

The Double Victory Campaign

Goal: Students will learn about African Americans' struggle to obtain civil rights at home even as they fought for freedom and democracy for peoples abroad.

Objectives:

- 1) Students will be able to name the type of role African Americans were able to play in the Armed Forces at the beginning of the war.
- 2) Students will be able to cite two reasons given by the U.S. Armed Forces for maintaining a policy of discrimination.
- 3) Students will be able to list other ways in which African Americans experienced discrimination during World War II.
- 4) Students will express in writing their opinion on the policy of segregation of the U.S. Armed Forces during World War II.

After reading the following information about African American participation in World War II and their fight for civil rights back home, complete the accompanying exercises.

African Americans in the 1940s were involved in fighting two wars. As participants in World War II, they fought enemy dictators abroad in Europe, the Pacific, and North Africa. However, they also fought racial discrimination in the Armed Forces and on the home front. African American soldiers noted the irony of their role in fighting for democracy and freedom abroad though they did not receive the full benefits of such things themselves at home in the United States.

On the home front, African Americans sought equal consideration for jobs both in the military and in civilian roles. As the war proceeded, factory jobs were left vacant at a time when production needed to increase. For this reason, African Americans did find more jobs open to them during the war, but what would happen when soldiers returned home?

In the military, African Americans also struggled to overcome harassment and discrimination. Few African Americans achieved entrance into the Navy, the Marines, or the Air Force because these branches did not want Black recruits. Therefore, most African American soldiers served in the Army. There, they faced discrimination in training, living quarters, and duty assignments. African American soldiers in the Navy were often forced to serve as cooks, dishwashers, and busboys. In other words, they were "messmen" – working in the mess areas (dining room and kitchen) of the ship. Black soldiers in the Army served in segregated units. At the beginning of World War II there were only 5 commissioned African American officers who were at least second lieutenants in rank.

The Armed Forces claimed that integrating the military would result in a decline in morale and would create discipline problems. They tried to limit African American enlistment, or quickly rejected African American recruits because of disease or illiteracy.

However, as the conflict grew, the military found that they needed the help of African American soldiers more than ever before. The military realized that in order to win the war, they would have to allow African-Americans to serve in combat positions alongside white troops. The Army reactivated the 92nd and 93rd Infantry divisions – the only two African American infantry divisions in World War I. Still, many of the white officers employed to oversee and train the troops were weak as commanders. Likewise, the commanders often lacked faith in their troops simply because they were Black. Low expectations and low morale created difficulties for the African American troops and sometimes affected their combat performance.

Nevertheless, the 92nd Infantry division proved themselves in combat in Italy, while other Black soldiers proved their bravery in Normandy and in other battles.

- 1) In what kinds of positions were African American soldiers placed at the beginning of World War II?

- 2) What reasons did the U.S. Armed Forces give for keeping a policy of segregation? Do you agree with this reasoning or not? Explain.

- 3) What was ironic about African American involvement in the World War II fight for democracy and freedom abroad? In other words, was there anything that did not seem to make sense about African American soldiers fighting for democracy and freedom elsewhere given the way that they were treated by white Americans at home?

- 4) In what other ways did African Americans experience discrimination during the World War II period?

- 5) As the war progressed, the government was forced to make a decision about whether or not to allow African American soldiers to serve in combat positions. It became clear that allowing African Americans to fight alongside white soldiers would speed up an Allied victory. Pretend that you are a U.S. citizen in 1943. Write a “Letter to the Editor” of your local newspaper defending your opinion of integration.