struggle that had been waged haltingly in the past by a small middle-class segment of blacks associated with the NAACP. By 1947, CIO and NAACP voter registration campaigns had succeeded in enrolling ten times the number of blacks eligible to vote three years before. "I didn't take registration seriously until the union came in and we began to talk about ... the importance of voting," one newly signed-up registrant commented. In 1947, Kenneth Williams, a black minister, won election to the Winston-Salem Board of Aldermen largely on the strength of this emergent African-American electorate. The efforts of Local 22 and its allies in heightening racial and political consciousness greatly impressed a visiting black journalist, who reported: "I was aware of a growing solidarity and intelligent mass action that will mean the dawn of a New Day in the South. If there is a 'New Negro', he is to be found in the ranks of the labor movement." Ultimately, however, much of the hope for this trade union path toward racial equality was dashed by the rising anti-Communist reaction that gripped the United States during the Cold War era (see Chapter 2).

Attempts to increase black political involvement throughout the South produced substantial dividends. Within a decade after *Smith v. Allwright*, over 1 million blacks, about four times the number in 1944, had qualified to vote. As Everett C. Ladd, Jr., noted, blacks were transformed “from ‘blanks’ to participants to city politics.” Black voters sometimes held the balance of power in close elections and increasingly helped defeat the most racist of candidates. Commentators noted that where blacks voted in sizable numbers treatment by police improved, black patrolmen were hired, and health, education, and recreational facilities were constructed. Streets in black neighborhoods in those areas were paved. Osceola McKaine, who after the war served as a field representative of the SCHW, reported from his travels: “The Negro masses are becoming keenly aware that the questions of jobs and schools are essentially political questions and these are the things that interest them most.” The greater turnout at the polls also encouraged blacks to seek political office in the South, and for the first time in the twentieth century nearly a dozen blacks in the South were elected to posts as aldermen, county supervisors, and members of city councils.

Women and the Civil Rights Movement

With the emphasis usually on returning veterans, namely men, it should not be forgotten that World War II also encouraged women to participate in the struggle for first-class citizenship. Inspired by the wartime rhetoric of equality, some 4,000 black women managed to gain admission into the Women’s Army Corps and other branches of the military. Moreover, the war whetted the appetite of black women for continued progress. Having profited from the greater availability of jobs during the war, many African-American women desired to hold on to them in peacetime. As Paula Giddings noted, the postwar period witnessed a rising percentage of black women college graduates and professionals and their entry into the middle class. As their educational and economic achievements grew, African-American women heightened their expectations of attaining the political and constitutional rights that marked full citizenship. As already discussed in this chapter, women such as Pauli Murray, Mabel K. Staupers, and Grace Towns Hamilton were instrumental in leading the charge against segregation and disfranchisement.

Furthermore, black women – married and single – more of whom worked outside the home than white women, experienced other frustrations of

racial discrimination. From early in the century they constituted a large share of the passengers on public transportation and encountered rude treatment and arbitrarily enforced segregation rules. As Giddings pointed out, “there had always been a tinderbox quality to the ill treatment of Black women on public conveyances.” It was not only women who worked in menial jobs in white sections of their communities who experienced the harshness of racism, but also more prominent black women such as the turn-of-the-century journalist Ida B. Wells and the North Carolina educator Charlotte Hawkins Brown. With expectations rising for racial equality after World War II, it was only a matter of time before women trained their sights on public transportation to express their grievances. Not surprisingly, as we shall see in the next chapter, if there has been one woman identified with the civil rights movement among the crowd of prominent men it is Rosa Parks, the catalyst for the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott.

Overall, women not only sustained African-American communities in the South through religious and social activities, they also nurtured the civil rights struggle in their familial roles as wives and mothers. Without the sources of support they provided, the movement would never have gotten off the ground. Because the struggle would rely on young people as plaintiffs in education cases and as marchers in demonstrations, women had enormous influence in shaping their children’s decision to join the cause. It took great courage and faith to put their daughters’ and sons’ lives in jeopardy in the face of often brutal white resistance. Both inside and outside the home, women played an essential part in building the foundation for the movement to flourish. Depicting women as organizers, however, does not do justice to the leadership they exhibited. They did not usually hold official titles or follow formal job descriptions, but, operating behind the scenes in routine, often gendered ways, women functioned as “bridge leaders.” According to Belinda Robnett, who coined this term, women in the civil rights movement served as intermediaries between local communities, where their power was greatest, and regional and national civil rights agencies, where their access was much more limited.

Seedtime of Reform

The struggle to expand the vote following World War II was a prelude to the civil rights struggle that mushroomed in the years after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation case. The blatant discrimination

in registration procedures that had been shockingly revealed to the public and a virtual reign of terror to preserve disfranchisement underscored the need for a second reconstruction in which the national government intervened in the South. As one black journalist explained: "Each time the United States Supreme Court outlaws one of these 'Negro stoppers' a new one is invented. It is clear that sooner or later the federal government will have to step in." It would not be too long before politics combined with principle. In a little more than a decade Washington lawmakers would enact four civil rights measures to extend the suffrage to southern blacks.

Just as vital as federal intervention was local assertiveness. Voter registration activities at the grassroots level paralleled the development of the "new Negro," the African American unafraid to stand up for his or her rights in the face of grave danger. The million-plus blacks who registered to vote demonstrated that politics was no longer for whites only. Enrollment drives often brought suffrage reformers into direct confrontation with



Figure 3 Blacks in Charleston lining up to vote in the 1948 Democratic Party primary. (Photo © Bettmann/Corbis)

representatives of the racist system in the South and sustained a protest tradition upon which more militant action would be built in the future. It required courage, pride, and emotional strength for blacks living in Dixie to enter courthouses and run the gauntlet of registrars likely to reject their applications and sheriffs anxious to punish them for having made the attempt in the first place. The lessons learned by the civil rights workers of the late 1940s and early 1950s proved valuable to the “new abolitionists” of the 1960s. They taught that the right to vote could be obtained if the federal government intervened to destroy the white stranglehold over the registration process and civil rights groups rallied the mass of blacks behind the ballot. By virtue of this interdependent relationship, the national government changed the law while the civil rights movement erected a support network emboldening blacks to transform their local communities. Although suffragists were only slightly successful in the 1940s, most of them were still around to see a majority of southern blacks enfranchised within a generation.

The World War II era furnished the staging ground for the black revolution. It revitalized black solidarity, tested innovative protest tactics, and moved the federal government closer to the side of racial equality. Wartime urban migration and improved economic opportunities laid the basis for later social and political changes. The war loosened some of the old chains of subservience imposed by the southern caste system and freed blacks in hundreds of locales throughout Dixie to join together to overthrow Jim Crow. What the historian Nancy J. Weiss concluded about Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal should be extended to the years that followed: “The growing interest of blacks in politics, their involvement in the Democratic party, and their new sense that the political process could be responsive to their needs became essential underpinnings of the drive for civil rights.” Along two fronts, black soldiers and veterans and their families and friends steered the United States toward living up to its democratic political principles.