THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN WORLD WAR I:
MAKING AMERICA UNSAFE FOR HYPOCRISY

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A Thesis Submitted to the
University of North Carolina Wilmington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of History
University of North Carolina Wilmington

2011

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ABSTRACT

The impact of World War I on African Americans, especially on the soldiers who served in the perceptibly more tolerant French society, transformed the black community and served as an important, yet often overlooked, episode in the civil rights movement. Despite strong white resistance to blacks serving in the war, between 1917 and 1919 the mind-set of American blacks was fundamentally and permanently altered by African Americans’ experiences during that conflict. To understand the civil rights revolution in the era following World War II, one must consider the African American experience in the years of the First World War.

During the war, the generally amicable relationship between the African American soldiers and French soldiers, French citizens, and colonial African and Asian troops led to a new black identity. The patriotic service of the African American soldiers, the war’s lofty aims for democracy, and rapid demographic changes all contributed to opening a new front in the battle for civil rights. Likewise, these changes fostered the “Harlem Renaissance” and a positive self-image for African Americans, often described as the “New Negro.”

The analysis of diaries, mainstream newspapers, black newspapers, memoirs, letters, government documents, and secondary sources detailing the experiences of African Americans in the war and on the home-front, permits a more thorough understanding of African Americans’ rapidly changing expectations and perceptions brought-on by their wartime experiences. The resulting study illuminates how the African American community was significantly influenced by black soldiers’ descriptions of their interactions with the comparatively liberal French people. This analysis also includes an examination of the fear arising among the whites who sought to inhibit this transformation and African Americans’ response to these proscriptive efforts.
President Wilson’s desire “to make the world safe for democracy” served to re-energize African Americans’ claims that democratic America could no longer tolerate racial hypocrisy. Conversely, for many whites, the war advanced and intensified their aspirations to retain their racial hegemony. But, unlike many of the lofty goals of the war, prideful African Americans’ heightened intolerance of the status quo and their war-induced commitments to bolder social and political change did not fall victim to the passing of time. These changes found expression in their music, political writings, and cultural organizations and represent an important advancement in their long struggle for equality in America.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to recognize the suggestions, editing, and dedication of my committee. Their efforts gave me ideas, support, and assurance. Likewise, I want to acknowledge my wife, Deb, who gave me nothing but support during the last four years. It was her confidence in me that both began and sustained this endeavor and I appreciate her steadfast encouragement.
Youngstown, Ohio. November 11, 1918 - Their service in the war has entitled them to better treatment than they have received. In a passenger coach of a southern train the other day a friend of the writer espied a veteran of Pershing’s army. Upon an empty sleeve were two six-month Foreign Service stripes, a wound chevron and on his breast a medal of honor. Ordinarily it would seem as if one who had sacrificed as much for his country and democracy would be certain of all courtesy and friendliness from every fellow citizen he met, but as he sat there the conductor of the train came to him and touching his worn uniform said, “You are in the wrong coach. You belong in the Jim Crow car. Get out of here.” The Negro looked him steadily in the eyes. “I’ll stay right here,” he said firmly. You could have talked to me that way once but you can’t now.” And he pointed to his empty sleeve. “All right” said the conductor, “I’ll soon fix you.” Whereupon he called a burly brakeman and they were about to throw this one-armed veteran out of the car when the Southern white men who witnessed this humiliating scene arose. The train hands were ordered to desist and Pershing’s veteran rode in peace; the sole colored man in a carload of whites.¹

INTRODUCTION

World War I was a transformative event for African Americans and a catalytic event in the twentieth century struggle for social justice that would encompass the next sixty years in American history. According to William H. Chafe, the civil rights movement is arguably the most important grassroots insurgency in American history.² Military service offered African Americans an unexpected opportunity, provided a springboard for increased their demands for equal rights, and contributed to the genesis of the civil rights movement. African Americans’ encounters with more liberal attitudes in fighting alongside French military and living among the French people became an extraordinary experience for these men. The experiences of these black soldiers reinforced by developments on the home-front such as northward migration, new economic opportunities, and organizational developments, accelerated and telescoped black activism and contributed to a radical cultural transformation of American blacks. For many African Americans, the war represented the launching of a new self-image and the opportunity to organize a systematic effort on a national and worldwide scale to overcome entrenched white oppression and discrimination. The war reversed a flagging and factionalized movement and led opportunistic black leaders to implore national leaders, the international population, and especially the black community, to renew their efforts to bring justice and equality to African Americans. Blacks actively participated in the war effort and viewed the war as an opportunity to turn away from being passive victims to embracing assertiveness, pride, and self-confidence.

The under-examined impact of World War I on race relations in American history may be partially due to the absence of a full-scale civil rights movement in the 1920’s and the decade’s limited progress toward racial justice. Hence, the significant changes the war cultivated in black

attitudes have been discounted or overlooked because the outcome failed to meet expectations. Further, because World War II ushered in far more consequential and lasting changes in the history of American race relations, the long-term effects of the Great War on American society and race relations tend to be undervalued. Yet the war years of 1914 - 1919 served as a harbinger of change and reversed some of the disenchantment in the African American community of the previous decades. In the course of their participation in the war effort, many black Americans cultivated a heightened self-awareness, racial pride, and responded with a more assertive willingness to turn anger over racial discrimination into political action. This was the age of the “New Negro.”

The new level of integration of black and white, which at that time had a vastly different meaning than it does today, included the immersion of black troops into a more tolerant French society. The physical segregation of the races began to ebb as black soldiers came into frequent and more personal contact with white citizens and soldiers. The embedding of African American troops in the French army and cities during World War I contributed to this erosion of physical racial barriers. This condition would model the subsequent wearing down of social barriers between the races in America. The opportunity to fight alongside the French, intermingle with the comparatively tolerant people, and associate with citizens from all over the world, afforded African Americans a taste of what could be their ultimate liberation at home—physical and then social integration. Despite countless attempts by many white Americans to export Jim Crow segregation to Europe, strengthen it at home, and augment it following the war, the merging relatively tolerant French and the expectant African Americans strengthened the resolve of those willing to fight for racial equality.
African Americans anticipated that with their military service and by displaying exemplary patriotism, their repayment would be a greater willingness on the part of white America to move towards citizenship defined as equal treatment under the law. Likewise, many blacks believed that the nation’s shared experience of war would garner further understanding from the white community and initiate the first step to ending segregation and racial intolerance.

What is still missing from this body of scholarship is a study of how the African Americans’ perceptions of French tolerance on racial issues and the temporary integration of African Americans into a predominantly white French society served as catalysts for change in the United States. Most historians of the African American experience during the war have alluded to this topic, but their focus often strays to other issues and events. The culmination of the experience both among the French, and on the home-front, was the shaping of a new African American self-perception—a development that remains obscured in a many historical works. The First World War and the experience of black soldiers integrated among the more liberal French social milieu, deserves greater recognition as a transformative event in the history of the African American’s pursuit of civil rights. This thesis will provide a detailed examination of African American soldiers’ changing perceptions about themselves and their development of a clearer sense of what a racially harmonious and democratic America could mean for both races.

To adequately study the impact of the war on African Americans, it is necessary to study the impact of the war on white attitudes on race issues. African Americans’ endeavors to reduce racial injustices and promote integration encountered indifference and reluctance from America’s white citizens and government.3 The renewal of this unbending and pervasive resistance led to

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increased anti-black activism, lynchings, and the persistence of the pre-war racial *status quo* mentality of most white Americans. Yet paradoxically, the war accelerated changes between the races and foretold of changes to come. If *de jure* segregation was to remain for decades, as in many ways it did, the war nonetheless initiated a greater willingness, on the part of the African American community to confront *de facto* segregation in America. The change was apparent to author Stephen Graham during his 1920 tour of the Southern United States. His book, *The Soul of John Brown*, published just one year after the end of the war, concluded:

…the war has radically changed the aspect of the Negro problem is evident. It may have changed it as radically as did the War of Secession…The war and the part taken in it by the Negro soldiers, above all the wider outlook gained by observation for the view taken of the race problem in foreign lands, has made for the growth of race consciousness among the more intelligent and better-educated Negroes. Among many of them it has resulted in a bellicose determination to have equality before the law and equality of opportunity, no matter what the cost.4

The war provided critical momentum for further political organization, resistance, and a willingness to fight for their well-being. Blacks turned away from white-enforced segregation, endured, and to some degree accepted, by the previous generation. This new post-war African American mind-set included a willingness to further intermix socially with the white community but on the condition that blacks retain their unique culture. For the “New Negro,” this form of assimilation, with blacks defining the terms of that transition, became an acceptable means of moving America forward on the race issue. Further, when segregation was necessary, it would not be to appease whites, but instead to preserve African Americans’ dignity and customs.

The extreme nature of war and the collectivity of action can turn perceptions into reality and swiftly generate a revolutionary spirit among its participants. Despite the brevity of American

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involvement in the war, the First World War, fought by young and impressionable soldiers, witnessed a profusion of propaganda and idealism, a promise of progressive social reforms, and the novelty of foreign travel and acculturation. African Americans’ wartime experience on the battlefields of Europe, especially soldiers from the rural South, exposed easily influenced young black men to people with radically different views on race. Furthermore, the French and American military would indoctrinate blacks into military discipline and organization while offering opportunities to prove their leadership and loyalty to America. For the first time, blacks would be exposed to a meritocracy-- teaching them that pay and promotions were not exclusively based on skin color. Likewise, military service offered black men positions of authority, at times even over whites, and recognition for their efforts and heroism.

Not only did the war do this for the soldiers, but the liberating effect of this wartime service impacted the larger black community in America. Those who did not experience French tolerance first-hand could do so vicariously through letters home from their brave young men, the columns of active and sympathetic black press, reports of mainstream newspapers and news organizations, and complimentary speeches by the United States government and military officials. At the same time, the migration of millions of African Americans northward and westward in the war years led to the diversification of urban communities, further integration of the races, and the eventual destruction of southern segregation.\(^5\) Despite the depth of racism in northern cities, this demographic flux fostered a gradual advance in racial tolerance as the North attempted to live up to its billing as a more race-tolerant region.\(^6\)

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The prevailing white attitudes toward African Americans and the depth of their loyalty to America also changed. Early in the war, white cynicism regarding African Americans’ loyalty stemmed from the insidious efforts of German propagandists who publicized threats from black soldiers to turn on America. Well-publicized mutinies and riots by black soldiers and the often spiteful and belligerent tone of black leaders and the black press furthered white suspicion. Yet, by and large, the actions of the African American community, both on the home-front and of soldiers, proved these beliefs unfounded. By the end of the war, concerns over black loyalty to America were nearly silenced. Despite deliberate injustices, African Americans answered their nation’s call in its time of need.

The greater equality and liberty the African American soldiers experienced, and the African American community supposed, was in many ways more of a perception than a reality. Yet the conviction in this perception created a mind-set which put in motion a transformative era in African American history. Such a profound transformation may not follow a gradual, step by step change, but instead lead to an epiphany for those experiencing it and a break-through that previous efforts at change failed to yield. Often identified only in retrospect, any large-scale social transformation is marked by a clear break from previous attitudes and beliefs. The unity and harmony cultivated among the African American troops produced, in spite of the presence of war, a sense of fearlessness on the battlefield and back in America. Black preconceptions of what military service in the war would mean and how the French would treat them, moved the African American community beyond individual concerns and towards the liberating ideals of a shared purpose.

7 John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans, 5th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1980), 332-335. German propaganda efforts were well documented in numerous sources. This book gives a good summary of those German efforts and not only the refusal of blacks to be swayed, but also the gallantry of black soldiers.
World War I created a new perception of what democratic America should be-- a nation integrated to at least the level exhibited by French society. By seeking to transcend not just the physical boundaries, but also the emotional boundaries of segregation, African Americans expressed a more powerful challenge to systemic racial injustice. Rather than choosing to see the war as only something destructive and tragic, countless African American participants saw it as a constructive moment for moving forward as a race. These African Americans recognized that they may or may not have control over the events in their lives but they could certainly take control of how to respond to them.

