

African Americans

DOUBLE VICTORY

A Multicultural History of
America in World War II

RONALD TAKAKI

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Did your best for the side . . .
I love Dorie Miller cause he's my race.¹

*"One of the Strangest Paradoxes":
A Segregated Army Fights for Democracy*

Four years before Miller's act of bravery at Pearl Harbor, Charles H. Houston of the NAACP had demanded that Franklin D. Roosevelt issue an executive order banning all racial discrimination in the armed forces.² But in 1940, Roosevelt signed into law the Selective Service Act, which included a provision that prohibited the intermingling of "colored and white" army personnel in the same regiments.³ "Such a mingling [of whites and blacks] was not a part of the President's policy," stated White House aide General Edwin M. Watson, "and for practical reasons it would be impossible to put into operation. It would seem that Negroes might be inspired to take pride in the efficiency of Negro units in the Army, as representing their contribution to the armed forces."⁴

Roosevelt's refusal to integrate the armed forces provoked disbelief and anger across black America. In a telegram to the White House, A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters declared: "We are inexpressibly shocked that a President of the United States at a time of national peril should surrender so completely to enemies of democracy who would destroy national unity by advocating segregation. Official approval by the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of such discrimination and segregation is a stab in the back of democracy."⁵ The NAACP denounced the army's segregationist policy: "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. . . . A Jim Crow army cannot fight for a free world."⁶ On October 9, 1940, the *Crisis* carried the headline: "WHITE HOUSE BLESSES JIM CROW."⁷

Blacks highlighted the hypocrisy. "Democracy must wage a twofold battle — a battle on far flung foreign fields against Hitler, and

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"BOMB THE COLOR LINE"
The War Against Jim Crow

FOR HIS DISTINGUISHED devotion to duty and great courage during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Dorie Miller was awarded the Navy Cross. The War Department sent the hero on a national tour to promote enlistments. Miller returned to the Pacific battlefield, and in December 1943 was listed as missing in action. An African-American song of World War II honored this sharecroppers' son who had given his life for his country:

In nineteen hundred and forty-one
Colored mess boy manned the gun
Although he had never been trained
Had the nerves ever seen
God willing and mother wit
Gon' be great Dorie Miller yet
Grabbed a gun and took dead aim
Japanese bombers into fiery flame
He was aiming the Japs to fight
Fought at the poles to make things right
Fight on Dorie Miller I know you tried

a battle on the home front against Hitlerism," insisted Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., a New York City councilman. "How can white Americans expect to have a tolerant world after this war when there is racial prejudice within the ranks of those who are fighting?"⁸ Black columnist George Schuyler castigated the jim crow army: "Our war is not against Hitler in Europe, but against Hitler in America. Our war is not to defend democracy, but to get a democracy we have never had."⁹ In his protest against segregation in the U.S. Armed Forces, the editor of the *Chicago Defender* declared: "We are not exaggerating when we say that the American Negro is damned tired of spilling his blood for empty promises of better days. Why die for democracy for some foreign country when we don't even have it here?" In order to unite the country and win the conflict, the *Defender's* editor demanded that America "bomb the color line."¹⁰

"Prove to us," blacks challenged whites, "that you are not hypocrites when you say this is a war for freedom." For African Americans, the war for freedom had to be fought in their country's own backyard. "The Army jim-crows us," complained a student. "The Navy lets us serve only as messmen. . . . Employers and labor unions shut us out. Lynchings continue. We are disfranchised . . . spat upon. What more can Hitler do than that."¹¹ In a letter to the NAACP, a soldier wrote: "I am a Negro soldier 22 years old. I won't fight or die in vain. If I fight, suffer or die it will be for the freedom of every black man to live equally with other races. If the life of the Negro in the United States is right as it is lived today, then I would rather be dead."¹² Scheduled to be drafted into the army, a youth declared: "Just carve on my tombstone, 'Here lies a black man killed fighting a yellow man for the protection of a white man.'"¹³ In a poem published in an African-American newspaper, another young man asked:

Dear Lord, today
I go to war:

To fight, to die,
Tell me what for?

Dear Lord, I'll fight,
I do not fear,
Germans or Japs;
My fears are here.
America!¹⁴

The army's color line symbolized white domination in America. "Whitey owns everything," grumbled Malcolm Little, who would later rename himself Malcolm X. "He wants us to go and bleed for him? Let him fight." In 1943, Little received his induction notice. When he reported for his physical examination, he was "costumed like an actor," wearing a "wild zoot suit" and "yellow knob-toe shoes" and his hair frizzled into "a reddish bush of conk." He greeted the soldier at the desk: "'Crazy-o, daddy-o, get me moving. I can't wait to get in that brown.'" The nurse noticed Little's strange behavior and ushered him into the office of the psychiatrist. "Suddenly, I sprang up and peeped under both doors," recalled Little, "the one I'd entered and another that was probably the closet." Then Little bent over and whispered in the psychiatrist's ear: "'Daddy-o, now you and me, we're from up North here, so don't you tell nobody. I want to get sent down South. Organize them nigger soldiers, you dig? Steal us some guns, and kill up crackers!'" Shortly afterward, Little received a 4-F card.¹⁵

Unlike Little, Winfred W. Lynn of Jamaica, New York, chose to confront rather than evade the discriminatory draft law. In June 1942, after receiving his draft notice, Lynn informed his draft board that he was ready to serve in any unit of the armed forces which was not segregated by race. "Unless I am assured that I can serve in a mixed regiment and that I will not be compelled to serve in a unit undemocratically selected as a Negro group," Lynn wrote, "I will refuse to report for induction." He claimed that his induc-

tion into a segregated unit violated Section 4 of the draft act, which stated that in the selection and training of men there should be no discrimination against any person based on race.

Lynn was arrested and indicted for draft evasion. Determined to overturn the draft law, he pursued a course of complicated appeals in the courts. In its decision against Lynn, the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals declared that the U.S. Army could segregate the races so long as blacks were accorded privileges "substantially equal" to those of whites. Lynn appealed to the highest court, and in 1944, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear his case. "If Congress had intended to prohibit separate white and Negro quotas and calls," the justices declared, "we believe it would have expressed such intention more definitely than by the general prohibition against discrimination appearing in Section 4."¹⁶

Protesting the army's jim crow policy, a soldier wrote a letter to the editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. He pointed out that the nation was experiencing the greatest emergency in history. "If there ever were a time that all racial prejudices and hatred should be put aside, now it is at hand, and the country should be unified in every possible respect. . . . Both White and Colored are being called up and everybody is doing his or her bit to cooperate. Negroes like the Whites are quitting their jobs to increase the military strength of this Nation, because we all think that a nation worth living in is worth fighting for." But in this struggle, "the age-old Monster of Prejudice" had raised his head high in the Army.¹⁷

Saturating the black press with testimonies, African-American soldiers documented the pervasiveness of this "Monster" in the U.S. Army. Recreation facilities were separate and unequal. "This camp we are at now is the worse camp we have ever been to," wrote a soldier to the *Pittsburgh Courier*. "It is Camp Berkeley, Texas near the town of Abilene. . . . There is a swimming pool here in the colored area and the colored use it on Mon. and Fri. only. They have a show where the colored go and you sit on the outside to see the picture. If it rains there isn't any picture. . . . We don't have a PX

like the whites. You can get only 1 bottle of beer, 1 box of ice cream. You can't use the white PX."¹⁸

