

What Was Black America's Double War?

by [Henry Louis Gates, Jr.](#) | Originally posted on [The Root](#)

We read about Robert Smalls, the slave who [sailed himself to freedom](#) and then became the first black Navy captain during the American Civil War, five years before the first Memorial Day. Black leaders felt that African Americans could make the strongest case for freedom and citizenship if they demonstrated their heroism and commitment to the country on the battlefield, as they had done since 5,000 black men fought for the Patriot cause in the American Revolution. No one put this more forcefully than Frederick Douglass did in the middle of the Civil War: "Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on earth or under the earth which can deny that he has earned the right of citizenship in the United States."

Yet, by the time the United States was attacked at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, memories of Smalls' heroism and of the 200,000 black men who had served during the Civil War (and those who had served in every other American war since) had been, if you will, lost at sea.

Despite the gains of the abolition of slavery and the three Reconstruction amendments to the Constitution, Jim Crow segregation had pervaded every aspect of American society since the 1890s. And the military was no exception. When black men volunteered for duty or were drafted following the Japanese sneak attack, they were relegated to segregated divisions and combat support roles, such as cook, quartermaster and grave-digging duty. The military was as segregated as the Deep South.

So it is easy for us to see why it was difficult for African Americans not to see the hypocrisy between conditions at home and the noble war aims President Franklin Roosevelt articulated in his famous "Four Freedoms" speech on Jan. 6, 1941. And because of the gap between the promise and performance of American freedom when it came to race relations, many black people frankly felt alienated from the war effort.

While A. Philip Randolph's threat of a massive March on Washington convinced FDR to ban discrimination against blacks in the defense industry in 1941, segregation in the armed forces persisted. Covering the conflict posed a problem for black newspapers: Either give in to the government's propaganda about racial harmony at home for the sake of the war effort and national unity,

or speak the truth and be smeared as co-conspirators with the enemy. American history was replete with cautionary tales of disappointment and betrayal, starting with experiences by Frederick Douglass in the post-Reconstruction period and continuing through [one involving W.E.B. Du Bois](#) (pdf) during World War I. What should black journalists and spokespersons do?

Two months to the day after Pearl Harbor (Feb. 7, 1942), the most widely read black newspaper in America, the Pittsburgh Courier, found a way to split the difference — actually, the newspaper cleverly intertwined them into a symbol and a national campaign that urged black people to give their all for the war effort, while at the same time calling on the government to do all it could to make the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence and the equal rights amendments to the Constitution real for every citizen, regardless of race. And in honor of the battle against enemies from without and within, they called it “the Double V Campaign.”



Participants in the Double V campaign, 1942. (National Archives and Records Administration)

While the Double V Campaign was unable to achieve its goals during the war (segregation in the armed forces remained official policy until President Truman changed that in 1948), it galvanized black people and liberal whites around a mission whose power derived from the elegance of its simplicity.

Innovative, clear and easily accessible, the Double V Campaign prefigured today's most popular social media campaigns ("It gets better," "Yes, we can," "Think Different"), using an impressive range of communication platforms, even gimmicks, to spread the word during the critical first year of the war.

More than 2.5 million African Americans registered for the draft when World War II began; 1 million served. And though they faced segregation, even in combat, the Courier was there to tell their stories, to fight against racial discrimination within the armed forces and to insist that the quest for civil rights at home was just as important as the fight against fascism abroad.

The Campaign

The story of the campaign and its antecedents is quite fascinating. When the war broke out, the overwhelming number of black soldiers served in segregated units. Rather than tackle integration of the military head-on, civil rights leaders A. Philip Randolph, Walter White and others organized a March on Washington to protest discrimination in the defense industry, which, well before Pearl Harbor, was receiving lucrative contracts from Uncle Sam to build up Britain's and the nation's defenses.

Eleanor Roosevelt met with Randolph and White to ask them to call the march off, but they refused; FDR then met with them, but they still refused — unless he signed an executive order banning discrimination in the defense industry. Facing a public relations disaster, FDR came around, and on June 25, 1941, he issued [Executive Order 8802](#), creating the Fair Employment Practices Committee to enforce a new rule — that "there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin."

The march was called off, but it laid the groundwork for MLK's March on Washington in 1963. And it established the mood within the black community to monitor race relations at home, even amid the war against fascism abroad. One man, deeply concerned about all of this, sat down and wrote a letter to the most influential black newspaper in the country.

On Jan. 31, 1942, the Pittsburgh Courier published a letter to the editor from James G. Thompson of Wichita, Kan. It was titled "[Should I Sacrifice to Live 'Half American?'](#)" In it, Thompson wrote: "Being an American of dark complexion and some 26 years, these questions flash through my mind: 'Should I sacrifice my life to live half American?' 'Will things be better for the next generation in the peace to follow?' 'Would it be demanding too much to

demand full citizenship rights in exchange for the sacrificing of my life?’ ‘Is the kind of America I know worth defending?’ ‘Will America be a true and pure democracy after this war?’ ‘Will colored Americans suffer still the indignities that have been heaped upon them in the past?’ These and other questions need answering.”