The African American community, despite its expression of a wide range of attitudes and beliefs on the consequences of American involvement in the war, was touched by that conflict, and like America itself, permanently altered by its far-reaching effects. Yet it would be a mistake to treat the African American community as a monolithic group. Generally, the more urban and middle class Northern blacks exhibited more liberal and activist views than the more rural Southern blacks. But as the events surrounding World War I unfolded, many African Americans experienced a change in their perceptions and their predicament.

As blacks fought alongside and interacted harmoniously with people of different races and ethnicity, their faith in the possibility of change became more vivid. The impact of outside influences further drove blacks to reject the perpetuation of inequality on their return to America. African American soldiers in their many individual acts of self-assertion, moved beyond the stagnant tactics for racial equality that preceded their time in France. Their experiences forged during a war that pitted them against formidable foes in the form of the German Army and racial intolerance, proved to be both cathartic and enabling.
To bring about a true revolution in racial harmony, black leaders recognized the need to craft a new race attitude. Ironically, the first step to such a change necessitated that African Americans abandoned any thought that the racial status quo was acceptable, the differences between the races irreconcilable, and that racial prejudice was so deeply systemic that change would be impossible. During the early twentieth century, African Americans such as Marcus Garvey adopted a posture that blacks were “a nation within a nation.” This further entrenchment of blacks accepting segregation and abandoning their cultural heritage to assimilate into white society, proved to be a hurdle for black activists seeking assimilation or integration.

Black leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois, editor of the influential Crisis magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored people (NAACP), realized that the American contribution to the war presented a unique opportunity for the African American population to finally shed some of its own perceptions of racial inferiority and, in the process, influence the white community to do the same. Du Bois rallied African Americans to see the bigger picture, that “This war is an End, and, also, a Beginning.”8 Du Bois believed in the need to move forward, seize the occasion, and fashion a new self-image for African Americans.9 An important step was to not only persuade whites to accept black cultural differences and tolerate blacks as equals but for blacks themselves to acknowledge those notions. Secondly, the humiliation of Jim Crow in the South and racial attitudes in the North could not continue to limit the opportunity that service to America presented. Integration with whites in the military, in the fields and factories of America, and among the French people could only be meaningful if the African American participants viewed it as such and set out to make it that way on their terms. For activists like Du Bois the potential of the war included the expansiveness in the power of blacks

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8 Crisis, 16 (June 1918), 60.
9 Ibid., 60-61.
to initiate change and to begin to shape, over subsequent decades, a new reality for themselves and American society.

The extensive historiography of the African American experience in World War I often focuses on the harsh treatment African American soldiers at home and how that same discriminatory behavior followed them across the Atlantic. In their recent books, historians Chad Williams and Adrianne Lentz-Smith have explored the ways that Jim Crow manifested itself among the white officers, the white troops, and in the minds of the French people. Lentz-Smith focuses much of her analysis of the influence war had on the notion of black “manhood” and their changing self-perceptions due to their war experience.10 Jonathan Rosenberg and the early work of Charles H. Williams reveal numerous examples of the poor treatment African American soldiers received on their return to America and how white Americans generally feared that these African American soldiers would gain a new sense of pride from their experience fighting as soldiers for the United States.11 Richard Slotkin’s extensive research of the “Harlem Hellfighters,” in his book *Lost Battalions*, lends some interesting insight into African American soldiers’ experiences as troops often fighting alongside their French comrades.12 Likewise, a more general study of American troops and their relationship with the French can be found in Robert R. Bruce’s, *A Fraternity of Arms*.13 But similar to other accounts, the treatment of the African American troops by the French officers, soldiers, and citizens, is a

topic that when mentioned, is limited in its scope and is secondary to highlighting the battlefield experiences of African American soldiers.

Other histories, such as The Hellfighters of Harlem and Bitter Victory, tend to detail the abuse suffered by the African American troops but fail to identify what impact it may have had on the long-term attitudes of African Americans.\textsuperscript{14} The service of many African Americans as laborers, their relegation to menial tasks, poor combat training, the prevalence of racism and discrimination, and praise for what they achieved on the battlefield are the central themes of these works. Further, they expose efforts by the United States government and the military to “educate” and at times even dictate to the French authorities that African American troops should not be given the same freedoms and liberties afforded to the white American troops.\textsuperscript{15}

The recently published, Entangled by White Supremacy: Reform in World War I- era South Carolina by Janet G. Hudson has a narrower focus on the impact of the war on the state of South Carolina which in 1919 was one of only two states to have a black majority. Yet her focus remains on the challenge the new African American attitude had on white supremacy and the efforts of Southern white reformers to reconcile this with their agenda. It also addresses the changing dynamics between not only the blacks and whites, but also the progressive reformers and the entrenched white supremacists.\textsuperscript{16} This work spotlights South Carolina and dedicates limited consideration to the African American and French relationship during the war.


In other notable works, the contribution of African American soldiers in World War I receives scholarly acclaim. The battlefield exploits and successes of the black 93rd and 369th Regiments earn the long overdue praise they deserve with numerous books and the documentary film, *Men of Bronze.*\(^{17}\) Within the context of these studies the authors often mention the soldiers’ experiences among the French people and their perception of a more egalitarian society. With the notable exception of two very poignant chapters by Adriane Lentz-Smith, what appears to be missing is a more in-depth study of what exactly those perceptions were and how they transformed themselves into a reality for African Americans.\(^{18}\) Chad Williams’ extensive work and rich personal narratives of African American soldiers who served in the war parallels this thesis’ argument but focuses more on African American issues than their relationship with the French.\(^{19}\) Additionally, the question of how deeply rooted the perception of French openness was among African Americans before, during, and after the war also needs further consideration.

*The Unknown Soldiers* by Arthur E. Barbeau and Florette Henri is perhaps the most comprehensive work on the African American soldiers’ experience in World War I and sheds light on the “sordid realities of the racist, debasing indignities committed against the black soldier, both as enlisted man and officer.”\(^{20}\) The statement in the book that “the outbreak of war in Europe brought the Black man of America no social or political change…” is a very debatable position that one must surmise applies only to the outbreak and not by the end of the war.\(^{21}\) Especially enlightening and a good source of first-hand accounts of the African American experience in France comes from nurses Addie Hunton and Kathryn Johnson in *Two Colored*


\(^{19}\) Chad Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy*.

\(^{20}\) Barbeau and Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers*, xv.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 8.
Women With the American Expeditionary Forces.\textsuperscript{22} Attempting to detach the fact from fiction regarding how African Americans were treated, the book does not attempt to draw any parallels between the influence the war and changing black attitudes gained from assimilation with the French.

In 1917, following a number of clashes between whites and black troops, President Woodrow Wilson appointed Emmett Scott special advisor of black affairs to Secretary of War Newton Baker. Scott wrote reports on conditions facing African Americans during the period and it was later published as \textit{The American Negro in the World War}. This study proved to be a valuable source of the black soldiers’ experience. The simple narrative of both government officials and firsthand accounts from black and white soldiers tells the tale of black issues related to the conflict from before the first shots were fired to the last chapter entitled, “What the Negro got out of the War.”\textsuperscript{23} Despite its rush to publication and biased defense of many government actions, the record of the African American troops and reactions by the United States government is enlightening.

The manner in which the French treated the African Americans during and after the First World War significantly impacted the views of African Americans and fostered a dynamic change in America. David C. Berliner considers the “exotic black other” during the post-war era in France.\textsuperscript{24} He asserts that the perception of the French as racially tolerant was largely a falsehood and goes to great length to analyze how such a myth was perpetuated. His focus, though, is largely on the colonial Africans who entered French society during and after the war.

\textsuperscript{24} Brett A. Berliner, \textit{Ambivalent Desire: The Exotic Black Other in Jazz-Age France} (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).
The attention World War I receives in the analysis of the roots of the African American civil rights movement garners comparatively less consideration than events and key figures in the period around the turn of the twentieth century. The influential work of Rayford Logan’s *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* and C. Vann Woodward’s, *Origins of the New South*, and *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* initiated a fresh dialogue on African American historiography but their focus remained on the importance of the period prior to World War I. Yet, if the period following Reconstruction to the Progressive Era was, as Rayford Logan branded it, the “nadir” for the African Americans’ quest for equal rights, then World War I indeed ushered in significant, positive changes for African Americans. Likewise, as Gilbert Osofsky and Constance McLaughlin Green noted, the Progressive Movement did not have a far-reaching impact on injustices towards African Americans and “the nadir” in terms of progress describes the entire period from 1877- World War I. Author and World War I soldier Kelly Miller states, “Capital, labor, state government and national government had brought the Negro so low that he was ready in 1914 for any form of relief.” Contributing factors to this low-point for blacks’ civil rights include the weakening of liberal Northern attitudes as America expanded overseas, conservative Supreme Court rulings, and the unwillingness of progressives to include African Americans in their movement.

Despite the uplifting and behind-the-scenes efforts of Booker T. Washington to improve the educational and economic plight of African Americans, the persistently poor economic

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conditions and a hardening of white racist attitudes made the period prior to World War I a difficult time for blacks. 28 As John Hope Franklin in From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans, stated, “… as [the black man] developed his own institutions and, to a considerable extent, his own cultural life, it became clearer that the American melting pot, so far as Negroes were concerned, was not boiling; it was hardly simmering.” 29

Although Logan and Franklin generally agreed that the period from 1880-1914 was a low-point race relations, they recognized that the organization of the African American civil rights movement had some very important roots in the time prior to the First World War. The articulation of a “Talented Tenth,” the use of civil disobedience, a surge in African American newspapers, the Niagara Movement, and the founding of The National Association for the Advancement of Colored people (NAACP) were harbingers of change which the war accelerated. 30 Likewise, the 1915 death of Booker T. Washington, the most influential black leader of the time, also opened-up new opportunities for outspoken and more militant black leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois and Joel Spingarn who diverged from Washington’s more accommodating doctrine. 31

Similarly, other historians have moved the conversation on the origins of the civil rights movement to the late 1800’s and the first decades of the twentieth century, incorporating World War I to some degree, but tending to spotlight the preceding years. 32 The new paradigm these historians initiated, with their focus on the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, serves as a vital

29 Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, 294.
31 Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, 325.
foundation for the exploration of the impact the First World War had on hastening the civil rights movement into its next and more aggressive phase in history. African American writers like Kelly Miller recognized that, “If war be change, however explosive in form, in 1914 the Negro wanted the world war to come to America from whatever angle that promised him the greatest advantage.”33

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33 Miller, *Kelly Miller’s History*, 446.
The African American Debate over Serving America in the War

To value the impact the war had on African Americans, one must first consider the diverse views of the African American community and its leaders regarding the decision to participate in the war effort. It is necessary to distinguish the expectations of the black community, the extent of their organization, and the power of the various factions and leaders. Likewise, it is paramount to understand black perceptions of the French and what their service in the war could lend to their cause.

In the years preceding American entry into the war, black Americans conflicted over approaches towards achieving legal and political equality. The issue of service in the war at times highlighted these differences, while at other times led to the building of a consensus. At a gathering in Armenia, New York in August 1916, one year following the death of Booker T. Washington, rising black leaders, including those who supported Booker T. Washington’s brand of gradualism and black self-improvement as the primary means to bring about change, agreed to embark on the more political and legal approach to attaining equality trumpeted by Northern black leaders like Du Bois. What ensued was a contentious debate, primarily among the African American leaders, including Du Bois, editor of the *Crisis* magazine, the outspoken Monroe Trotter and writer Claude McKay, a Jamaican-born black activist. Each represented unique views and each addressed the aspirations and fears of the African American community. Further fueling the debate was a vast array of new and often more militant blacks voicing their opinions by means of the growing number of African American newspapers. The occasionally

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fierce verbal assaults of blacks on other blacks, once reserved exclusively to white America’s comments on the black race, included the questioning of loyalty and commitment to the cause. But in the end, each spoke of the status of blacks in America and what their participation in the war may or may not offer their beleaguered race.

Most forthright in his opposition to black support for the war effort was Trotter, editor of the Boston Guardian and, like Du Bois, a Harvard professor. Trotter, who had endorsed the most progressive candidate in 1912, Woodrow Wilson, was appalled by Wilson’s indifference to the plight of African Americans. Following an invitation to meet with Wilson at the White House in 1914, Trotter was expelled after a heated face to face confrontation with Wilson on race issues. In Trotter’s estimation, the opportunity of serving in the war could only be substantial if there was first the guarantee from the federal government of some action on race inequality.