Camp conditions for black soldiers were degrading. In a letter to the *Baltimore Afro-American*, "A Negro Soldier" described what was happening at Camp Gordon Johnston, Florida. "The first two weeks we laid around doing nothing. . . . The third week they started us cleaning the white officers rooms, making us [make their] dirty beds and cleaning their latrine and are still doing that right at the present. We cannot go to church services on the camp. The service clubs are off limit for us because a Staff Sgt. went over with some more of our comrades to get a couple of sandwiches and were told by a civilian worker we don't serve colored, and Sir this is an Army Post. . . . Sir we sleep on sand floors with no boards or anything to bed. . . . Sir, we do not have running latrines. They have a group of colored troops who go around every morning and [pick up] the used buckets and put clean ones in. Sir, that is the way your boys who are somebody's sons are treated here in this Army, and which we are supposed to fighting for Democracy."¹⁹

Training programs were also segregated. In a letter to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a soldier reported that four blacks had been sent to a tire maintenance school in Akron, Ohio, where they were told by Lieutenant Joseph J. Poggione that it was "not advisable to have both Colored and White troops attending the same classes." Euliss M. Looney, Joseph Nibitt, Walter B. Lewis, and Sammie K. Banks were forced to return to their posts in Michigan and California. "Is there nothing that can be done to right these wrongs," the writer concluded, "or to prevent such things from happening again?"²⁰

The "wrongs" also included servile work assignments. Writing to the *Richmond Afro-American*, blacks in the 328th Aviation Squadron based in Pampa, Texas, protested: "We are a group of permanent K.P.'s [kitchen police]. We are allowed no other advancement whatsoever. It is true that K.P. pushers (head K.P.) are made Cpl. and Sgt. but the K.P.'s themselves are a miserable group

that will be worked like slaves. We are confined to this job not because we are not fit for anything else but because we are dark. We are referred to on this post as 'that nigger squadron at the end of the field.'"²¹

Skilled blacks found themselves occupationally downgraded. "A lone soldier" wrote to the *Pittsburgh Courier*: "We are members of the 78 Aviation Sqdr, and it seems like we are not being treated fair. Most of us got trades of our own to help win this war. But instead we are servants and ditch diggers and we want better, if it ever been slavery it is now, please help us because we want better. They got us here washing dishes, working around the officers houses and waiting on them, instead of trying to win this war they got us in ditches. . . . And the sad part about it is that most of us are volunteers, but they didn't give us what we ask for, they gave us a pick."²²

As soldiers with skills, many African Americans wanted to contribute their expertise to the war effort. Writing to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Private Laurence W. Harris expressed his frustration: "In my civilian life I was a small tool maker. I worked for Silling and Spences Co in Hartford, Conn. Then I was doing much for the war effort, and was in hopes I could continue in the service. In the past ten months I feel as though I have been a complete failure to myself, and to the helping to win this war." In a letter to the *African American Newspapers*, Samuel A. Connor described how black radio technicians were forced to become construction laborers. When the 2nd Cavalry Division had been placed on alert for probable shipment overseas, Connor's unit was not included in the order. "*We later learned that we were to be used as dock stevedores, unloading ships. . . . We had visions of being the Cadre for an operations battalion because our troop is one-third radio operations and radio technicians.*" Instead they received an order to form a construction battalion. "In this type of battalion there isn't any place for radiomen," Connor complained. "To be frank, we must toss away the months, in some cases, years of training that we have had since our entrance into the army."²³

More stressful than experiencing discrimination on army bases was facing the terrible threat of hate violence, especially in small Southern towns. While training at Tuskegee, Alabama, pilot Fred Smith of Chicago was warned by officers: "Don't go off the base or you won't come back. You'll be lynched."²⁴ On April 3, 1941, at Fort Benning, Georgia, the body of Private Felix Hall was found hanging from a tree, his hands bound behind his back. Denouncing the Hall murder, the *Crisis* declared: "America is marching to war for the purpose of stopping brutalities overseas, but apparently our government does not choose to stop lynching within its own borders, or even within the borders of its army camps."²⁵ In response to pressures from the NAACP and black newspapers, the War Department agreed to conduct an investigation of Hall's death. "There has been no report of the results of the 'Investigation,'" the *Pittsburgh Courier* complained on January 3, 1942.²⁶

Later that year, Paul Parks of Indianapolis was on maneuvers in rural Louisiana as a member of the 183 Battalion of Combat Engineers. "Two of us were told by officers to go into a little town and pick up supplies," he recalled. "I got out of the truck and went into the store, and I was ordering. I started out, and the storekeeper said, 'Don't go back there!' I crowded under the porch, and I saw my comrade being dragged up and down the street until he died." Parks hid under the porch until dark and then returned to camp. There was "a big upheaval" over the killing, he said, and the military moved "us black troops out of the area immediately."²⁷

In a February 13, 1943, memorandum to her supervisor, Lucien Warner of the War Information Office gave a list of incidents that had occurred in Texas:

In Beaumont, a Negro soldier was shot last summer following an altercation on a bus.

At Corpus Christy [*sic*] a stabbing occurred in an altercation on a bus. . . .

A Negro Sargeant [sic], Walter B. Springs, was killed in a Bastrop cafe by a white Military Policeman after a dispute. . . .²⁸

In 1944, a black soldier was killed by a bus driver in Alexandria, Louisiana; the War Department asked the Justice Department to charge the driver with murder: "Considering the testimony of all the witnesses, and the circumstances surrounding the case, the conclusion is inescapable that there was no justification, moral or legal, for the slaying of Private Edward Green by Odell Lachnette." But the Justice Department took no action.²⁹

In a "Statement to the Nation" issued in June 1943, the NAACP declared: "The continued ill treatment of Negroes in uniform, both on military reservations and in many civilian communities is disgraceful. Negroes in the uniform of the nation have been beaten, mobbed, killed and lynched." The proclamation of the "Four Freedoms," the NAACP stated, would be regarded as hypocritical by colored people around the world until President Roosevelt acted to end discrimination in the Army.³⁰

In a letter addressed "Dear President Roosevelt," May 9, 1944, Private Charles F. Wilson pointed out that America's fight against fascism was "marred by one of the strangest paradoxes": fighting for "World Democracy," the U.S. Army was itself undemocratic. "Totally inadequate opportunities," wrote Wilson, were being given to "the Negro members of our Armed Forces, nearly one-tenth of the whole, to participate with 'equality,' regardless of race and color' in the fight for our war aims." Wilson related the contradiction to the war in Asia. "Are the Chinese to believe that we are fighting to bring them 'freedom, equality, and justice,' when they can see that in our Armed Forces we are not even practicing what we are preaching?"

In his conclusion, Private Wilson offered a concrete recommendation: Roosevelt should follow Executive Order 8802 prohibiting discrimination in the defense industries with another executive order that would outlaw discrimination in the Army. "Then and only

then," Wilson wrote, would the U.S. military live up to the principles of freedom, equality, and justice for all, regardless of race.³¹

Such an executive order was never issued by Roosevelt. Thus, in the war for the "Four Freedoms," one million African Americans in the armed forces were forced to fight in a jim crow army. Equality, for them, was a "dream deferred"; but they refused to let it "dry up like a raisin in the sun" or to explode.³² Instead, abiding while protesting, they served, hopeful their loyalty and sacrifice would make America live up to what the Declaration of Independence had proclaimed a "self-evident" truth. Enlisting in a segregated army and accepting a situation that did not represent "an ideal of democracy," explained Major Harriet M. Waddy of the Wacs, was not "a retreat from our fight" but "our contribution to its realization."³³

Assigned to service and support duties, African Americans composed half of the Transportation Corps in Europe. They, too, landed at Omaha Beach for the D-Day invasion. Although they would not be included as heroes in Hollywood movies, black soldiers made a difference in this crucial military campaign. On the beaches of Normandy, they unloaded supplies from ships and transported them to the fighting troops. In the D-Day invasion, recalled Timuel Black, "we were really stevedores. . . . I went into Normandy with combat troops. We serviced them." Support work was especially dangerous. "The Germans aimed at our supplies," explained Black. "We were direct targets. I'd been on six-by-six trucks many nights when the Luftwaffe was strafing us, dropping those small bombs and firing those machine guns at us."