Then he proposed what he called “the double V V for a double victory ... The V for victory sign is being displayed prominently in all so-called democratic countries which are fighting for victory over aggression, slavery, and tyranny. If this V sign means that to those now engaged in this great conflict, then let we colored Americans adopt the double V V for a double victory. The first V for victory over our enemies from without, the second V for victory for our enemies from within. For surely those who perpetuate these ugly prejudices here are seeking to destroy our democratic form of government just as surely as the Axis forces.” [Read [Thompson’s full letter to the Courier here.](#)]

The Courier was the most widely read black newspaper during the war, with a national circulation well above 200,000. It had already run stories protesting the Navy’s use of black sailors only as “messmen,” and on Jan. 3, 1942, the paper denounced the American Red Cross’ refusal to accept black blood in donor drives, under the title “The Red Blood Myth.” But nothing could prepare the editors for the enthusiastic response of the public to Thompson’s letter.

A week later, on Feb. 7, 1942, two months to the day after the Pearl Harbor attack, the Courier published on its front page an insignia announcing “[Democracy At Home Abroad.](#)” The following week, the paper announced that it had published the insignia “to test the response and popularity of such a slogan with our readers. The response has been overwhelming.” Henceforth, “this slogan represents the true battle cry of colored America.” As the editors conclude, “we have adopted the Double ‘V’ war cry — victory over our enemies on the battlefields abroad. Thus in our fight for freedom we wage a two-pronged attack against our enslavers at home and those abroad who would enslave us. WE HAVE A STAKE IN THIS FIGHT ... WE ARE AMERICANS TOO!” (Read the [full editorial online here.](#) [pdf])

The Double V Campaign ran weekly into 1943. To promote patriotism, the Courier included an American flag with every subscription and encouraged its readers to buy war bonds. Double V clubs spread around the country. Among the campaign’s features, the paper published a weekly photo of a new “[Double V Girl](#)” frequently lifting two fingers in a “v” sign; celebrity and political endorsements followed, including Lana Turner (who, in a bit of cross-promotion, mentioned that her movie *Slightly Dangerous* featured blacks in

the cast) and former presidential candidate Wendell Willkie, wearing a Double V pin, which the *Courier* sold for five cents, as William F. Yurasko [reports](#). A Double V hairstyle called “the Doubler” also became popular, historian Patrick Washburn recalls, as did Double V gardens and Double V baseball games. Other black newspapers soon joined the *Courier*’s campaign.

To measure the campaign’s impact, the *Courier* ran a survey. On Oct. 24, 1942, it published the results: In response to the question, “Do You Feel that the Negro Should Soft Pedal His Demands for Complete Freedom and Citizenship and Await the Development of the Educational Process?” 88.7 percent of readers responded no, with only 9.2 percent responding yes.

Needless to say, not everyone was pleased with the Double V Campaign: As Washburn writes in *A Question of Sedition*, the federal government systematically monitored the black press, including this campaign, during the war. Accordingly, to avoid charges of disloyalty or aiding and abetting the enemy, the *Courier*’s editorial [added](#) a caveat to its poll results: “No one must interpret this ... as a plot to impede the war effort. Negroes recognize that the first factor in the survival of this nation is the winning of the war. But they feel integration of Negroes into the whole scheme of things ‘revitalizes’ the U.S. war program.”

Legacy of the Campaign

In September 1945, the Double V insignia disappeared from the paper, replaced in 1946 by a Single V, indicating that more work combating antiblack racism needed to be done at home. But as Clarence Taylor concludes, “Although the *Courier* could not claim any concrete accomplishments, the Double V campaign helped provide a voice to Americans who wanted to protest racial discrimination and contribute to the war effort.”

While the *Courier*’s campaign kept the demands of African Americans for equal rights at home front and center during the war abroad, we can also argue that the Double V Campaign had at least two important legacies following the war: First, through the columns of its sportswriter, Wendell Smith, which featured prominently in the film *42*, it doggedly fought against segregation in professional sports, contributing without a doubt to the Brooklyn, N.Y., Dodgers’ decision to sign Jackie Robinson in 1947, which in turn had a ripple effect. And on July 26, 1948, President Harry Truman issued [Executive Order 9981](#), which ordered the desegregation of the U.S. armed forces. With that action, the Double V Campaign had at last realized one of its principal goals.

The military service of black men and women before and after the desegregation order, and the strength of the Double V Campaign, helped to inspire the modern civil rights movement that began in earnest just after the war ended. Both efforts remain worthy of remembrance on this Memorial Day holiday.

Fifty of the 100 Amazing Facts will be published on The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross website. [Read all 100 Facts on The Root.](#)

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