Conversely, forward-looking leaders like Du Bois tactfully argued that the war could serve as a chance to prove their patriotism, train young men as leaders, and offer opportunities for heroism. Du Bois argued that black participation would inevitably open further interaction and a greater degree of integration between blacks and American and European whites. Lastly, as in the case of earlier conflicts which involved black soldiers fighting for America, the opportunity to seek rewards for their efforts following the war factored into his reasoning. Du Bois reckoned that citizenship, defined as equal treatment under the law, could be furthered through blacks’ participation in the war. Willingness to serve their nation in war, a fundamental act of citizenship, could be a unique opportunity for African Americans to mock a society which called on the fulfillment of their civic duty yet did not treat them equally. The battles Du Bois and the

36 Ibid., 323-6.
NAACP anticipated fighting in the courts over the ensuing decades could be fortified, if not won, by their service in the war.

Unquestionably, the United States government needed the support of blacks as part of the rapid mobilization effort as laborers, contributors to the war bond campaign, and to a lesser extent-- as combat soldiers. The United States was ill-prepared for war in 1917 and the government strenuously courted African American leaders to rally their supporters to the war effort. Du Bois promoted African American participation by suggesting that they postpone their fight for equality in lieu of, what he hoped would be, long-term gains on the home-front following the war. In an article entitled, “Close Ranks” in *Crisis*, Du Bois requested of his brethren that in the name of patriotism and with the understanding that African American patriotism be met with changes in American race relations, that blacks actively join the military. Du Bois pleaded, “Let us, while the war lasts, forget our special grievances and close ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens…fighting for democracy. We make no ordinary sacrifice, but we make it gladly and willingly.” The war, he argued, would serve a dual purpose as both an opportunity for blacks to disprove the white misinformation campaign regarding their loyalty to America and to generate a forum to call for an end to lynching, disenfranchisement, and segregation. Often derided as a “Francophile,” Du Bois also trumpeted the possibility of fighting and being among the French as a unique opportunity and serving as an inspiration to African American soldiers. Du Bois’ optimism was often fortified by

40 “Close Ranks,” *Crisis*, May 1917, 23.
an active black press including newspapers like the *Cleveland Advocate* and the *Baltimore Crusader* which publicized the French acceptance of African American troops and French respect for racial equality.

Black leaders were keenly aware of many Americans’ belief in the ennobling experience of war, the value it held for blacks following their participation in previous wars, and the interaction when American blacks would serve among the French and their colonial troops.42 African Americans favoring the pro-war stand bolstered their argument by often citing the liberal beliefs of the French. As one black newspaper admonished its readers,

> There is hope for Colored America, for the whole American nation feels that the hammer-stroke of our entry into the war on the side of ‘the rights of humanity’ has opened up a new epoch! France Greets America as a comrade in arms for a common cause, and who can deny by that the co-mingling of America and that nation- whose Marseillaise proclaims ‘liberty, equality and fraternity to all, regardless of race, color, creed, or previous condition of servitude’- will prove a leavening influence of good, and France’s treatment of her darker people’s be a paragon, whereby our own America- the land of our fathers- may rightly pattern. Then let us rally to the Stars and Stripes of our land, with the assurance that there are better days ahead of us- just in the ‘offing.’43

Further, pro-involvement black leaders believed the war would provide the African American community with the chance to escape white control and create “a tremendous inner uplift.”44

Yet amid the celebrated potential of service, there remained a viable black indifference. Due in part to their poverty and isolation in the South, African American apathy to the war was generally higher than among whites, but faded as war-fever engulfed the nation. In northern black strongholds like Harlem, such ambivalence was less common among the black populace.

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43 “Message from France,” *Cleveland Advocate*, vol. 4, iss. 43 (March 2, 1918): 8.
Harlem, home of many of the more confrontational blacks, supported fighting for France largely, as historians Arthur Barbeau and Florette Henri argue, because the widely read blacks in the Northern cities, “…felt France had been liberal in its attitude toward colored peoples.”

Likewise, better-informed and more progressive Northern blacks were inclined to see their participation as a vital stepping-stone in their quest for equality; as was the case when they embarked on their northward migration.

The African American confidence in change was checked by the entrenched American racism and the ongoing and vocal efforts of its supporters to ensure its perpetuation. African Americans supporting the war, optimistic about how they would be treated in France, were astute to the resistance of white Americans to change. Despite the harsh lessons of history, blacks were hopeful that the United States government would shield them from overt racial hostilities while they served as soldiers. Yet reality often disheartened such confidence as blacks read articles in papers like The Cleveland Advocate of one Southern white soldier saying, “Wait till we get these niggers over in France, where they can’t reach the War Department with their ‘damned appeals’ and we’ll give ‘em hell.”

Yet the mere perception of better treatment while in France and participation in the war unleashed blacks’ optimism. The forward-thinking, sanguine attitude of African Americans, mired in varying degrees of collective hopelessness in the pre-war years, saw prospects not entrenchment. As one African American paper announced:

We rest confident that our men, when they step foot upon foreign soil, will give a good account of themselves. France has no segregation laws which crowd her patriots, her fighting men into Jim-Crow cars. France has no laws which confer upon traitors rights and privileges denied to her patriots. France is a free, open

45 Barbeau and Henri, Unknown Soldiers, 6.
country, and stepping foot upon her soil for the purpose of fighting…the Colored soldier will stand his ground. But what a sad commentary on the Americanism and patriotism of the man who prates about giving ‘the niggers hell when we get them over in France.’

Other blacks, not necessarily seeing opportunity in black involvement, believed that serving in the war may not ultimately be their decision to make and they should, when given the chance, use the war to convey black patriotism through enlisting rather than waiting to be drafted. Proactive arguments were influenced by the publishing of white editorials like one in the *Columbus Ledger* suggesting, “…drifting Negroes should be rounded up and those fit for service be sent to France and all others placed under guard and forced to get busy on the southern farm.” For African Americans, especially in the South, the mere mention of forced labor harkened back to the days of the Black Codes, or worse yet-- slavery. Those images furthered a black willingness to enlist or when drafted, readily join the military. For the blacks newly arrived in the North, such messages conjured-up all too recent memories of the South, stimulating a similar urge to enlist and not look back.

The expectation that war would bring change for the African Americans was heralded not just by black leaders in black publications, but also by major national newspapers. *The New York Times* speculated that change was imminent for the Southern blacks and their northward migration would slow as a result. In a January 21, 1918 editorial, the *Times* opined, “If this change does come, and comes quickly, it will do much to keep the Negro where by nature and endowment he is most at home, where he is best understood, and in reality where he is best liked, and where his best service and highest happiness lie.” Arguably, many blacks’ disagreed that

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47 Ibid., 8.
their happiness was tied to the South, but more poignantly, the comment suggests the attentiveness of white Americans to the potential the war held for the African American community. Typically, the “changes” that transpired took the form of “work or fight” laws, aimed at forcing African Americans to work at low wages determined by whites or being forced into military service. African American leaders like Du Bois were offended by the implementation of such vagrancy laws and responded that black patriotism through enlistment would prove such measures unnecessary. The Southern white views on race may not have been changing in ways the Times editorial indicated, but the attitudes and aspirations of African Americans throughout the nation were.

If the fear of forced labor, expectations of better treatment in France, or optimistic proclamations of what the war would yield to black Americans’ were not enough to inspire a rally to the war effort, a more direct appeal to service was employed. Captain Napoleon Marshall, an officer in Harlem’s 15th National Guard, when asked, “What has that uniform ever got you?” replied indignantly, “Any man who was not willing to fight for his country was not worthy to be one of its citizens.” The link between military service and citizenship dated back to the organization of black units in the Civil War. To the African American community, the Fourteenth Amendment represented a hollow promise that black America judged insufficient at protecting their citizenship. Yet again, fighting for America resonated as a surer path to the privileges of citizenship. The African American community was caught-up in the rhetoric of their leaders-- many of whom articulated their expectation that through participation in the war

50 Barbeau and Henri, Unknown Soldiers, 10.
the long-sought after white recognition of black citizenship would be accelerated. Moreover, black leaders felt that if the black contribution in the war, both on the home-front and in France were ignored, it could enhance their rendering of America’s hypocrisy.

Du Bois implored blacks to join the military and to work hard to support the war effort on the home-front despite what he conveyed as a “…deep sympathy with the reasonable and deep-seated feeling of revolt among Negroes at the persistent insult and discrimination to which they are subject and will be subject even when they do their patriotic duty.”53 Booker T. Washington’s nephew Roscoe Conkling Simmons echoed the calls to action saying, “…where he commands one to go I shall go,” and was joined by a chorus of influential black leaders who, by and large, saw participation in the conflict similar to Du Bois. In his Crisis editorial, “Close Ranks,” Du Bois wrote:

This is a crisis for the world…we of the colored race have no ordinary interest in the outcome. That which the German power represents today spells the death to the aspirations of Negroes and all darker races for equality, freedom and democracy. Let us not hesitate.54

Du Bois pressed on with his convictions, contending that blacks could demand, “…the right to serve on the battlefield …the right of our best men to lead troops of their own race in battle…and immediate end to lynching, [and] equal rights in all public institutions and movements.”55 Joining Du Bois was William Pickens, whose dramatic speeches following the war included the words, “[when]…the black man went to France it was with a desire to better conditions at home. When a black American shot a German in France he hoped he saw a lycner

53 Crisis, May 1917, 59.
54 Crisis, July 1918, 111
55 Crisis, June 1918, 59-62.
die a spiritual death in the United States. It is true that the Negro thrust his bayonet harder in Europe when he thought of conditions in Georgia.”56 The majority of black leaders’ argued their priority was to serve their nation and to be patient until the conclusion of the effort to see what would be yielded on the subject of racial equality America.

The French, too, entered their plea to African Americans to enlist in the war effort. In March of 1918, the Cleveland Advocate published “A Message from France,” which included, “There is hope for Colored Americans, not in a revolution after the war, but in EVOLUTION hastened by the war.”57 In their time of great need and yearning for the arrival of fresh troops, the French actively propagated the African Americans’ perceptions of French racial tolerance. The anti-German propaganda and stirring calls by President Wilson to “make the world safe for democracy,” satisfied white America, but the image of fighting for the French principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity aroused black America. To black Americans, the French causes in 1789 were to be their own. As William Pickens wrote of the French in the Cleveland Advocate, “You are the last liberal spirit left in the white world today. More than English, German, or American…Your liberalism is your providential strong point…”58

The German propaganda machine was well-aware of the ambivalence of African Americans and sought to undermine their growing support for the war. Disseminating messages intended to heighten black awareness of their plight in America, German propaganda efforts threatened the effort of both the United States government and the pro-war African American leaders to encourage black support prior to and during the war.59 In actuality, the German propaganda

56 Jonathan Rosenberg, How Far the Promised Land, 63.
57 “Message from France,” Cleveland Advocate, 4, iss. 43 (March 2, 1918): 8.
59 For the impact of this German propaganda effort, see Mark Ellis, Race, War, and Surveillance: African Americans and the United States Government during World War I (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001).
effort in the United States did little to steer African Americans away from draft compliance and from expressing their loyalty to the United States. Further, as many African Americans noted, they hardly needed Germans to point-out American racial injustices. Ironically, the German propaganda effort did have an impact on the already apprehensive white Southerners who used this imaginary threat as an excuse to over-react, question black loyalty, re-organize the Ku Klux Klan, and demand that the government closely monitor signs of racial unrest generated in the African American community. During the war, propaganda again acted to demoralize African American efforts at improving their standing among white America. In a *New York Times* article this situation was articulated by J.W. Johnson, a delegate at a NAACP conference on the issue,

…the propaganda sought to destroy the good feeling existing between the colored people and the French, and warned against placing faith in stories of any mistreatment by the French because…Frenchmen had always been friendly to the colored races and were welcoming them now in a fight against a common enemy.