The Transportation Corps' biggest task was feeding an enormous army in movement. "We were in Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge," Black boasted. "We were at one time feeding three million soldiers: the First, the Third, the Ninth, and the British Seventh [Armies]." Without their vital support, the Allies would have been beaten back to the beaches by this fierce Nazi counter-attack.

Although they were given support assignments, black soldiers in

the Transportation Corps found they were sometimes needed for military duties. "We were responsible for keeping the German saboteurs from blowing up our ammunition," recalled Black. "If they had gotten us, we would have been pushed right back into the beach. The Germans had dropped young fellows who lived in places like New York and Chicago and spoke perfect English. They could talk about the Brooklyn Dodgers and the White Sox. You couldn't distinguish them from Americans. You didn't know whether the white person was an American soldier or a German saboteur." To avoid such possible confusion, the Army command ordered all white soldiers off the streets at night and assigned black soldiers to do patrol duty. "If there was a white person on the street at night," said Black, "we had orders to pick him up or shoot him. We were doing double duty. Keep the supplies moving [during the day] and patrol at night."³⁴

On the home front, African Americans in the military also had to keep the supplies moving. This duty turned out to be particularly dangerous at Port Chicago, California, where black sailors worked as stevedores. On July 17, 1944, a tragic accident occurred. The sailors were loading 860,000 tons of fragmentation and incendiary bombs onto the *E. A. Bryan* and *Quimault Victory* when the ammunition suddenly exploded. In the barracks nearby, Joseph Small felt the tremendous blast. "I was laying on the top bunk on my stomach when I heard it. Then the barracks just started to disintegrate. All the windows blew out. I was picked up off the bunk and flipped over and landed on my back. But I had gripped the edge of the mattress, so it was on top of me. That prevented me from getting cut by the glass and the dunnage and the lumber and everything that fell into the barracks."³⁵ Equivalent to five tons of TNT, the explosion obliterated both ships and leveled most of the base. Of the three hundred and twenty sailors killed, 202 were black. "This single stunning disaster," wrote historian Robert Allen, "accounted for more than 15 percent of all black naval casualties during the war."³⁶ It was a tragedy waiting to hap-

pen: neither the black stevedores or their white officers had been given specialized training in munitions handling.

Ordered to return to work at a nearby ammunition depot at Vallejo on August 9, 328 black sailors refused. Admiral Carleton Wright threatened to have them arrested and executed for mutiny. "The hazards of facing a firing squad," he warned, "are far greater than the hazards of handling ammunition." Fifty of the strikers continued their resistance and were court-martialed. "An admiral called me to his office," recalled Joseph Small. "He said, 'Small, you are the leader of this bunch. If you don't return to work, I'm gonna have you shot.' Just like that. Then I did something stupid: I blew my top. I said, 'You baldheaded so-and-so, go ahead and shoot.' That branded me as a mutineer."³⁷ On October 24, after only a little more than an hour's deliberation, all of the strikers were found guilty of mutiny, sentenced to fifteen years in prison, and dishonorably discharged. In January 1946, the Navy released most of the men from prison. The Port Chicago case represented "one of the worst 'frameups' we have come across in a long time," observed Thurgood Marshall of the NAACP. "It was deliberately planned and staged by certain officers to discredit Negro seamen."³⁸ "We knew from the beginning how it was coming out," Small remarked. "Everything was rigged."³⁹

While African Americans contributed significantly to the war effort in support work, they also wanted an equal opportunity to fight for their country in combat. Blacks hoped that what Lincoln called "the mystic chords of memory" stretching from battlefields and patriot graves would entitle them to dignity as full Americans after the war.⁴⁰

Confronting the Army Air Force as a bastion of jim crow, African Americans insisted on their right to fly for their country. "They didn't want blacks to fly," recalled Fred Smith. "They said blacks were not smart enough to be pilots."⁴¹ African Americans protested their exclusion. The editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier* asked: "How can we excuse refusal to abolish the disuniting

COLOR LINE when the life of this nation is threatened?"⁴² In response to this pressure, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson authorized the training of black aviation cadets in a segregated unit at Tuskegee Air Force Base. While welcoming the Tuskegee training program as "a step in the right direction," the *Crisis* argued that the solution still adhered to "the old Army pattern of segregation."⁴³

Sent to Europe as members of the all-black 99th Pursuit Squadron and 332nd Fighter Group, the Tuskegee pilots fought the German Luftwaffe in aerial combat. For their heroic service in Sicily and Italy, two of them were awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation, the air force's highest commendation. When General Ira C. Acker, commanding officer of the Mediterranean Air Force, inspected the 99th Pursuit Squadron on April 20, 1944, he declared: "By the magnificent showing your fliers have made since coming into this theatre, and especially in the Anzio beachhead operations, you have not only won the plaudits of the Air Force, but have earned the opportunity to apply your talents to much more advanced work than was at one time planned for you."⁴⁴

After Italy, the pilots of the 99th Pursuit Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group escorted bombers over France and then Berlin itself. As the protectors of white pilots flying bombers en route to enemy targets, the Tuskegee pilots earned great respect, and bombing groups began requesting them as escorts. "They all wanted us," explained Coleman Young, "because we were the only fighter group in the entire air force that did not lose a bomber to enemy action. Oh, we were much in demand."⁴⁵

On the ground below, African-American soldiers of the 761st Tank Battalion were also in demand. "When General Patton sent for us," said E. G. McConnell, "he asked for the best tank unit in the country. Hot dog it, were we proud, proud! I was in a unit I was damn proud of, and I knew that the things we did would shape the future for my children and grandchildren. We were so proud and dedicated to the cause of progress . . . going ahead so everyone would be able to live like an American."⁴⁶

The black tankers fought in one of the fiercest fights of World War II — the Battle of the Bulge. "They put us on flatcars in France and shipped us to Belgium, where the fighting was," recalled Johnnie Stevens. "We never fell back. We never lost an inch of ground during the whole campaign. You can't find nothing in the record that says the 761st lost any of their ground."⁴⁷ During the battle, the 761st Tank Battalion joined the white paratroopers of the 17th Airborne Division. Together they attacked German forces at the French town of Tillet; after five days of close range fighting, they beat the Germans into retreat. The victory at Tillet inspired Captain Philip W. Latimer to celebrate the interracial comradeship in poetry:

Black tankers and white paratroops,
They made a lovely sight
Unless you were German
And then you'd best take flight.
Black tankers and white paratroops,
They all were color blind.
They went into battle
With winning on their mind.
Black tankers and white paratroops
Made Patton shout with glee,
"They fight the way I want them to.
They're good enough for me."
Black tankers and white paratroops
Lie buried side by side.
They gave their life for country,
They gave it with pride.
Black tankers and white paratroops,
Our memories take us back.
Since we've been in battle
There is no white or black.⁴⁸

For black America, World War II was also "her-story." The international conflict offered black women new opportunities to

travel and work as well as to demonstrate their refusal to live "half American." "When I saw all the advertisement about schooling and the other benefits, and the travel which would probably be involved, I thought, This is what I want," said Gertrude La Vigne. A college graduate, Dorothy Johnson stated frankly: "I think I joined because I was bored at Spelman." A student at New York University when she enlisted, Elaine Bennett explained: "I wanted to prove to myself, and maybe the world, that we [African Americans] would give what we had back to the United States as a confirmation that we were full-fledged citizens."⁴⁹

