

Segregation In

[Adapted from Morris J. MacGregor, Jr.,

The Armed Forces Before 1940

Progress toward equal treatment and opportunity in the armed forces was an uneven process, the result of sporadic and sometimes conflicting pressures derived from such constants in American society as prejudice and idealism and spurred by a chronic shortage of military manpower. The democratic spirit embodied in the Declaration of Independence, for example, opened the Continental Army to many Negroes, holding out to them the promise of eventual freedom.

Yet the fact that the British themselves were taking large numbers of Negroes into their ranks proved more important than revolutionary idealism in creating a place for Negroes in the American forces. Above all, the participation of both slaves and freedmen in the Continental Army and the Navy was a pragmatic response to a pressing need for fighting men and laborers. Despite the fear of slave insurrection shared by many colonists, some 5,000 Negroes, the majority from New England, served with the American forces in the Revolution, often in integrated units, some as artillerymen and musicians, the majority as infantrymen or as unarmed pioneers detailed to repair roads and bridges.

Again, General Jackson's need for manpower at New Orleans explains the presence of the Louisiana Free then of Color in the last great battle of the War of 1812. In the Civil War the practical needs of the Union Army overcame the Lincoln administration's fear of alienating the border states. When the call for volunteers failed to produce the necessary men, Negroes were recruited, generally as laborers at first but later for combat. In all, 186,000 Negroes served in the Union Army. In addition to those in the 149 segregated combat regiments and the labor units, thousands also served unofficially as laborers, teamsters, and cooks. Some 30,000 Negroes served in the Navy, about 25 percent of its total Civil War strength.



Military needs and idealistic impulses were not enough to guarantee uninterrupted racial progress; in fact, the status of black servicemen tended to reflect the changing patterns in American race relations. During most of the nineteenth century, for example, Negroes served in an integrated U.S. Navy, in the latter half of the century averaging between 20 and 30 percent of the enlisted strength. But the employment of Negroes in the Navy was abruptly curtailed after 1900. Paralleling the rise of Jim Crow and legalized segregation in much of America was the cutback in the number of black sailors, who by 1909 were mostly in the galley and the engine room. In contrast to their high percentage of the ranks in the Civil War and Spanish-American War, only 6,750 black sailors, including twenty-four women reservists (yeomanettes), served in World War I; they constituted 1.2 percent of the Navy's total enlistment. Their service was limited chiefly to mess duty and coal passing, the latter becoming increasingly rare as the fleet changed from coal to oil.

When postwar enlistment was resumed in 1923, the Navy recruited Filipino stewards instead of Negroes, although a decade later it reopened the branch to black enlistment. Negroes quickly took advantage of this limited opportunity, their numbers rising from 441 in 1932 to 4,007 in June 1940, when they constituted 2.3 percent of the Navy's 170,000 total. Curiously enough, because black reenlistment in combat or technical specialties had never been barred, a few black gunner's mates, torpedomen, machinist mates and the like continued

The Military: I

Armed Forces 1940-1965, Washington, DC, 1985]

to serve in the 1930's.

Although the Army's racial policy differed from the Navy's, the resulting limited, separate service for Negroes proved similar. The laws of 1866 and 1869 that guaranteed the existence of four black Regular Army regiments also institutionalized segregation, granting federal recognition to a system racially separate and theoretically equal in treatment and opportunity a generation before the Supreme Court sanctioned such a distinction in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

The Spanish-American War marked a break with the post-Civil War tradition of limited recruitment. Besides the 3,339 black regulars, approximately 10,000 black volunteers served in the Army during the conflict. World War I was another exception, for Negroes made up nearly 11 percent of the Army's total strength, some 404,000 officers and men. The acceptance of Negroes during wartime stemmed from the Army's pressing need for additional manpower. Yet it was no means certain in the early months of World War I that this need for men would prevail over the reluctance of many leaders to arm large groups of Negroes. Still remembered were the 1906 Brownsville affair, in which men of the 25th Infantry had allegedly fired on Texan civilians, and the August 1917 riot involving members of the 24th Infantry at Houston, Texas. Woodrow Wilson's promise to make the world safe for democracy was forcing his administration to admit Negroes to the Army. Although it carefully maintained racially separate draft calls, the National Army conscripted some 368,000 Negroes, 13.08 percent of all those drafted in World War I.

Black assignments reflected the opinion, expressed repeatedly in Army staff studies throughout the war, that when properly led by whites, blacks could perform reasonably well in segregated units. Once again Negroes were called on to perform a number of vital though unskilled jobs, such as construction work, most notably in sixteen specially formed pioneer-infantry regiments. But they also served as frontline combat troops in the all-black 92d and 93d Infantry Divisions, the latter serving with distinction among the French forces.

Established by law and tradition and reinforced by the Army staff's conviction that black troops had not performed well in combat, segregation survived to flourish in the postwar era. The familiar practice of maintaining a few black units was resumed in the Regular Army, with the added restriction that Negroes were totally excluded from the Air Corps. By June 1940 the number of Negroes on active duty stood at approximately 4,000 men, 1.5 percent of the Army's total, about the same proportion as Negroes in the Navy.

Civil Rights and the Law in 1940

The same constants in American society that helped decide the status of black servicemen in the nineteenth century remained influential between the world wars, but with a significant change. Where once- the advancing fortunes of Negroes in the services depended almost exclusively on the good will of white progressives, their welfare now became the concern of a new generation of black leaders and emerging civil rights organizations. Both the New Deal politicians and their opponents openly courted the black vote in the 1940 presidential election. NAACP urged Roosevelt to appoint a commission of black and white citizens to investigate discrimination in the Army and Navy and to recommend the removal of racial barriers. Nothing immediately came of that, but World War II was looming on the horizon.