Clearly black leaders were outspoken in their expectations of better treatment following the war as a way to garner support for the war. Yet the prospects Du Bois had in mind for blacks through their service were secondary to his declarations that the war was for global liberty. He wrote,

We urge this despite our deep sympathy with the reasonable and deep-seated feeling of revolt among Negroes at the persistent insult and discrimination to which they are subject and will be subject even when they do their patriotic duty.

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60 Ibid., 5-6, 11, 17, 28-30.
62 *Crisis*, June 1917, 59.
Just months prior to America’s decision to enter the war, the NAACP held a two-day conference in Washington, D.C. which included delegates from other black organizations. Among the attendees were over seven-hundred black activists expressing their collective belief that the war might serve as a mechanism for change. At the conclusion of the conference, a set of resolutions stated that the cause of the war ultimately resided in European exploitation of the “darker and backward people” of the world and that true world peace would not be achieved until democratic governments established by the consent of the people eliminated race hatred.63 African Americans’ purpose in the war, according to Du Bois, was removing Africa from the spoils of war and service not as warriors but as mentors for the subjugated people of Africa.64 But Du Bois also stressed that the war, especially for African Americans, was about patriotism.65 He believed that the expectations blacks had regarding greater justice at home could only come about if their service was cloaked in the essence of pure patriotic duty.

No matter how much the patient wait-and-see approach was trumpeted, the question persisted: would the rhetoric of America’s leaders, both black and white, become reality for African Americans in the post-war years? Enlisted soldier Kelly Miller wondered, “Will the Anglo-Saxon issue to him [the black] the warrant of immunities and privileges certifying that he is four-square with the dominant opinion of mankind, and therefore entitled to superior status?”66 Further, blacks’ favoring their participation in the war and indoctrinated by decades of racially motivated and inaccurate scientific “findings” and “observations,” believed their service would

65 Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought*, 34.
66 Miller, *Kelly Miller’s History*, 479.
begin to dispel such fallacies. As Miller wrote, “No American Negro who went to fight for humanity will return to America as the same physical being.”

Miller, an African American soldier succinctly expressed the bargain pro-war blacks embraced:

You asked for billions of dollars and millions of lives to be placed at your disposal for the purpose of carrying on the great conflict, and it was willingly granted. The people have willingly placed in your hands more power that has ever been exercised by any member of the human race and are willing to trust you in the use of that power. I am sure that they will grant this additional authority during the continuance of the present war in order to secure the unqualified patriotic devotion of all of the citizens and to safeguard the honor of democracy and the good name of the republic.

Not all black leaders shared Du Bois’ optimism of what black participation in the war would yield. Activists Claude McKay and Monroe Trotter questioned whether black participation would have any effect on ending discrimination in America. Trotter called Du Bois “a rank quitter of the fight for our rights” and suggested he had deserted and betrayed his race. Skepticism of fighting for “liberty” that they themselves did not enjoy irked many blacks. C.L. Threadgill-Dennis wrote in the black newspaper, *The San Antonio Inquirer,*

We would rather see you shot by the highest tribunal of the United States Army because you dared protect a Negro woman from the insult of a southern brute in the form of a policeman, than to have you forced to go to Europe to fight for a liberty you cannot enjoy.

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67 Ibid., 478.
68 Ibid., 494.
70 Quoted in Gary Mead, *The Doughboys*, 372.
Furthermore, joining a war whose primary participants, France, Great Britain, and Germany, subjugated and exploited much of Africa and harbored equally racist beliefs infuriated many African Americans. McKay pointed out that supporting the French colonial hegemony was ultimately supporting France’s domination in Africa. Convincing African Americans to fight for injustices on the world stage was problematic when, in many ways, those perpetuating those injustices African Americans would be fighting alongside.\textsuperscript{71} Coupled with the belief that seeking to rectify discrimination should begin at home, many blacks proved to be hesitant when it came to enlisting in any “moral crusade.” McKay’s rhetoric included denouncing the French as racist and seeking to dispel propagandistic inaccuracies of French egalitarianism and openness towards blacks.\textsuperscript{72}

In the South especially, the opinions of Du Bois and other vocal Northern black leaders and black publications were questioned and prompted one outspoken black Mississippian to write in a circular, “If we fight in this war time we fight for nothing…stick to your bush and fight not, for we will only be a breastwork or a shield for the white race. After the war we get nothing.”\textsuperscript{73} The “white person’s war” that some black intellectuals propagated clashed with the pro-war argument that the war was over defeating subjugation and enabling liberty, freedom, and democracy to flourish.\textsuperscript{74}

Asa Phillip Randolph and Chandler Owen, both Southern blacks who had emigrated to New York City, championed their brand of socialism and opposition to the war through the founding of the controversial newspaper, The \textit{Messenger}. In print and in frequent speeches, the two men

\textsuperscript{71} From Harlem, 93.
\textsuperscript{72} From Harlem, 93.
\textsuperscript{74} Mead, \textit{The Doughboys}, 372.
launched a relentless attack on the decision by American leaders to enter the war. The attacks principally sought to convince African Americans to shun participation in any efforts to support “white democracy.”75 Deemed, “the most dangerous Negroes in the United States” by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, the two activists were arrested in 1918 under the Espionage Act for interfering with the recruitment of troops.76 In The Messenger, the two demurred when the Wilson administration attributed African Americans’ demands for an end to racial prejudice to the German war propaganda. Further, they criticized the NAACP for failing to reject these accusations and voice the genuine “deep and dark [reasons]…though obvious to all who care to use their mental eyes.”77 The real propaganda of displeasure for blacks, according to Randolph and Owen was, “Peonage, disenfranchisement, Jim-Crowism, segregation, rank civil discrimination, injustice in legislatures, [and] courts and administrators.”78 According to those who ascribed to the views of The Messenger,

The only legitimate connection between this unrest and Germanism is the extensive government advertisement that we are fighting ‘to make the world safe for democracy,’ to carry democracy to Germany; that we are conscripting the Negro into the military and industrial establishments to achieve this end for white democracy four thousand miles away, while the Negro at home, through bearing the burden in every way, is denied economic, political, educational and civil democracy.79

Before enlisting, black activist Rayford Logan accepted this argument, believing that American industrialists were profiting from the war and that their form of preparedness was measured only in quantity of weapons and size of the army, rather than the key element to

76 Ibid., 427.
77 The Messenger, June, 1918.
78 The Messenger, June, 1918.
79 The Messenger, June, 1918.
success—“having the support of the civilian population.”

Logan argued that because of a “military policy of discrimination demoralized African Americans,” America lacked the crucial ingredient to wage a successful war. Logan supposed that if the priority of ending racial discrimination was addressed first, rather than as an outcome of the war, America would achieve victory not only on the battlefield, but also in living-up to its wartime rhetoric. He said,

Let the businessman take the lead by abolishing sweat shops and child labor…
Let us endeavor to secure the good will of the European nations instead of trying to filch every cent possible out of them. Let us lay aside prejudices & selfish interests & submerge all in the general good of the nation.

All the same, Logan was equally quick to criticize those preferring to accept the racial status quo, accommodate the white South, hail the war for democracy, and blindly fight in support of a “white man’s country.” Logan’s ultimate viewpoint, and his decision to fight, was eventually shared by much of the African American community—somewhere between the pro-war Northern intellectuals like Du Bois and the highly skeptical and belligerent tones of McKay, Randolph, and Owen.

As yet another alternative to the aforementioned black viewpoints on the war, some African Americans turned to Black Nationalism. Spearheaded by Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey, its followers believed that co-existence with the white community were proving to be increasingly futile. Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) criticized many aspects of white culture, venerated black culture, and encouraged blacks to move back to Africa. Although his elevation of African American culture proved contagious and dynamic, much of the black

80 Janken, Rayford Logan, 29.
81 Ibid., 29-30.
82 Ibid., 29-30.
83 Ibid., 29-30.
community rejected his other tenets which included opposition to the war and later his back to Africa movement. Still, Garvey’s approach, with its strong message of nationalism based on the segregation of the races, had a polarizing effect on the African American movement. If the majority of the African American community expected further integration as a possible outcome of the war, then Garvey and his supporters constituted a bona fide threat to such a prospect.

With the debate among black Americans reaching a crescendo and whites becoming increasingly fearful of a change in the status of blacks due to the war, the black community cautiously unified on the war issue. Many began to adopt the philosophy that participation could lead to changes, and non-participation would probably change nothing or make it worse. Also, most understood if white Americans’ past record of rewarding African Americans soldiers for their effort were any indication, the rhetoric would fall far short of reality. Eventually, virtually all the key voices of the African American community defended Wilson’s galvanizing calls to fight a war to save democracy but with the expectation of greater equal rights for America’s blacks. Further, despite German propagandists’ attempts to quell black patriotism by calling it a “white man’s fight,” and mocking America’s hypocritical leader’s language of making the world safe for democracy while mistreating its own black citizens, blacks identified themselves as patriotic Americans. Eventually, over 1 million African Americans registered in the Selective Service and more than 400,000 served in the Great War. Whether by enlisting or being drafted (in disproportionate numbers to whites) the African American men, as a whole, answered their nation’s call to arms and served with distinction throughout the war in the infantry, Cavalry, Engineer Corps, field artillery, coast artillery, Signal Corps, Medical Corps, Hospital and

84 Ibid., 152-153.
85 Janken, Rayford Logan, 32.
86 Scott, Scott’s Official History, 9-14.
Ambulance Corps, Aviation Corps, Veterinary Corps, and in Stevedore Regiments, Labor Battalions and Depot Brigades.  

The Decision of African Americans to Support the War Effort

The assumption that African Americans blindly embraced Du Bois’ views in “Close Ranks” requires some consideration. Even by simply analyzing figures such as black patriotism through enlistment and the purchasing of Liberty Bonds, perception of African American support for the war can be skewed. The black community actively participated in war bond efforts yet often failed to reach their quotas in many southern communities. What some falsely attribute to a lack of loyalty could be ascribed as much to low wages as to a lack of patriotism. The black newspaper writer R. Doyle Phillips in Ohio State Monitor sought to convey black patriotism on the home-front writing:

This world war has taught the Negro to give when it cost something to give. There can be no just complaint on the part of the superior race that the Negro has failed to give his means to help support the government. He has given of his means to Thrift Stamps, the War Chest, and the buying of Liberty Bonds, no inconsiderable sum, though for the most part their incomes are small; but notwithstanding they have made the sacrifice willingly, and have demonstrated the fact that they were as a race desirous of doing their bit for their country, in the great world war crisis. 

Yet buying war bonds as a display of their patriotism may not be the only reason blacks purchased Liberty Bonds. The purchase of government issued bonds was seen as a good business practice, a solid investment, and a way to avoid physical attacks; not uncommon for

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87 Ibid., 9-14.
88 “What the War Has Taught Concerning Men and Things,” Ohio State Monitor, 1, no. 27 (December 7, 1918): 1.
those resisting financial support for the war. But similar to the African Americans who joined
the military, financial incentives were trumped by the desire to prove loyalty and answer the call
of their leaders. W.E.B. Du Bois, who was not only instrumental in rallying blacks to join the
military, solicited the African American community to purchase War Saving Stamps. Believing
their efforts at home could also have an impact on ending racial injustices in America he wrote,
“If the Colored citizens of the country seize this opportunity to emphasize their American
citizenship by effective war activities, they will score tremendously. When men fight together
and work together and save together, this foolishness of race prejudice disappears.”

Proportionally, the African American manpower contribution was greater than if not equal to,
white America’s. In the first draft, about 31 percent of blacks who were called ended up
serving, compared to only about 26 percent of whites. Although blacks comprised only about
one-tenth of the population, the War Board drafted over one-seventh of eligible blacks. But in
the attempt to discredit African American fidelity to country, it was not uncommon to see
publicized examples of black disloyalty. In reality, the desertions of blacks was a third of the
total of white desertion and in each case it was often due to poor communication between
soldiers and their draft boards or the lack of understanding of the exemption feature of the law.
The Provost Marshal General Enoch Crowder reported to the Secretary of War in 1918,

With equal unanimity the draft executives report that the amount of willful
delinquency or desertion has been almost nil. Several describe the strenuous
efforts of the Negroes to comply with the regulations, when the requirements

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92 Ibid., 30.
were explained to them, many registrants travelling long distances to report in person to the adjutant general of the state.94

“The conviction resulting from these reports” said General Crowder, “is that the colored men as a whole responded readily and gladly to their military obligations once their duties were understood.”95

The resistance of the more passive Southern blacks, who were more inclined to avoid the draft, led the Bureau of Investigation and Military Intelligence Branch (MIB) to investigate reports of wide-ranging antipathy by Southern blacks during the war.96 Surely not all blacks “closed ranks” and all did not internalize the propaganda of President Wilson or their own black leaders. Yet throughout the war, the black community recognized the fact that many of their own were serving their nation in a time of need and thus shared in those soldiers’ hopes that upon the conclusion of the war, justice would be granted to their entire race. Through the purchase of war bonds, enlistment, and in their labor on the home-front, it can be surmised that the African American community, both in the North and South, displayed unquestionable devotion and determination which easily matched that of their white counterparts.