But wearing army uniforms did not always mean equal rights as citizens. At the bus station in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, three black Wacs experienced a brutal reminder of segregation. White policemen had told them to switch from the "white" waiting room to the overcrowded "colored" one, and then began beating them because they did not promptly respond to the order. One of the policemen barked: "Down here, when we tell niggers to move, they move."⁵⁰ While traveling on a train in the South, Charity Adams Early was waiting in line to enter the dining car. After standing for a long time, she heard the steward call: "All persons in uniform first." Dressed as a Wac, Early stepped forward, but the steward put his arm across the door and snarled: "I said all persons in uniform first." Suddenly, from behind her, a white lieutenant shouted: "Well, what in the hell do you think that is that she has on? Get your ——— arm down before I break it off for you. What in the world are we fighting this damned war for? She's giving her service, too, and can eat anywhere I can."⁵¹

Black Wacs served in England and France as members of the black 6888 Central Postal Directory Battalion. "The job of our battalion," Lucia M. Pitts wrote, "was to keep up with the addresses of our fighting men, who were constantly on the move, and see that their mail reached them. An average of 30,000 address changes had to be made every day."⁵² Margaret Y. Jackson vividly recalled the frenzied work of processing the mail. "As we labored at long tables, piled high with mail," she later wrote, "we were more than

objectively impressed by the stacks of letters which we sought to place in the hands of the individuals to whom they were sent. Many of these letters were from the same loved ones. . . . After weeks — even months — they finally wound up on the floor of the auditorium in the Central Postal Directory. Many of us were as pleased as the soldiers must have been when stacks of letters were distributed to them at mail call." Working together with white Wacs in the auditorium, the busy mail processors took satisfaction in seeing "mountains of mail dwindle to small hills."⁵³ Wherever the Wacs went in Birmingham after work, they were approached by servicemen profusely thanking them for getting their long-awaited letters and packages to them. The Wacs took pride in their motto: "No mail, no morale."⁵⁴

Soldiers, black and white, carried valuable lessons back to America. Sailing home, Pitts crossed the Atlantic with a group of black and white Wacs; after their ship landed, they were taken together to Camp Shanks. All of them were overjoyed to be home again, reported Pitts. "They exclaimed about everything, just because it was American — houses, signs, streets, automobiles." For dinner on the first night, they had steaks. "In the evening, two of the white girls — one from Georgia, the other from Virginia — came to our rooms and said to us, 'It's been a pleasure knowing you girls. We have learned something and you have certainly demanded our respect. We're proud of you.' To the four of us, that meant a great deal. From the time we were ordered to Compiègne, we and thirty-seven white girls had been thrown closely together. Most of the white girls were from the South — Georgia, Virginia, Texas; and the First Sergeant was from Mississippi. For over a month we lived (though we slept in separate tents), bathed, ate, made formations and played together. They had undoubtedly never associated with Negroes before in their lives, and it was immensely gratifying to us to know we had given them the right impression."⁵⁵

After he had returned home from overseas duty in 1944, a wounded black soldier also had an affirming experience. Wearing

travel and work as well as to demonstrate their refusal to live "half American." "When I saw all the advertisement about schooling and the other benefits, and the travel which would probably be involved, I thought, This is what I want," said Gertrude La Vigne. A college graduate, Dorothy Johnson stated frankly: "I think I joined because I was bored at Spelman." A student at New York University when she enlisted, Elaine Bennett explained: "I wanted to prove to myself, and maybe the world, that we [African Americans] would give what we had back to the United States as a confirmation that we were full-fledged citizens."⁴⁹

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Black Wacs served in England and France as members of the all-black 6888 Central Postal Directory Battalion. "The job of our battalion," Lucia M. Pitts wrote, "was to keep up with the addresses of our fighting men, who were constantly on the move, and see that their mail reached them. An average of 30,000 address changes had to be made every day."⁵² Margaret Y. Jackson vividly recalled the frenzied work of processing the mail. "As we labored at long tables, piled high with mail," she later wrote, "we were more than

objectively impressed by the stacks of letters which we sought to place in the hands of the individuals to whom they were sent. Many of these letters were from the same loved ones. . . . After weeks — even months — they finally wound up on the floor of the auditorium in the Central Postal Directory. Many of us were as pleased as the soldiers must have been when stacks of letters were distributed to them at mail call." Working together with white Wacs in the auditorium, the busy mail processors took satisfaction in seeing "mountains of mail dwindle to small hills."⁵³ Wherever the Wacs went in Birmingham after work, they were approached by servicemen profusely thanking them for getting their long-awaited letters and packages to them. The Wacs took pride in their motto: "No mail, no morale."⁵⁴

Soldiers, black and white, carried valuable lessons back to America. Sailing home, Pitts crossed the Atlantic with a group of black and white Wacs; after their ship landed, they were taken together to Camp Shanks. All of them were overjoyed to be home again, reported Pitts. "They exclaimed about everything, just because it was American — houses, signs, streets, automobiles." For dinner on the first night, they had steaks. "In the evening, two of the white girls — one from Georgia, the other from Virginia — came to our rooms and said to us, 'It's been a pleasure knowing you girls. We have learned something and you have certainly demanded our respect. We're proud of you.' To the four of us, that meant a great deal. From the time we were ordered to Compiègne, we and thirty-seven white girls had been thrown closely together. Most of the white girls were from the South — Georgia, Virginia, Texas; and the First Sergeant was from Mississippi. For over a month we lived (though we slept in separate tents), bathed, ate, made formations and played together. They had undoubtedly never associated with Negroes before in their lives, and it was immensely gratifying to us to know we had given them the right impression."⁵⁵

After he had returned home from overseas duty in 1944, a wounded black soldier also had an affirming experience. Wearing

the service stripes of the Tunisian, Sicilian, and Italian campaigns, he boarded a crowded bus in Florida. Three white soldiers were sitting in the front of the bus, and one of them got up and offered his seat to the veteran. However, the bus driver instructed the black rider to move to the back of the bus. After the white soldier pointed out that there were no empty seats, the driver replied: "Niggers can't sit up front in Florida." Turning to his buddies, the white soldier asked: "Does he sit or doesn't he?" They roared: "He does!" Then the soldier told the bus driver: "Either he sits down and you drive or we'll throw you off the bus and I'll drive." The threat ended the argument.⁵⁶

A Battle Line on the Home Front: "Freedom from Want"

At the beginning of the war, blacks were in especially dire economic straits. "The depression brought everybody down a peg or two," Langston Hughes observed. "And the Negroes had but a few pegs to fall."⁵⁷ During the decade of America's great economic crisis, the majority of blacks still lived below the Mason-Dixon Line, growing cotton as sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Their livelihoods crumpled as cotton prices dropped sharply from 18 cents per pound in 1929 to 6 cents in 1933. That year, two-thirds of the black cotton farmers broke even or went deeper into debt. Moving to Southern cities in search of work, blacks encountered angry unemployed whites, shouting: "No Jobs for Niggers Until Every White Man Has a Job!" "Niggers, back to the cotton fields — city jobs are for white folks." More than 50 percent of blacks living in Southern cities were unemployed.⁵⁸

In Northern cities, unemployment rates among blacks also soared. The people of Harlem, reported social worker Anna Arnold Hedgeman, were faced with the reality of starvation and they turned sadly to public relief. Men, women, and children "combed the streets and searched in garbage cans for food, foraging with dogs and cats." Living in cellars and basements, thousands of people found themselves packed in "damp, ratridden dungeons," existing

in "squalor not too different from that of Arkansas sharecroppers."⁵⁹ Statistics told this story of hardship and hunger. During the Great Depression, unemployment for blacks was from 30 to 60 percent greater than for whites, and blacks joined the relief rolls two times more frequently than whites.⁶⁰

The New Deal offered little relief to African Americans. Federal programs designed to provide a safety net for people in distress forced blacks to take a backseat. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration supported white farmers and workers but shunned blacks. "The AAA was no new deal for blacks," wrote historian Harvard Sitkoff; "it was a continuation of the same old raw deal." Similarly, the National Recovery Administration failed to protect black workers from discrimination in employment and wages. Blacks denounced the N.R.A. as "Negroes Ruined Again" and "Negro Removal Act." In 1935, at a conference on "The Position of the Negro in the Present Economic Crisis," black leaders and intellectuals grimly assessed the Roosevelt administration: "The Negro worker has good reason to feel that his government has betrayed him under the New Deal."⁶¹

The war revived the American economy as an "arsenal for democracy." But, as it turned out, defense jobs were not democratically distributed: most of them were reserved for whites only. Seventy-five percent of the war industries refused to hire blacks, while 15 percent hired them only for menial jobs. In 1940, blacks constituted only 0.2 percent of the workers in aircraft production. Of the 6,000 employees of Vultee Aircraft in 1941, none were black. "It is not the policy of this company," the defense contractor stated, "to employ other than of the Caucasian race."⁶² Only ten of the 33,000 workers of Douglas Aircraft Company were black. "While we are in complete sympathy with the Negro," the president of North American Aviation stated frankly, "it is against company policy to employ them as aircraft workers or mechanics . . . regardless of their training."⁶³ On the cover of its July issue, the *Crisis* featured a photograph of an airplane factory with the caption "For Whites Only." The NAACP denounced discrimi-

nation in the defense industry: "Warplanes — Negro Americans may not build them, repair them, or fly them, but they must help pay for them."⁶⁴

Confined to the unskilled and the service occupations before the war, African Americans wanted the better and higher-paying factory jobs generated by the war. As the country began to mobilize its war economy in early 1941, branches of the NAACP organized protests against discrimination in the defense plants of Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other cities. Pickets carried signs with messages: "Let's Blitzkrieg the Color Line." "Down with Jim-Crow in National Defense." "If We Can Fight for Democracy, We Can Work for Democracy." "A Bullet Draws No Color Line But Bullet Makers Do." "Not Hitlerism But Americanism, Jobs for All."⁶⁵

The political iron was hot. Unwilling to wait for employers to open their doors voluntarily, African Americans demanded action from the federal government. At a 1941 meeting in Chicago, a black woman called for a mass demonstration in Washington: "We ought to throw 50,000 Negroes around the White House, bring them from all over the country, in jalopies, in trains and any way they can get there, and throw them around the White House and keep them there until we can get some action from the White House."⁶⁶

The idea of a march on Washington seized the imagination of A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. "Let the Negro masses speak," he declared. "Negroes have a stake in National Defense. It is a big stake. . . . The stake involves jobs. It involves equal employment opportunities."⁶⁷ In his "Call to the March on Washington," Randolph demanded an end to discrimination not only in the military but also in the defense industries: "Negroes, by the mobilization and coordination of their mass power, can cause PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT TO ISSUE AN EXECUTIVE ORDER ABOLISHING DISCRIMINATION IN ALL GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS, ARMY, NAVY, AIR CORPS AND NATIONAL DEFENSE JOBS."⁶⁸

Randolph was determined to make Roosevelt do the right thing: translate the pronouncements of the democratic war aims abroad

into practices of equality at home. "An 'all-out' thundering march on Washington," the union leader promised, "ending in a monster and huge demonstration at Lincoln's Monument will shake up white America."⁶⁹ Randolph's threat of a mass demonstration alarmed Washington officials. "What will they think in Berlin?" they anxiously asked. Blacks replied: "Oh, perhaps no more than they already think of America's racial policy."⁷⁰ The march was scheduled for July 1.

At the White House on June 18, Roosevelt met with civil rights leaders, including Randolph. Opening the discussion with small talk, the President said: "Hello, Phil. Which class were you in at Harvard?" Randolph replied: "I never went to Harvard." Roosevelt then began entertaining his guests with old political anecdotes. Impatient, Randolph respectfully interrupted: "Mr. President, time is running on. You are quite busy, I know. But what we want to talk with you about is the problem of jobs for Negroes in defense industries. Our people are being turned away at factory gates because they are colored. They can't live with this thing. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

Roosevelt offered to call up the heads of defense plants and urge them to hire blacks. "We want you to do more than that," Randolph countered. "We want something concrete, something tangible, definite, positive, and affirmative." Asked what he meant, Randolph presented his radical proposal: "Mr. President, we want you to issue an executive order making it mandatory that Negroes be permitted to work in these plants." Roosevelt said that he would not do anything unless the march was first called off. "Questions like this can't be settled with a sledge hammer." Randolph replied: "I'm sorry, Mr. President, the march cannot be called off." Then Roosevelt asked the black leader how many people would be at the march. "One hundred thousand, Mr. President."⁷¹

A week later, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802: "There shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or Government because of race, creed, color, or national origin . . . and it is the duty of employers and of labor or-

ganizations . . . to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries, without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin." His order also established the Committee on Fair Employment Practices to investigate complaints of discrimination and take appropriate steps to redress valid grievances.⁷²

The march was canceled. Black munitions worker Margaret Wright recalled that it was only Randolph's threat of a march on Washington that "made Roosevelt give this proclamation, because no one does anything — you never get anything — out of the goodness of people's hearts."⁷³

But Roosevelt's new policy was designed for failure. In its first year of operation, the FEPC had but seven field officers and five clerical workers, with a budget of only \$80,000. Even after the committee's personnel were increased, its budget totaled only \$431,609, far below the funding allocated to other government departments.

Moreover, Roosevelt's FEPC had no teeth to enforce equal employment. According to a federal government report, blacks were complaining that the FEPC had "no power to penalize violators of the non-discrimination order," and that the committee's hearings were merely "a token of the government's wish to rectify the situation, rather than an actual solution of the problem."⁷⁴ In *Oppor-tunity: Journal of Negro Life*, George E. DeMar pointed out that Roosevelt's "Executive Order was accepted as policy, but all too often not for practice, by those holding war contracts."⁷⁵ In "An Open Letter to President Roosevelt — An Editorial," the *Crisis* impatiently informed the President that in too many communities "your Executive Order 8802 was being defied and sabotaged by management and labor alike."⁷⁶

Knowing that the government would not interfere with war production and that the FEPC had neither the power nor the will to desegregate, white laborers resisted the federal government's efforts to integrate the war industries. In 1943, for example, twenty thousand white workers rioted to protest the upgrading of black

welders in the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilders Company. After federal troops intervened, the FEPC agreed to allow segregation to continue in the shipyards.

Ultimately, the real pressure for employment integration came from the sheer need for labor in America's booming war industries. Almost 1 million African Americans entered the industrial labor force during the war years. At the beginning of 1942, only 3 percent of defense workers were black; by November 1944, that number had jumped to 8.3 percent. Blacks constituted 2.5 percent of the labor force in foundries and 12 percent in shipbuilding and steel mills.⁷⁷ They also entered employment in the auto industry. In 1943, 55,000 of the 450,000 members of Detroit's United Auto Workers were African Americans. During the war years, the wages of black families increased from 40 percent to 60 percent of that of white families.⁷⁸

Pulled by job opportunities in the war industries, over a half million African Americans left the South. During the decade of the 1940s, the percentage of blacks living in the South declined from 77 percent to 68 percent. Following the jobs to the cities, blacks classified as urban dwellers increased from 49 percent to 62 percent. They migrated, again as they had during World War I, to the Midwestern cities like Chicago and Detroit. But this time, they also went to California, where they found war-related jobs in Los Angeles, Oakland, Richmond, and San Francisco. "I came to California in 1943," recalled Ella Johnson. "The shipyard people came to Louisiana offering \$1.20 an hour to work in California. I'd work for as little as 25 cents an hour, 50 cents an hour, and thinking I was doing pretty good. Had I ever seen a ship? I imagine I had not. I didn't even know what a ship looked like. But they were hiring, so we went."⁷⁹