Recognition of the African American war effort on the home-front was sporadic. Yet the rare mention of it, such as in a main-stream news article, conveyed admiration for black compliance and patriotism. An article in Stars and Stripes entitled, “U.S. War Gardens Total 5,285, 000,” concludes by saying, “In the South alone more than 115,000 enrolled [in a government agricultural program] and produced food the value of which is placed at $4,500,000. Negro boys

94 Ibid., 112-113.
95 Ibid., 113.
raised a small fortune in crops.” The all too often overlooked contributions of blacks on the home-front included their efforts in factories, mines, and shipyards.

The impact of increased economic opportunities for blacks presented them with the chance to show that when “given a fair chance and sympathetic guidance in making the labor program they will respond enthusiastically.” The war further exposed the link between racial inequality and economic inequality. Blacks who had moved to the northern cities experienced a degree of economic equality which eroded some racial injustices. The opportunities were often in jobs with white employers and among white employees; leading to racial misunderstandings and fear by the workers that blacks will work for lower wages and take their jobs. The proletarianization of blacks from sharecroppers to wage earners, coupled with urbanization, initiated black labor organization which, in turn, orchestrated black action on race issues. In response, the Department of Labor held a number of conferences to promote unity in the workforce among the races and black laborers’ unified by forming their own “advisory committees” on labor issues. Largely absent before the war, the enhanced level of involvement by the federal government in labor issues for African Americans, including the appointment of a Director of Negro Economics to mobilize the African American labor force, was unprecedented, although temporary. More importantly, the expansion of local labor organizing especially among Southern blacks and the further racial integration of the workplace, created a vital economic and social imperative which the black community would build upon. The war economy produced a need for labor unity and efficient production on the home-front, resulting in a spirit of cooperation which elevated not only the economic standing, but also the self-image of the average African American worker.

97 “U.S War Gardens Total 5,285,000,” Stars and Stripes, 1, no. 33 (October 18, 1918): 1.
100 Ibid., 12.
101 Scott, Scott’s Official History, 462.
Further, the *laissez-faire* policy of the federal government on labor issues, especially on race relations, was at least temporarily curtailed as a result of the war-time economy. The precedent for the Federal Department of Labor to serve as an arbitrator on issues of discrimination in the workplace laid the groundwork for future government endeavors to protect workers, including blacks, from job discrimination.

Not unlike African Americans who contributed to the war effort on the home-front, those who enlisted in the military did so for a number of reasons including: a steady job, improved status among fellow blacks, regular pay, and like many white soldiers, wanting to defend their nation.\(^{102}\) The African Americans who enlisted headed off to war with some faith that America would forget its prejudices and with a conviction that if it did not it was unfit for a place among the leading nations of the world.\(^{103}\) The consensus among these blacks was generally, “Yes, white America, we shall fight for you, for our country, and for democracy-- but will you not grant us some of that democracy at home?”\(^{104}\)

Despite persistent arguments, the voices of those blacks who opposed conscription and enlistment were drowned out by those seeing the recruitment of blacks into the military as an empowering experience. The enraged voices in opposition to blacks fighting in the war, such as Monroe Trotter’s, were no match for the unruffled, more organized, rational, and calculating approach of black leaders like W.E.B Du Bois. The nascent civil rights movement, which up to that point was in continuous disorder, witnessed the galvanization of African Americans in a shared purpose. The war’s premise of expanding freedom shaped the African American

\(^{102}\) Barbeau and Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers*, 14.
\(^{104}\) *Guardian*, 215-216.
collective and guided the black community towards its most unifying endeavor since the Civil War. Black soldier and author Kelly Miller summarized this patriotic transformation,

> Everywhere the Negro dropped the mattock, left the ploughshare, poised himself at erect stature, passionately saluted Old Glory answered ‘Here am I!’ counted fours, and away! Pro-German cried: ‘white man’s war!’ Propagandist yelled: ‘Cannon fodder!’ Reactionary declared: ‘It must not be.’ The Negro burst the gate and entered the arena of combat in spite of all opposition to his service in honorable capacity under the United States government.105

While anxious black men enlisted and answered their draft call, the black community rallied to the cause, eager to prove themselves as worthy and patriotic citizens of America. Meanwhile, white America, from the Wilson Administration on down, had their own plans and expectations for black America.

White America’s Trepidations and the “Great Migration”

Concern over the involvement of African Americans in the war proved prevalent among many white Americans, especially in South. Many were unsure if arming blacks and sending them off to fight in a war for the “liberation” of subjugated peoples would threaten their hegemony at home. The dilemma for Southern white Americans is exemplified in three questions they asked themselves: Should both Southern white men and blacks stay out of the war and let the North fight it? Should Southern white men go off to fight and die while leaving the blacks behind? Should the Southern white men stay at home while blacks serve their nation with distinction?106 Hence, the fear of African American men staying behind, while white men

105 Kelly Miller, *Kelly Miller’s History*, 451-452.
106 Ibid., 455.
went off to fight and die, quelled much of the Southern white opposition to black service in the war. Recognizing the inevitability of blacks serving, many Southern whites shifted their focus to limiting the war’s impact on the Southern racial status quo. Some military training policies seemed to reflect those plans: weaponless training of black regiments, calls on the Wilson administration and War Department to station existing African American regiments inside American borders, and limiting African Americans to non-combat roles as laborers, dock workers and stevedores.\textsuperscript{107}

Frequent newspaper articles citing the gallantry and achievement, not to mention the “savage” fighting methods, of black colonial West African troops furthered white consternation over African American participation in the brutality and accolades of war. Reports of black colonial troops “full of a sacred frenzy, carried away in ecstasy…striking and killing, tearing eyes and flesh with steel, nail, and teeth,” perpetuated white anxiety over what “their” South could be subjected to at the conclusion of the war.\textsuperscript{108} White America’s perception of the French people’s openness on the intermixing of the races added to their fears. The French readiness to venerate blacks, such as in the case of a regiment of Senegalese troops, which became the most highly decorated unit in the French army, advanced the perception of the liberal French while clashing with the white Southerner’s views.\textsuperscript{109}

Many whites realized the influence the war could have on African Americans, understanding its potential to be, in fact, greater than in earlier conflicts. The impact of military service, as


\textsuperscript{109} Henri and Barbeau, \textit{Unknown Soldiers}, 18-19.
historian Eric Foner argues, “… has always been a politicizing and radicalizing experience.”

White’s expected African Americans to increase their levels of civic engagement, economic, political and social advancement, develop a new self-image, and reconsider the entrenched views of their position in society. The perceived radicalization of the African American and the rapid changes they demanded, unsettled the gradualism white America conveniently endorsed in the years prior to the war.

Most troubling to white supremacists was the image of a uniformed black, sanctioned to some degree by the federal government, trained to fight, and radicalized through contact with outspoken blacks and other more open-minded cultures. Exposing the young, impressionable, and determined African American men to French freethinking and French women, and then attempting to “put them back in their proper place” upon their return, represented enormous threats to white America’s conception of “national purity.” To many whites, any hopes of retaining the racial status quo would be lost with the enhancement of black manhood through sexual contact with white women.

Economic considerations also played a role in the strong white opposition, especially among Southerners, to blacks serving in the war. In 1914, two-thirds of the cultivated land in the South was tilled by blacks as sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and small farmers. Coupled with the “Great Migration” north and its lure of higher paying jobs, the fear of a continued exodus of blacks from their region alarmed Southern whites.

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110 As quoted in Reich, “Black Texans,” 1484.
At the same time, the migration of blacks to Northern cities created shock waves that were felt not just in the Jim Crow South. Beginning around 1914, when war engulfed Europe, the flow of immigrants to America declined precipitously. In 1919 only 110,600 immigrants from Europe came to America.\textsuperscript{114} The reduction of immigration and stimulation of the manufacturing sector, paved the way for a surge of job-seeking Southern blacks to Northern and Midwestern cities. Coupled with the decimation of the cotton crop by the boll weevil, the emigration from the South approached 400,000 by 1920.\textsuperscript{115} Tempted by better pay, blacks were also drawn to the perception of less racism among the Northerners. Although life in cities brought higher risk of disease, overcrowding, racial tension and competition for jobs, Southern blacks who relocated often experienced economic and social gains.\textsuperscript{116} The combination of the economic improvement and the perception of greater equality and status prompted one Mississippian to write home,

\begin{quote}
I was promoted on the first of the month I was made assistant to the head carpenter when he is out of the place I take everything in charge and was raised to $95 a month…I should have been here 20 years ago. I just began to feel like a man.\textsuperscript{117}
\end{quote}

Whites in the dogmatic South, witnessing the alarming loss of their labor force to northern factories and the war, recognized a need to improve conditions for the African Americans. Realizing perhaps too late the need for a change in their approach, a Greenville, South Carolina newspaper admitted,

\begin{quote}
The truth might as well be faced, and the truth is that the treatment of the Negro in the South must change or the South will lose the Negro. We have not made it
\end{quote}

\begin{thebibliography}{117}
\bibitem{114}Henri, \emph{Bitter Victory}, 7.
\bibitem{115}Levine, \emph{Social Issues in American History Series}, 144.
\bibitem{116}Foner, \emph{The New American History}, 325-327.
\bibitem{117}Ibid., 145.
\end{thebibliography}
worth their while to stay with us. We are being vigorously reminded that they
should have been better taught, better housed, better fed, and better paid.118

The African American newspaper the *Cleveland Advocate* reported in April of 1918,

If the war has accomplished nothing else of a constructive character, it has
awakened the South to the necessity of giving the Negro a squarer deal… We
shall see less race discrimination in the South hereafter because the migration of
Negroes to Northern industrial plants … has demonstrated to Southerners how
dependent the South is on Negro labor. The South is now willing to do almost
anything within reason to keep us there.119

The feared loss of manpower combined with a return of more militant and expectant blacks
serving their nation in its time of need, swelled Southern unease. In a book review of Stephen
Graham’s, *The Soul of “Jim Crow”*, the impact of the migration on both the North and the South
was obvious,

The economic change is manifested outwardly, so far by the exodus from the
South and the race riots in the North. Since Negroes are not wanted on equal
terms in trades unions they can come north as under-bidders, if not strikebreakers.
Economically the loss of so much labor in turn affects the South in a way that
needs no explanations.120

The new black journalism served as a mechanism of propaganda, disseminating the message
of greater opportunity and equality in the North. The outspoken Robert S. Abbot in perhaps the
most radical African American publication, the *Chicago Defender*, opined,

The same factories, mills and workshops that have been closed to us, through
necessity are opened to us… prejudice vanishes where the almighty dollar is

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119 “South Treats Race Better Since War,” *Cleveland Advocate*, 4, iss. 51 (April, 27, 1918): 8.
concerned…let us make the most of this opportunity…that has opened because it is expedient. 121

Despite tangible gains, this equality often proved to be more illusory than real. The racial animosities of Northerners, long established in their nativist past and treatment of immigrants was unleashed on the black migrants. Race riots in 1917 in Philadelphia, New York, and Newark, along with violent clashes between blacks and whites in St. Louis and Chicago, were ugly reminders that the North and Midwest were not nearly as enlightened as many blacks’ supposed.