As a teenager living in San Francisco at the time, Maya Angelou witnessed the movement of blacks into the Fillmore District, which had been inhabited by Japanese Americans until their evacuation and internment. "As the Japanese disappeared, soundlessly and without protest," she wrote in her autobiography, "the Ne-

groes entered with their loud jukeboxes, the just-released animosities and the relief of escape from Southern bonds. The Japanese area became San Francisco's Harlem in a matter of months." She offered a reflection on the sudden racial recomposition of this community. "A person unaware of all the factors that make up oppression might have expected sympathy or even support from the Negro newcomers for the dislodged Japanese. Especially in view of the fact that they (the Blacks) had themselves undergone concentration-camp living for centuries in slavery's plantations and later in sharecroppers' cabins. But the sensations of common relationship were missing." The black newcomers had been recruited from the South to work in the shipyards, Angelou explained, and were experiencing employment and housing opportunities that had long been denied to them. Who could expect them to share their "new and dizzying importance with concern for a race" they had "never known to exist"?⁸⁰

The employment opportunities in the war industries were especially "dizzying" for African-American women. The military demand for soldiers created labor shortages and opened industrial jobs to women, including black women.⁸¹ "When we first got into the war," said San Francisco shipworker Lyn Childs, "the country wasn't prepared. And as the manpower in the country was getting pulled into the service, all of the industries were wide open. So they decided, 'Well, we better let some of those blacks come in.' Then after the source of men dried up, they began to let women come in. The doors were opened."⁸²

Of the 1 million African Americans who entered defense employment during the war years, 600,000 were women. Between 1940 and 1944, the percentage of black women in industry increased from 6.5 percent to 18 percent of the female workforce. Between 1940 and 1944, their numbers in Detroit's factories had risen sharply, from 14,451 to 46,750. In the aircraft plants of Los Angeles, 2,000 black women were employed by North American Aviation alone.⁸³ In "Negro Women on the Production Front," published in a 1943 issue of *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*,

Mary Anderson wrote: "At the same time that Negro women are contributing to the war effort in essential war and civilian jobs, they are broadening their occupational experience. . . . We must use the highest skills and the full strength of all our people, men and women, to win the war and to win the peace."⁸⁴

For African-American women, defense work offered escape from domestic work. "We'd never had any opportunity to do that kind of work [in the defense industry]," recalled Lyn Childs. "Do you think that if you did domestic work all of your life, where you'd clean somebody's toilets and did all the cooking for some lazy characters who were sitting on top, and you finally got a chance where you can get a dignified job, you wouldn't fly through the door?"⁸⁵

Between 1940 and 1944, the proportion of black women employed in housework declined from 60 percent to 45 percent. One of these women was Fanny Christina Hill. Moving from Tyler, Texas, to Los Angeles in 1943, she had planned to continue working as a house cleaner. "Well, I better get me a good job around here working in a hotel or motel," Hill told her sister. "No," said her sister, "you just come on out and go in the war plants and work and maybe you'll make enough money where you won't have to work in the hotels or motels." Hill took her advice and applied for a job at North American Aviation. "There was a black girl that hired with me," she recalled. "I went to work the next day, sixty cents an hour." For six weeks, Hill attended a training school where she learned to shoot and buck rivets and to drill holes. Then she was transferred to the plant. However, she discovered that workers with the right "color" were given the privileged job assignments. "They had fifteen or twenty departments, but all the Negroes went to Department 17 because there was nothing but shooting and bucking rivets. You stood on one side of the panel and your partner stood on this side, and he would shoot the rivets with a gun and you'd buck them with the bar." When Hill threatened to quit because she disliked this punishing and monotonous work, she was given a workbench assignment and then a job help-

ing to build the tail sections of bombers. "The war made me live better, it really did," recalled Hill. "My sister always said that Hitler was the one that got us out of the white folks' kitchen."⁸⁶

Although the defense industries had begun to hire women, black women often had to fight to be included. After completing an auto-body training program to be a riveter, Wanita Allen found that the defense plants were hiring only white women. "I felt like I had just as much right to work as they did," she recalled, "and they had jobs and they had children and I had children." Refusing to be denied, Allen joined the United Auto Workers in challenging this discrimination. She agreed to help the union gather evidence for a lawsuit. Repeatedly, she applied for a job at the defense plant, only to be told that they "were not hiring now." After several rebuffs, Allen stood in front of the hiring office; then one day, she noticed a white woman coming out and asked her: "Oh, you were lucky too, huh, you got hired too. Maybe I'll see you in the plant, what's your name?" The woman gave her name to Allen. With this evidence showing that the company was in fact hiring white women and discriminating against black women, the UAW "won the suit and they notified all the black women to come in, so they came in droves and they hired them one by one."⁸⁷

Even after doors were opened to black women, however, they often found themselves assigned to non-skilled jobs such as janitors and cafeteria workers. Trained as a drill-press operator by the National Youth Administration, Beatrice Marshall looked forward to working in the defense industry. "I felt like I was a champion on the drill press, and I really did like it." But when she applied for a job at the Portland, Oregon, shipyards, Marshall was told that they had no openings for drill-press operators and that she could be hired only as a painter's helper. The company actually did have jobs available in the machine shop but was not accepting black workers. Marshall hated her job as a painter's helper. "The job was in the bottom of the boat. We had to crawl on our hands and knees and carry our light on an extension cord to see because it was so dark in there. And we had a little tool, something like a

spreader, where we scraped the rust off the bottom of the boat where they had to paint. We had to wear masks, there was so much rust in there until you could hardly breathe."⁸⁸ Even when placed in skilled jobs, however, black women still experienced discrimination. Westinghouse Electric Manufacturing Company, for example, hired 3,500 women, including 100 black women, to work as punch-press, drill-press, and milling-machine operators, engravers, painters, and grinders. But the black women were hired for the night shift only.⁸⁹

Still, the new jobs in the defense industries paid what seemed like enormous wages. Employed in the Detroit auto industry, Lilian Hatcher earned double the wages she had been receiving as a cafeteria worker. "I was working not for patriotic reasons," she stated. "I was working for the money. The 97 cents a hour was the greatest salary that I had earned. Going up to \$1.16 an hour — that was going to be my top rate. And I really needed that money, because my son was wearing out corduroy pants, two and three pairs a month, gym shoes and all the other things my daughters had to have, you know, clothing and shoes and all that stuff. And our house rent was the whole price of \$32.50 a month and we had to save for that, in order to pay \$32.50 and keep the light and gas."⁹⁰

Working and making money in the defense industry complicated family life. Many women found that they had two shifts — one at the plant and a second at home. "When your husband came home," munitions worker Margaret White said, "he propped his feet up and got a can of beer while you fixed dinner, or even if we weren't working the same shifts you fixed dinner and left it where it would be convenient for him to get it." Wanita Allen complained that she had to "rush, rush, rush" — get dinner ready, wash clothes, iron clothes, clean the house. "By the time I got in bed it was time to get up in the morning."⁹¹

But the frenetic life of a defense worker was worth the trouble for many African-American women. In a 1943 article published in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, Leatha Hackshaw described "What My Job Means to Me." "Eighteen months ago," she wrote,

"I told my friends that I was going into the war industry. Mary, a close friend, raised a horrified face and shouted, 'Lee, are you crazy? Why, that work is *killing*. You're not accustomed to the kind of thing.' Hackshaw found a job in a company where she cemented and polished lenses for binoculars. A college graduate, Hackshaw was indeed not accustomed to such repetitious and boring work; she was also not prepared for her punishing schedule. Hackshaw had to get up at 5:30 A.M. in order to get ready for work and take her son to the babysitter. Shortly afterward, she was transferred to the night shift, working from midnight to 8 A.M. "I never realized how many different noises there are until I tried to sleep in the daytime," she said.