Yet during the war years, the race dynamic in America began to change. The war afforded greater value to all American citizens, especially the majority of blacks who occupied the lower strata of the socio-economic structure. The cities fostered a higher degree of solidarity among the African American community, especially in comparison to the vast distances between black farmers in the rural South. The increased density of black settlement in cities gave rise to an expanding black press and to black organizations. The prominence of the National Urban League grew with branches in forty-eight cities. 122 In the two decades following World War I, the number of chapters of the interracial NAACP increased from fifty to over five hundred and became a nationwide political force. 123 In New York City, in July 1917, the silent march of over 15,000 African Americans protesting against lynching and segregation could not have happened only a decade earlier. 124 Because of the war, more militant African Americans were gathering in cities, organizing, protesting, planning, and ultimately conveying an entirely new message--America’s injustices had to be given more than just lip-service. Paradoxically, America needed

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121 Quoted from Werstein, A Proud People, 112.
123 Ibid., 125.
124 Henri, Bitter Victory, 12.
the African Americans to unite in the cause of the war, yet in the process, African Americans united because of the war. As Steven A. Reich states in “Soldiers of Democracy: Black Texans and the Fight for Citizenship,”

By migration in search of more favorable economic and political climes, by withholding their labor, by defying the draft, by serving in the military, and by organizing NAACP branches, blacks waged a political struggle that contested not only exploitive working conditions but segregation and disenfranchisement as well.125

America’s white community struggled with the implications of the war’s impact on black Americans, and the venom found in letters to draft boards such as black Tennessean Private Sidney Wilson’s of the 368th Infantry resonated in their minds.

Dear Sir,

It afoads to the soldier boys wich you have sint so far away from home a great deal of pledger to write you a few lines to let you know that you low-down Mother Fuckers can put a gun in our hands but who is able to take it out? We may go to France but I want to let you know that it will not be over with until we straiten up this state. We feel like we have nothing to do with this war, so if you all thinks it, just wait until Uncle Sam puts a gun in the niggers hands and you will be sorry of it, because we is show goin to come back and fight and whip out the United States…So all we wants now is the amanation, then you all can look out, for we is coming.126

This letter, handed to the Justice Department for investigation, resulted in a ten-year sentence of hard labor for its author, but its message was not uncommon in other complaints by black

126 “Capt. G. H. Hill” to H.B. Everett, April 27, 1918, MID File, 10218-145, RG 165.
In the wake of race riots in July 1917 in St. Louis and a mutiny of the 3rd Battalion of the 24th Infantry in which black soldiers opened fire on civilians in Houston, leaving sixteen whites dead, the United States Government took these threats seriously. These two events were instrumental in the shaping of a more concerted action on the part of the federal government to act on race issues, at least during the war.

Parts of black America became openly hostile as they saw white resistance take on new levels of viciousness. Fearing open insurrection throughout the South in particular, the Wilson administration began a continuous dialogue with prominent black leaders, established an intelligence gathering department to monitor black unrest, and appointed a black man and gradualist, Emmett J. Scott, as confidential advisor to the War Department on black affairs. Yet tensions remained high, and Northern newspapers like The New York Times and William Randolph Hearst’s American concurred; black demands for radical changes would be a certain by-product of the war and bloodshed would result if more decisive action was not taken. These assumptions by whites and blacks alike set the nation on a collision course as black self-image and ambition ran up against white hostility and misgivings.

Yet other prominent whites were beginning to come to the defense of African American troops. Just one month after a July, 1917 riot in East St. Louis, at a conference in New York City, Samuel Gompers, head of the American Federation of Labor (A.F.L.) insinuated that the black strike-breakers “got what they deserved.” In response, ex-president Theodore Roosevelt immediately crossed the stage saying to Gompers, “Murder is murder, whether white or black. I

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127 Ellis, Race, War and Surveillance, 91.
128 Ibid., 46.
129 Ibid., 38-41, 46-47.
130 Slotkin, Lost Battalions, 442.
will never stand on any platform and remain silent and listen to anyone condoning the savage
and brutal treatment of Negro strike breakers.”

Despite the acknowledgment of the value of African Americans to the war effort, the Wilson
Administration and the War Department attempted to suppress white anger and their fear of
black liberation. To begin with, black enlistees were confined to just four regular Army
regiments, and after two weeks filling these regiments, further black enlistment was closed-
off. Likewise, the government took action to put black units under white officers, dragging
their feet on training black officers and stationing black troops only within the United States.
Outspoken white leaders initially sought to exclude blacks from service in Europe, with
Secretary of War Newton Baker and Congress capitulating only after a concerted effort by the
NAACP and an assurance to Southern white congressmen that the highest ranking black officer,
Colonel Charles Young, would not be put in command of a black division. Continued
pressure by the NAACP, the desperate situation in France, and the racial unrest at southern
training facilities forced the army to abandon its plans of using black soldiers only in non-combat
roles and created two combat divisions, the 92nd and 93rd. Still, most blacks (80 percent) served
in segregated units with white officers and worked in the Services of Supply (S.O.S.) as
stevedores, cooks, laborers, and other low-level non-combat positions. Only after substantial
lobbying did Secretary of War Newton Baker relent and establish an officer training school for
African Americans. Yet the fear of trained black officers who could command white troops

132 Ibid., 27.
133 Henri, Bitter Victory, 16, 30.
134 Ibid., 21-26.
135 Ibid., 28-30.
and the potential of a new black self-confidence emerging among these officers, kept fearful whites determined that the program not succeed.¹³⁷

Some high-ranking members of the military favored the recruitment of African Americans. General Pershing saw blacks as a way to fill manpower requirements, supply a ready source of labor to tackle army logistics including unloading ships and building linkages, and, if necessary, fight on the front-lines in a war that was bleeding Europe dry. When asked the question if he had always favored the recruiting of African American soldiers, Pershing replied,

Yes, of course I want[ed] colored men. Aren’t the colored men American citizens? Can’t they do as much in the line of fighting, as much work, as any other American citizens? I was raised in a town where three-fourths of the people were colored: I had a black mammy and I was proud of it, and she was proud of me and used to say so. I used to wrestle with a colored boy…and he used to throw me about as often as I threw him. I commanded a colored troop during the Spanish war and I was glad to be with a colored regiment…They did splendid work then and they are going to do splendid work now.¹³⁸

Again it was the necessities of the war and the organization of African Americans at home which forced the hand of government to act and for white Americans to grudgingly accept these changes. White America was being driven to take action on the race issue, and some were beginning to see not only the necessity of fairer treatment of African Americans but also to see the decency of it as well.

Training of the African American Soldiers

The elevation in discrimination which many blacks hoped to see ebbing as they entered the military was staggering, yet not without precedent. As historian Kenneth Janken states, “Echoing the dominant sentiment in the South, the army made it clear that whether or not African Americans wore military uniforms, the United States was still a white man’s country.”

The poor training received by black soldiers, the discrimination and lopsided treatment by the Draft Board, the supplies allocated to African American divisions, and the recurrent banishment of black soldiers from opportunities provided by service organizations like the YMCA were especially glaring. Nonetheless, black soldiers like the outspoken Osceola E. McKaine of Sumter, South Carolina and a first lieutenant in the Buffalo Regiment, conveyed,

I am eager for the fray. Death does not matter, for it will mean life for thousands of my countrymen or for my race, for right must triumph. I’m not apprehensive for the future of my people in the States, for the free allied nations of the world will not condone America’s past treatment of her colored citizens.”

African Americans, accustomed to discrimination and abuse, looked to the war as their opportunity for liberation.

Since the decision was made to recruit and later draft African American troops, racist white Americans opposing black soldiers in the U.S. military, shifted their efforts to curtailing any form of integration in the ranks. Using the guise of protecting blacks from altercations stemming from white troops who opposed serving alongside blacks, one white Alabaman wrote to his

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Senator, after first establishing his credentials as a “friend of the negro” and having a Negro “in my home”:

... [The Secretary of War] does not know the spirit of the young white men of the South; neither does he understand the American Negro. I now write in the interest of the negro [sic], as well as I do in the interest of the white people; and in the interest of humanity…if the negroes [sic] and white men are placed in the same camp for soldier training, there will be bloodshed and much of it and no man can prevent it. If Secretary Baker thinks he can have both groups trained in the same camp, he will find out his mistake, when it is too late. The camps should not be located in the same community…if you can induce that War Secretary to change his mind…you will surely have done more for this Government, and Alabama, than all others combined.141

To some degree, the author of this letter, John W. Inzer was correct in his prognostication of unrest between blacks and whites in the training camps. Of the many concerns white Americans had over any form of integration, and however much it was cloaked to sound race-neutral, their conviction that African Americans would make strides towards equality as a result of the war, ranked the highest. Further, whites worried that the gains African Americans would make would be at the expense of whites, lowering the morale of white American soldiers experiencing the transformation first-hand. Yet as much as the government attempted to honor the strong Southern white desire to keep white and black soldiers separated and despite the reports of unrest in training camps between the races, it was inevitable that the two groups came into situations that often put blacks on an even footing with whites. As the two worked together towards a common purpose, trained and fought together, and shared hospital wards, peaceful interracial

relationships began to emerge.\textsuperscript{142} The complexity of the racial relationships within the army did not necessarily foster significant change through greater integration, but the impracticability of the type of segregation which existed in much of the South proved to be increasingly difficult.

Yet even without any hope of full-scale integration between black and white troops, the marshalling of African American troops and putting them under the care of the national government, as soldiers of the nation, the effect on their attitude was immediate.

As the trains from the South brought the men into the camps during the bleak days of November, 1917, they were a spectacle to behold. Hundreds coming directly from the cotton and corn fields or the lumber and mining districts---frightened, slow-footed, slack-shouldered, many underfed, apprehensive, knowing little of the purpose for which they were being assembled and possibly caring less---the officers but recently from the training camp received them.\textsuperscript{143}

The amalgamation of African Americans in the training camps from different geographic regions, social and economic backgrounds, and education levels was the beginning of the first true nationalization of the American black experience. The integration of blacks from all walks of life, all embarking on a life-changing experience together, provided an important building-block in the civil rights movement in America’s black community.\textsuperscript{144}

The formation of training facilities exclusively for black officers played a significant role in how African Americans viewed the war effort. The training of only the most qualified blacks, their commissioning up to the rank of captain, and honoring them with the recognition and authority to command troops, lifted the spirits of the African American community. Joel Spingarn, New York Progressive and chairman of the NAACP, who was instrumental in the push

\textsuperscript{142} Jennifer D. Keene, \textit{Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America} (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 85-91.
\textsuperscript{143} Scott, \textit{Scott’s Official History}, 78.
\textsuperscript{144} Keene, \textit{Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America}, 83-85.
for the creation of a black officer training facility, while addressing the African American community wrote,

It is of highest importance that the educated colored men of this country would be given opportunities for leadership. You must cease to remain in the background in every field of national activity, and must come forward to assume your right places as leaders of American life. All of you cannot be leaders, but those who have the capacity for leadership must be given the opportunity to test and display it.\textsuperscript{145}

Du Bois, who agreed with Spingarn, and also blinded by the hyper-nationalist passion of the war, failed, as historian Chad Williams asserts, “to fully appreciate how, for most African Americans, loyalty to the country in a time of war did not dictate an abdication of democratic principle on the questions of civil rights.”\textsuperscript{146} The training of the best and the brightest of the African American men as officers in the United States Army was a way to further the goals the war presented for African Americans. By the end of the war, over a thousand black officers had commanded and led African American troops, only to be, on arrival home, discharged of their duty despite a generally adequate, and in some cases, exceptional, performance in the war.\textsuperscript{147} Despite the improvement in War Department’s record on race issues throughout the course of the war, the African American community’s aspirations were vanquished when the government failed to make permanent the “spirit of fairness and justice for which the army is renowned.”\textsuperscript{148}

Organized in June, 1917, the Des Moines Camp began the training of over twelve-hundred of the most educated and dedicated men of the African American community. By August, Colonel C.C. Ballou, of the War College and a man with strong racial beliefs remarked,

\textsuperscript{145} As quoted in Miller, \textit{Kelly Miller’s History}, 455.
\textsuperscript{146} Williams, \textit{Torchbearers of Democracy}, 40-41.
\textsuperscript{147} Williams, \textit{Sidelights on Negro Soldiers}, 65-67.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 67.
This is the first opportunity in his [African Americans] history to prove on an adequate scale his fitness or unfitness for command and leadership... Let any man who doubts the colored men’s patriotism go to Fort Des Moines and see men who have given up professions, business and homes in order to learn to defend their race. Let any man who doubts the colored man’s fidelity and loyalty come... and revise his opinions on what he will there learn of the spirit that has stood unswervingly behind the commanding officer in every decision that he has been called upon to make, even though that decision involved sore disappointment and shattering of hopes.149

On November 11, 1917, and much to the surprise of both whites and blacks, seven hundred black officers received their commissions from President Wilson, including thirteen captains.150 Not only had the African American community offered-up their “best and brightest” who were able to survive a multitude of degradations, but their assignments to various camps resulted in few instances of white reluctance to accept the authority of black officers.151 Blacks were entering the military, proving their loyalty, achieving positions of leadership, and in some cases, experiencing levels of equality unmatched in the history of the United States.