Hackshaw left the plant to work for Army Ordnance as an inspector of finished binoculars. "I was one of eight inspectors in the plant and the only Negro. Many of them had never worked with a Negro before. With them as with me it was a question of adjusting to each other. The company itself, I soon learned, had no Negroes in its employ with the exception of one or two porters." But labor shortages soon led to the hiring of more black women, even to assigning them to the semi-skilled assembly lines where they worked side-by-side with white women. "If anyone had expected a riot between the white girls (mostly Irish-American) and the incoming Negro girls, they must have been disappointed," recalled Hackshaw. "No interest was shown whatever."

For Hackshaw, checking the finished glasses in the ordnance plant meant more than just making money. "Often as I inspected a glass, I would visualize the use to which it would be put. The scene thus conjured up in my imagination may vary greatly from the real procedure on the field. Nonetheless, it never fails to stir me with the thrill of knowing that I am doing something worthwhile in the winning of the war." Every pair of binoculars became a symbol of liberty. "In our own time our President has raised the standard of the 'Four Freedoms.' These freedoms are not new. They have been fought for over and over again. The Negro has attained one of these and part of another. Freedom from fear and freedom from

want he is fighting for now; for under them democracy can reach its fulfillment."⁹²

For African Americans, men as well as women, World War II was a crossing, constituting what Robert C. Weaver of the Office of Production Management called "more industrial and occupational diversification for Negroes than had occurred in the seventy-five preceding years."⁹³ At the end of the war, however, the defense industry contracted, and industrial employment opportunities for African Americans suddenly disappeared. Economic reconversion hurt black workers more than white workers. From July 1945 to April 1946, unemployment rates among blacks increased more than twice as much as among whites.⁹⁴

Unemployed, blacks found themselves joining Huddie Ledbetter ("Leadbelly") in song:

I had a little woman, working on that national defense,
I had a little woman, working on that national defense,
That little woman act just like she did not have no sense.

Just because she was working, making so much dough,
Just because she was working, making so much dough,
That woman got to say she did not love me no more.

Every payday would come — her check was big as mine,
Every payday would come — her check was big as mine,
That woman thought that defense was gonna last all the time.

That defense is gone, just listen to my song,
That defense is gone, just listen to my song,
Since that defense is gone, that woman done lose her home.

I will tell the truth and it's got to be a fact,
I will tell the truth and it's got to be a fact,
Since that defense is gone that woman lose her Cadillac.⁹⁵

However, not everything was gone. The war had given African Americans a taste of the honey of equality. "A lot of blacks that were share cropping, doing menial work and stuff," said defense worker Margaret Wright, "got into the army and saw how other things were and how things could be. They decided they did not want to go back to what they were doing before. They did not want to walk behind a plow, they wouldn't get on the back of the bus anymore."⁹⁶

African Americans would also refuse to be denied the right to "freedom from fear."

No "Freedom from Fear" in the Cities: Race Riots

As black and white workers followed the defense jobs into the cities, they often clashed violently. In 1943, at the height of industrial production for the war, urban race riots exploded across the country. The Social Science Institute at Fisk University reported that 242 racial battles had occurred that year in forty-seven cities.⁹⁷

Detroit was the scene of the bloodiest conflict. At the beginning of the war, African Americans totaled 150,000 of this city's population of 1,600,000. Between 1940 and 1943, half a million people, including more than 50,000 blacks, moved into the city, lured by the demand for workers in the "arsenal for democracy." In an August 14, 1942, memorandum, the Office of War Information highlighted the importance of Detroit in "the Battle of Production." "It is an assembly center which dominates the nation's greatest war-industrial region and represents the culmination of the coordination of this vast industrial machine. If Detroit's part of this machine breaks down, the impact upon the regional net-work of production is tremendous."⁹⁸

Although jobs in the defense industry were abundant, white workers were determined to continue the exclusion of blacks from the better jobs. In September 1941, 250 whites staged a sit-down strike at the Packard Motor Car Company to protest the promotion of two blacks from polishing work to assembly work. With

the support of the United Auto Workers, blacks continued to be upgraded. "A new wave of protest against working with Negroes was spread by white workers at Packard Motor Car Company during the last two weeks as anti-Negro demonstrators employed a new technique in 'hate strikes,'" the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported on March 6, 1942. "The new technique calls for short stoppages while Negro workers are booed lustily by whites who ignore the pleas of foremen and union stewards to keep production rolling."⁹⁹

On May 27, twenty thousand white workers at Packard walked off their jobs and stopped production for almost a week to protest the upgrading of three blacks.¹⁰⁰ Four days later, 350 white workers shut down the Dodge plant after 23 blacks had been transferred from unskilled to skilled jobs.¹⁰¹ "Hate strikes" also erupted in the munitions industry. On January 23, 1942, two blacks at the Hudson Naval Ordnance Plant were transferred from the janitorial staff to jobs as machine operators. White workers promptly staged a work stoppage. Their strike was successful: after only two hours of protest, reported the Office of War Information, the black workers were sent back to "their dustpans and brooms."¹⁰² On March 15, 1943, the Office of War Information reported that white workers resented the economic gains of blacks and believed that "the Negro must be kept in his place."¹⁰³

Competition between whites and blacks intensified not only in the workplace but also in housing. The tremendous influx of newcomers into Detroit had created crowded living conditions. Black newcomers found themselves herded into a ghetto known as Paradise Valley. There men, women, and children found themselves "packed like sardines, in the horribly dirty one- and two-family houses and apartment buildings on Hastings and other streets in the Valley."¹⁰⁴ To meet the immense housing needs of the expanding workforce, the federal government constructed public housing projects. Built in a white neighborhood, the Sojourner Truth Housing Project for blacks was completed in February 1942. When black defense workers tried to move their families into the project, however, they were attacked and driven away by a thousand whites

armed with clubs, knives, and rifles. Two months later, blacks were able to occupy their homes in the Sojourner Truth project, but only with the protection of 1,750 city and state police.¹⁰⁵

The turmoil at the Sojourner Truth project became international news. "The Detroit housing crisis was shortwaved to the peoples of Asia by the Japs as proof of the fact that the democratic nations do not intend to extend democracy to non-white peoples," stated a federal government report marked "confidential."¹⁰⁶ The editors of the *Crisis* declared that Japanese radio propaganda broadcasts were using the Sojourner Truth riot as "an example to colored peoples of the Far East of the type of democracy they [could] expect from white America."¹⁰⁷

By 1943, Detroit was a racial tinderbox. In early June, Walter White of the NAACP declared at a rally in Cadillac Square: "Let us drag out into the open what has been whispered throughout Detroit for months — that a race riot may break out here at any time." Then on Sunday, June 20, when sixty thousand blacks and forty thousand whites retreated from the heat to a park in the middle of the Detroit River, a scuffle broke out between a white man and a black man on the Belle Island bridge. Quickly, the fighting spread through the crowd. Rumors fanned the fiery conflict: whites had killed a black woman and her baby on the Belle Island bridge, and blacks had raped and killed a white woman on the park bridge. "By midnight," reported Earl Brown in *Harper's Magazine*, "the fight had spread north, east, south, and west, and Paradise Valley was going crazy. By three in the morning store looting was in full swing and at daybreak both black and white mobs were attacking street cars crowded with war-plant workers on their way to and from work."¹⁰⁸

Detroit began to resemble a bombed city as scores of fires turned entire blocks into ashes. The hospital in the riot area was accepting injured individuals at the rate of one every other minute. "Armed with beer and pop bottles, bricks and improvised weapons of scrap iron and table legs," the black newspaper *Detroit Tribune* reported, "white mobs gathered on the edge of the Negro district

and brutally beat isolated Negro citizens, overturning automobiles in which Negroes were riding and setting cars on fire. In retaliation, Negro mobs formed and stoned all whites who were caught in the ghetto. Frantically trying to keep the mobs apart, the Detroit police whipped out Tommy guns and tear gas, but almost always in the direction of Negroes."¹⁰⁹

This urban warfare continued until Tuesday morning when six thousand federal troops finally restored order to Detroit. By then, losses totaled \$2 million in property due to looting and destruction. Hundreds of people were injured, and thirty-four killed — nine whites and twenty-five blacks.¹¹⁰ "Three fourths of the Negroes killed were shot by police," editorialized the *Crisis*. "Not a single white person was shot by police. More than 90 percent of those arrested for rioting were Negroes. Yet all the pictures showed white people chasing, kicking, and beating colored people. There were many graphic and horrible pictures of the riot, but the most meaningful to the theme of this piece was the one showing a Negro being struck in the face by a white rioter as he was being escorted by two policemen!"¹¹¹

As chief counsel for the NAACP, Thurgood Marshall had tried to warn Roosevelt about Detroit's powder keg of racial tensions. "In those days," he told Carl T. Rowan years later, "I would lie awake some nights worrying that Detroit and other cities that had industries that were critical to the war effort were becoming tinderboxes because whites, from the Roosevelt brain trust to the unions, wanted to keep Negroes out of the mobilization jobs. The tragedy was that Roosevelt didn't have a fucking clue as to the explosive tensions that were building up."¹¹²

Actually, the President had more than a clue. In a "Special Report on Negro Housing Situation in Detroit," March 5, 1942, marked "Confidential," the federal government's Office of Facts and Figures had noted the escalating racial antagonisms in Detroit. "It now appears," the report stated, "that only the direct intervention of the President can prevent not only a violent race riot in Detroit but a steadily widening fissure that will create havoc in the

working force of every Northern industrial city." A clear warning was given: "Unless strong and quick action intervention by some high official, preferably the President, is not taken at once, hell is going to be let loose."¹¹³ In a March 15, 1943, report, the Bureau of Intelligence of the Office of War Information had warned: "In Detroit, the situation is not good. Unless it is carefully handled you can have trouble there now any day, and when it bursts out it will require some harsh treatment, not in subduing the Negroes, but the whites."¹¹⁴ Two days before the outbreak of violence in Detroit, Congress of Industrial Organizations president Philip Murray informed Roosevelt that the explosive situation in Detroit was "more than a problem either of mob prejudice or juvenile delinquency." Rather it was "a grave question of our relations with our allies and test of our ability to present a truly united front to the Axis."¹¹⁵

In a telegram to Roosevelt, John Sengstacke of the Negro Publishers' Association asked the President to appeal to the conscience of the nation: "We urge you to call attention of all Americans through the radio and the press to the unpatriotic activities of those who subvert the constitutional guarantee of equal opportunity for all."¹¹⁶ Roosevelt felt the pressure to speak out. "Don't you think it is about time," he asked his press secretary, Steve Early, "for me to issue a statement about racial riots?"¹¹⁷ In the end, however, the President decided not to make a public address on the crisis. He realized, Eleanor Roosevelt explained, that "he must not irritate the southern leaders," whose votes he needed for essential war bills.¹¹⁸

Roosevelt's silence on the Detroit crisis spoke loudly overseas. A week after the riot, the editor of the *Christian Century* stressed the international significance of the urban violence: "Some Americans may at last wake up to the way in which such racial outrages play into the hands of Japan's propagandists; they may at last see that for every person of color struck down by a white mob in this country the United States loses the confidence and comradeship of ten thousand Asiatics." The editor expressed dismay at the race hatred

aimed not only at African Americans but also at Mexican Americans and Japanese Americans. "The nation is at war, according to the President, in order to make possible a world in which there shall be, for all people, freedom from fear. Freedom from fear — with mobs sweeping up and down the streets of cities, shouting 'Kill the d——n niggers!' 'Kill the d——n greasers!' 'Kill the d——n Japs!' Freedom from fear! Will not the words stick in our throats?"¹¹⁹

During the days of violence, however, there were also shouts for justice. On one occasion, three white sailors rescued a young black from a white mob. "Leave him alone!" the sailors shouted, and a rioter snarled: "What's it to you?" One of the sailors snapped: "Plenty. There was a colored guy in our outfit in the Pacific and he saved the lives of two of my buddies. Besides, you guys are stirring up here at home something we are fighting to stop."¹²⁰

Five weeks after the bloodbath in Detroit, Harlem exploded. Conditions in this ghetto had been ready for ignition: blacks were still being excluded from many defense industry plants, 70 percent of Harlem was on relief, and people were trapped in squalid, rat-infested apartments. The match was lit on August 1. On leave from his army base in New Jersey, Robert J. Bandy was with his mother and fiancée at the Braddock Hotel in Harlem. When they returned from the movies, they found the hotel clerk and a black woman engaged in a heated argument. Called to the scene, police officer James Collins began pushing the woman to the hotel door. Bandy intervened, accusing the white officer of mistreating the woman because she was black. During the struggle that followed, Collins shot Bandy in the left shoulder.

Meanwhile, an angry crowd had assembled outside the hotel. Suddenly they were seized by a rumor that a white policeman had shot and killed a black soldier. Soon thousands of enraged people were in the streets, smashing store windows on 125th Street and looting businesses. As the rioting gathered momentum, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia rushed to Harlem; accompanied by black community leaders, he appealed to the rioters, urging them to re-

turn to their homes. La Guardia instructed city police to use only as much force as absolutely necessary and to disperse crowds as diplomatically as possible. To help calm the community, the mayor made repeated radio broadcasts to inform the people that Bandy had not, in fact, been killed.

When peace was restored, property damage to 1,450 stores totalled \$5 million; 550 individuals had been arrested, 500 injured, and 6 persons killed. A child at the time, Claude Brown was in bed when he heard the screaming of the mobs in the streets and the shattering of broken windows. The next morning, he saw a scene resembling a war zone with burned-out buildings and the heavy smell of smoke. "None of the stores had any windows," he recalled, "and glass was everywhere. It seemed that all the cops in the world were on 145th Street and Eighth Avenue that day. The cops were telling everybody to move on, and everybody was talking about the riot."¹²¹

Assessing the devastation in an essay published in *New York PM*, Richard Wright identified the shooting of the soldier as "the spark" that set off "a spontaneous outburst of anger, stemming mainly from the economic pinch."¹²² City council member Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., viewed the fury in the streets as more than an expression of economic discontent: it was "the last open revolt of the black common man against a bastard democracy," against "the whole sorrowful, disgraceful bloody record of America's treatment of one million blacks in uniform."¹²³

Reports of the Detroit and Harlem riots dismayed a group of soldiers in a hospital ward in Europe. Writing to a newspaper in their home city of Detroit, they indignantly asked America: "Why are these race riots going on there in Detroit and in other cities in this land — supposedly the land of freedom, equality, and brotherhood?" The riots "make us fighters think — *what are we fighting for?*" They believed they were fighting and willing to die for the "principles that gave birth to the United States of America." In the crucible of the battlefield, they had come to understand deeply

the meaning of those "self-evident" truths. "In this hospital ward, we eat, laugh, and sleep uncomplaining together." They signed their letter: "Jim Stanley, Negro; Joe Wakamatsu, Japanese; Eng Yu, Chinese; John Brennan, Irish; Paul Colosi, Italian; Don Holzheimer, German; Joe Wojciechowski, Polish; and Mike Cohen, Jewish."¹²⁴