Yet, in many training camps, the hesitant white Americans’ actions to curb the enthusiasm of the black community took shape immediately. The most appalling form of discrimination and racism experienced by black troops came at the hands of the brutal white officers, often selected from and serving in, regions of the Deep South.152 The treatment of the black 15th Infantry, New York National Guard (later part of the 93rd Division) was especially ruthless, but by no means unique. Forced to train in Spartanburg, the decision caused a storm of protest from the citizens of the South Carolina town. The Spartanburg Chamber of Commerce drafted resolutions protesting the training of African American troops near their town. The resolutions, however,
held less weight than the exigencies of the war and the 15th Negro Infantry began training at Camp Wadsworth. Spartanburg’s Mayor, J.F. Floyd’s reaction was emblematic,

I was sorry to learn that the Fifteenth Regiment has been ordered here, for with their Northern ideas about race equality, they will probably expect to be treated like white men. I can say right here that they will not be treated as anything except Negroes. This thing is like waving a red flag in the face of a bull, something that can’t be done without trouble.153

Backlash against the increasingly more outspoken and demonstrative African Americans, especially those from the North, were included in Emmett Scott’s report:

Spartanburg is a small Southern city which closely follows what are usually regarded as Southern traditions and prejudices in the treatment of the Negro. Some of its citizens rather felt that something was needed to let the jaunty Negro soldiers from New York ‘know their place.’154

Yet, the anticipated "tragic consequences" did not materialize. There were instances of local stores refusing to serve Negro customers which were, in turn, boycotted by some of the white soldiers. The Army, with its military needs far outweighing the need to push racial harmony in the South responded, “…it would be futile for the military authorities to attempt to regulate the customs of the country, and that the situation would simply have to be accepted.” Likewise, the Army, in order to alleviate clashes between the local whites and black soldiers was asked to “explain to the Negro soldiers the difference between South Carolina and New York City.”155 Any attempts by the military to gradually integrate blacks into mainstream white society were weakened by a resilient white population intent on maintaining their dominance. Yet as some of the white citizens of Spartanburg sought to invoke strict racial segregation and intolerance,

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154 Scott, Scott’s Official History, 79.
others attended concerts performed by the vibrant Jim Europe and his all-black band, opened their businesses to black patrons, and spoke-out against old Southern attitudes.\textsuperscript{156} Realizing that even in such a hostile environment there was an opportunity to “educate” white Southerners, Colonel Jim Hayward explained to his men it was,

\begin{quote}
…an opportunity to compel the South to recognize the differences which people of the North already appreciated, simply by accepting the Spartanburg situation as an opening for the educated colored man to prove his moral worth as a citizen, by refusing to meet the white citizens upon the undignified plane of prejudice and brutality. [It was an opportunity] to win from the whole world respect for the colored races.\textsuperscript{157}
\end{quote}

In the Southern towns near military bases, citizen’s enacted tougher Jim Crow restrictions and in the North and Midwest, where Jim Crow was more of a custom than law, segregation increased.\textsuperscript{158} Ironically, one of the chief results of the Fifteenth’s visit to Spartanburg was some measure of respect in for the black soldier from their fellow white soldiers. For others, like Rayford Logan the humiliating experience had the reverse effect; instead of submitting to a continued acceptance of white hegemony, the Army training served as a catalyst for his later career as a black activist.

In the case of the 15\textsuperscript{th} Negro Infantry at Camp Wadsworth, the insults by both the officers and the local population of Spartanburg forced the entire unit, at the request of Colonel Hayward, to ship off to France with only twelve days of training.\textsuperscript{159} The degree of discrimination in training camps varied, and like the differing accounts from both blacks and whites, its extent is debatable. The budding support black troops received from fellow white soldiers was noteworthy, as one

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{156}{Nelson, \textit{A More Unbending Battle}, 37-39.}
\footnotetext{157}{Ibid., 38-39.}
\footnotetext{158}{See Bulletin No. 35 in Scott’s, \textit{Scott’s Official History}, 97-98.}
\footnotetext{159}{Levine, \textit{Social Issues in American History Series}, 143.}
\end{footnotes}
white soldier in Spartanburg said, “The colored soldiers are all right. They’re fighting with us for our country. They’re our buddies.” Following the war, Emmett Scott summarized, the experience of training on the African American troops and the actions by the government by concluding,

Reports of discrimination against colored soldiers because of race and color were heard upon all sides and at times the colored people were greatly exercised when alleged situations of a particularly outrageous character came to their ears. The morale of the race was at times lowered to a degree that was little short of dangerous. Prompt and vigorous action, however, on the part of officers high in command led to a correction of many of the evils complained of, and in this way countless episodes pregnant with the possibility of serious clashes and violent conflicts were happily adjusted and no end of trouble thus averted.

Still, as author Richard Slotkin, in his book Lost Battalions suggests, for the much maligned African American troops, the opportunity to get off American soil and transfer to France was liberation rather than an exile.

Despite the hardships, the diminishing expectations of military service, the disinclination of the United States Government to attend to racial issues, and the arousal of Northern racism, African Americans began to perceive a shifting racial dynamic. The African American community was at no point naïve in their belief that the changes they anticipated would come easily. In the moderate voice of his post-war manuscript of the trials and tribulations of African Americans during the war, Emmett Scott concluded,

It was unjust, but not strange, that there should be many attempts at discrimination against Negro officers and soldiers in many of the camps, particularly those in the South, and in other sections where white soldiers from the South were brought into contact with colored troops. Prejudice, based on race,

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161 Scott, *Scott’s Official History*, 92.
162 Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 139.
was something too deeply implanted in the mental fabric of an element of the American people, it seemed, to be overcome over night through any pressure the war might bring to bear. Clashes between white and colored soldiers happened North and South, after a sporadic fashion, but at no time were their clashes as general or persistent as to endanger the well-being of the Army as a whole.\textsuperscript{163}

Likewise, the variation in the treatment of African Americans is deserving of consideration. The effects of the war issued in a new era by accelerating economic, social and psychological changes in the African American community. As these changes were occurring at home, the tens of thousands of African American troops heading to France were poised to experience a radical shift in their way of thinking. As historian Adriane Lentz-Smith wrote in \textit{Freedom Struggles}, “In the early years before U.S. engagement, Du Bois realized, even as…others many not have, that the Great War had begun to touch African American lives long before it began to take any away.”\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{163} Scott, \textit{Scott’s Official History}, 93.
\textsuperscript{164} Lentz-Smith, \textit{Freedom Struggles}, 15.
African American Perceptions and Misperceptions of the French

Both during the onset of American involvement in the war and through their service during the war, African Americans entertained certain perceptions of the French people. The history of the perception of French openness on racial issues has its origins dating back to the antebellum era. In Louisiana, the children of black women and white men, known as “Octoroos”, were classified as black and not permitted to attend school. The sons of wealthy Creole and Octoroon women found France the one place they could attend school and be free of racial injustices.\footnote{Werstein, \textit{A Proud People; Black Americans}, 63-64.} The memories of these “blacks” being fully accepted into French society slowly filtered-down through generations and were a contributing factor to the impression of egalitarianism in French society.

French liberalism was furthered in the French belief that America’s treatment of blacks was reprehensible.\footnote{Brett A. Berliner, \textit{Ambivalent Desire: The Exotic Black Other in Jazz-Age France} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 42.} The French “civilizing” mission was in stark contrast to America’s subjugation, separation, and persecution of blacks.\footnote{Ibid., 46.} White Americans considered blacks to be lacking in intelligence, judgment, and civic or professional morals, vices which presented a constant danger and required severe reprimand.\footnote{Barbeau and Henri, \textit{The Unknown Soldiers}, 114-115.} War correspondents perpetuated the preconceptions of the French by writing,

Long previous to the war thousands of blacks from various States of Africa were in France, most especially Paris, at the universities, in business and in the better ranges of service. Everywhere and by all sorts and conditions of whites, they were treated as equals. During several visits to the French capital I, an American,
knowing full well the prejudices of whites of this country against the race, was amazed to see the cordial mingling of all phases of the cosmopolitan population of the French capital. Refined white men promenaded the streets with refined black women, and the two races mingled cordially in studies, industries, and athletic sports. White and black artists had ateliers in common in the Latin Quarter…”

Other war correspondents like Henry Berry echoed this sentiment rhapsodizing that the Frenchman was “not a savage, not a mere educated dog, but a human being…having the right to live and be happy in the beautiful world.” Black war journalist Ralph Tyler said the French were, “too liberty loving to deny freedom to even the darkest skin.”

The irony of African Americans going to France to fight among people who were more receptive to liberty and equality than a majority America’s white citizens and the president, was not lost on black soldier Kelly Miller,

So early in May of 1918 went up to sea, partly under their officers, 90,000 and more American Negroes, registered as of African descent, and drafted to do battle in France. It was sub-species against super-man, broad head against long head, flat nose against sharp nose, thick cranium against Hun helmet. It was this unprecedented synthetic group of black men sailing the sea of darkness on a mission concerning the vital interests of Englishmen and Americans who had misused them for centuries, and concerning beloved France, which laid the real claim for honor and recognition and equality for the American Negro.

Generally African Americans were mindful they would be entering a more liberal society in France. Widely-read black publications such as the *Messenger* and the *Crusader* expounded French values of democracy to the level of propagandized romanticism. The perception of

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169 L.W. Lightner, as Quoted in Miller, *Kelly Miller’s History*, 437.
171 “Ralph W. Tyler Writes of the Spirit of France,” *Cleveland Advocate* (October 26, 1918), I.
172 Miller, *Kelly Miller’s History*, 466.
French liberalism was likely exaggerated, but to blacks who had experienced mostly degradation in America, their reception by the French was indeed a liberating moment, and one not easily erased from their collective memory. Black soldiers saw the French as one of them, “noisy, excitable, lovable, and light-hearted.”¹⁷⁴

The perception of a France rich in democratic traditions and lacking of racial discrimination is what has been described as a Barthesian process of mythologization. Simply put, this is the belief that the media and other such image-makers help in the formation of myths through constructed images which, in turn, are so effective that they become embedded in popular culture. The prevailing images of French popular culture at that time was of a nation under siege, fighting for its survival, and fighting for democratic, liberal, and egalitarian principles.¹⁷⁵ Despite evidence to the contrary, especially when taking into account French colonial rule in Asia and Africa, the negative images which African Americans associated with the French paled beside those which were positive. Author Mark Whalan suggests that the association of France with democracy and egalitarianism was embedded in the culture of language. Because of this, he argues, the French practice of democracy through electoral and legislative methods was reinforced with a “consensus on democratic ideals within a nation akin to a democratic consciousness or style.”¹⁷⁶ The coexistence of both a practice in democracy and a national consciousness led not only the French to expound their liberalism, but to also convince African Americans of the same. For whatever reasons, and despite immeasurable evidence of racism among the French, African American soldiers perceived that they were entering into a populace that viewed race issues far differently than their own nation. The mythologizing of the French,

¹⁷⁴ Fabre, From Harlem to Paris, 140.
¹⁷⁵ See explanation and World War I reference to black perceptions in http://seacoast.sunderland.ac.uk/~os0tmc/culture/myth3.htm, accessed March 14, 2011.
¹⁷⁶ Whalan, “The Only Real White Democracy,” 782.
paired with lofty Wilsonian war aims, signaled both a new direction in America and a new opportunity. The words “making the world safe for democracy” struck a distinctive chord in the African American community.

Black writer Claude McKay, an outspoken critic of the war and familiar with France both before and after the war, disapproved of those propagandizing French liberalism; believing that the French hated colored people, acted culturally superior to America, and were hypocritical.\footnote{Fabre, \textit{From Harlem}, 106.} The inferior treatment of blacks by the French and their view of blacks as merely exotics were quite prevalent in their advertisements and pop culture.\footnote{Berliner, \textit{Ambivalent Desire}, 5-17.} Historian Adriane Lentz-Smith argues that the absence of Jim Crow in France was not because of a French belief in no color line, but because “the French were too busy drawing their\textit{ own} color lines - between colony and metropole.”\footnote{Lentz-Smith, \textit{Freedom Struggles}, 108.} Further, she adds, “That ideal France invoked by black soldiers and decried by white supremacists did not actually exist. Like its ally (The United States), France was mundane, flawed, and complex.”\footnote{Lentz-Smith, \textit{Freedom Struggles}, 108.}

The evident faults in African Americans’ reasoning were readily apparent when they considered French colonial rule in Africa and Indochina. But because of the comparatively little interaction most French citizens had with blacks, the result was similar to the nascent racism and subdued atmosphere of white supremacy that was prevalent in most of the northern United States before the war. American blacks purposely ignored this reality in favor of a more self-serving, albeit naïve, view of French racial tolerance.
How much of this impression was accurate is in many ways irrelevant. If blacks collectively perceived and absorbed a new sense of freedom, their experience in France would have a transformative impact. When contrasted to their treatment at home and by white soldiers’ determined to bring Jim Crow to France, the European experience was certainly uplifting. Black soldier Kelly Miller’s belief that “…the French ever invited the black man to a social world which the Anglo-Saxon denied him…,” typified the African American soldier’s viewpoint.\textsuperscript{181}

African American Troops Head to France

In mid-1917, black soldiers finished their abbreviated instruction for their mission. Their training was expedited in some cases to meet French demands for troops and avoid growing racial tensions in America. The French people readied themselves not just for the influx of manpower they desperately needed, but also for stricter American racial attitudes into their more tolerant society.

The French officers held none of the prejudices that African Americans faced in the U.S. Army. Many French officers and veterans previously commanded and fought alongside African troops in the French colonies and were well aware of the skills Senegalese and other African troops brought to the front. As author Bill Harris suggests, “Although the Americans were ambivalent about their black soldiers, the French knew exactly what they were getting, and they were pleased by prospect.”\textsuperscript{182}

\textsuperscript{181} Miller, \textit{Kelly Miller’s History}, 437. \\
\textsuperscript{182} Harris, \textit{Hellfighters of Harlem}, 32.
In an environment with far less bigotry, the African Americans quickly learned the use of French weaponry, French battle tactics, and rudiments of the French language. In a *Stars and Stripes* article with the subscript, “Shoulder Insignia Exemplifies Allegiance of Our Colored Troops with French Army,” the 93rd black infantry was, “… a friend in need for our ally and in most cases they became friends indeed, with every effort made to put them on equality…” Even the simple use of the word “Our” in the subscript, was a momentous step for a paper which readily allowed for the use of “nigger” in cartoons, jokes, and in an occasional news article. African American troops, although being “loaned” to the French, as in the case of the 93rd, were still “Our” troops, deserving of a degree of respect that often put them above most foreign fighters.

In June, 1917, the first United States troops arrived on French soil. As discrimination followed them overseas aboard segregated troop transport ships, in an interesting bit of irony, some of the black soldiers’ were issued Civil War-era uniforms due to shortages. As author Floyd Gibbons recalled in his book, *And They Thought We Wouldn’t Fight,*

But somewhere down in Washington, somehow or other, someone resurrected an old, large heavy iron key and this, inserted into an ancient rusty lock, had opened some long forgotten door in one of the government arsenals. There were revealed old dust-covered bundles wrapped up in newspapers, yellow with age, and when these wrappings of the past were removed, there were seen the uniforms of old Union blue that had been laid away back in ’65- uniforms that had been worn by men who fought and bled and died to save the Union, and ultimately free those early ‘black Americans’.  

Many of these first waves of soldiers arriving in France were several hundred African American stevedores assigned to labor details known as “Slave Battalions.” To many, the moniker

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"stevedore" came to mean a person physically or mentally unfit to fight. The word “stevedore” had a derogatory connotation. In the early drafts, hundreds of African Americans who met the physical qualifications for combat soldiers were turned-down because they could not meet the educational requirements. These men were usually transferred to stevedore battalions which had a rate of illiteracy in these ran from 35 to 75 percent. Of the over 200,000 African American troops that served in France, 80 percent performed non-combat duties. The labor-intensive unloading of ships often included 24-hour shifts, humiliating insults by white officers and M.P.’s, poor living conditions, and strict rules preventing interaction with the locals. What little praise this “muscle behind the Allied war effort” received came from the black press and from the French people. These often forgotten soldiers built airfields, cleared mines, unloaded ships, maintained roads and rail lines, served as medics, and drove the trucks that supplied the armies.

The reality of the African American perception of French equality was enhanced by their absorption and greater degree of integration into the French Army as an American fighting force under French command. General John Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force, promised the French four American regiments. He decided to give them the regiments of the 93d Division since the French had used French colonial troops from Senegal and had experience at training and employing black soldiers. The French high command was in no position to discriminate between Americans; their need for troops trumped any race inhibitions. The all-black 369th Regiment of New York was fully incorporated into the 16th and 161st French Infantry divisions. With this stunning decision, some African American

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188 Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris*, 49.
soldiers were largely integrated into white society, albeit the *French military* white society. Although the United States military suppressed the news of this event, once released, its significance cannot be understated. W.E.B Du Bois recognized its ramifications, “The [white] Americans were truly scared… Negroes and Negro officers were about to be introduced to French democracy without the watchful eye of American color hatred to guard them. Something must be done.”\(^{189}\)

Integrating African Americans with the French, a threat many whites felt surpassed the German threat, had begun in earnest. Although it could be argued that this was just a relatively small percentage of the total African American troops who served in the war, it had a significant impact. As in many cases both before and since, the granting of civil liberties to a few can be construed as extending those same liberties to the many. As the press reported the black soldier’s battlefield worthiness and their budding relationship with the French, African Americans’ feelings of equality via integration spread quickly. To many whites, concerned about such mixing and its long-term implications, the events of the war were the beginning to a slippery-slope that could lead to similar calls for greater integration of blacks into white society in America.

There was no consensus on how the black Americans would relate to the French nor how they would fare in battle. To the French military, the ‘*enfants perdus*’ were as if General Pershing had “…put the black orphan in a basket, set it on the doorstep, pulled the bell, and went away.”\(^{190}\) The French reaction was like that of an expectant mother; happy to take the child into her besieged home, train the child, and in the process instill a set of values vastly different than


those harbored by the abandoning parent. The budding relationship between the French and African American soldiers is expressed in a letter written by Colonel William Hayward shortly after the 369th reached France and began training with the French,

We have answered the first question [How would the French welcome the African American soldiers?] in a most gratifying way. The French soldiers have not the slightest prejudice or feeling. The poilus [sic] and my boys are great chums, eat, dance, sing, march and fight together in absolute accord. The French officers have little, if any feeling about Negro officers. What little, if any, is not racial but from skepticism that a colored man (judging of course by those they have known) can have the technical education necessary to make an efficient officer. However, as I write these lines, Capt. Napoleon Bonaparte Marshall and Lieut. D. Lincoln Reed are living at the French Officers' Mess at our division Infanterie School, honored guests. 191

The answer to the battlefield readiness question came soon afterward. African American troops were hastily sent into combat and considering their inadequate training, new equipment, strange officers, and communication difficulties, performed admirably. Colonel Heyward’s letter also confronted that subject as well,

The program I enclose gives you an idea of the way I've cultivated friendship between my boys and the poilus [sic]. You should have seen the 500 soldiers French and mine, all mixed up together, cheering and laughing at the show arranged while the Boche shells (boxcar size) went screaming over our heads. 192

French troops and officers alike were quick to praise the African American soldiers, citing their proficiency, devotion, technical skills, high morale, few complaints, and viewed them as General Garnier-Duplessix noted, “comparable to any French division.” 193 The American public was at first unaware of the degree in which African Americans were incorporated into the French

military. But following the awarding of two African American soldiers the *Croix de Guerre* with Palm for valor by the French military, the revelation of one of the darkest and best-kept secrets of the war took place-- African American units were “completely absorbed” into the French military. The accompanying *Stars and Stripes* article stated, “…that a German scout would have to come within an ear-shot and be something of a linguist to be able to report that the terrifying *soldat noirs* in that sector were not the long familiar French Colonials from down Morocco way.” The praise of the African American troops overshadowed the disclosure of a secret that some members of the General’s Headquarters (G.H.Q.) were oblivious. The greater degree of integration of African American soldiers into the French military, their relations with the French citizens, and the national praise of two of newest American heroes, both blacks from New York State, Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts, was the real news.

Now the secret is out and all the testimony from the French commanders and from the French folk of the village where they have been billeted is in praise of the *soldat noirs de L’Amerique*. They know what is to go over the top, to drop into German trenches under barrage and emerge with prisoners, to scour No Man’s Land every night even up to the Boche wire. There is nothing about No Man’s Land they don’t know, and it is their favorite joke and their great pride that unlike the white patrols, they do not have to make-up their tell-tale faces with lamp black before venturing on these excursions.

Throughout America, the word went out that African Americans were contributing on the front lines, capturing Germans, defeating the enemy, and effectively serving alongside white and blacks from all over the world.

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195 Ibid., 1.
196 Ibid., 1.
197 Ibid., 1,2.
The black press in America, in their unrelenting search to find inspiring news from the front, was pleased to report on any combat involving African Americans. In the black newspaper *Informer*, French praise of African American troops was a more common theme. Even more than newsworthy were letters like one from a white officer to his mother which cited black military prowess. In it he wrote,

> The stories we have heard about our troops give us all a thrill and you would be proud of them. A French officer said the other day that of all the troops he had ever seen in the line, barring none...the finest he had seen were the draft [ed] Afro-Americans; they are wonderful in the open warfare.198

Following one major battlefield action which culminated with two African American soldiers forcing the retreat of twenty-four Germans in a raiding party, the commanding French General reported to his superiors: “The American report is too modest. As a result of oral information furnished me, it appears that the blacks were extremely brave. This little combat does honor to the Americans.”199

Similar French praise was heaped on the many African Americans who served in the war as dock laborers, commending them for not only their behind-the-scenes efforts but also for their ability to withstand the most ruthless persecution by white American soldiers.200 Just days after the armistice in 1919, Secretary of War Baker addressed over 2,000 African American stevedores. As the troops ate their lunch in a half-finished warehouse, the secretary applauded the workers for their efforts, telling them how proud all Americans were of them, especially their own race.201 Baker’s tour included numerous stops to address all-black regiments, citing their

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199 “Two Black Yanks Smear 24 Huns,” *Stars and Stripes*, 1, no. 16 (March 24, 1918): 2.
201 “Mr. Baker Looks In,” *Stars and Stripes*, 1, no. 5 (March 8, 1918): 4.
dedication to the cause, the indebtedness of the nation, and how “…all of them would be marked men in their communities throughout their entire lives for the service they had rendered their country in time of urgent need.”

But it was from the French that the African American troops received the most decorations, basking in this rarefied air of appreciation. It is little wonder that many of the French remarked on the high morale of these soldiers despite the multi-front war they were fighting. African American troops knew that their actions must be exemplary and that the white-dominated American press would be looking for any chance to debase their performance as troops or while interacting with the French citizenry. The bonds forged between the French and African American troops were not only tangible but lasting.

French Citizens and African Americans

The relationship established between the African American troops and the French people was equally congenial. The initial fear and astonishment expressed by the French people evolved into an open embrace of the African Americans, welcoming them into their homes and encouraging their children to interact with them. “French children were treated with the greatest deference by the Negro soldiers, and as a result a real brotherhood was established.”

The French people, like the French army, were invigorated by the presence of American troops, and they took a special liking to the African American soldiers. In comparison to the often

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202 Ibid., 4.
203 Hunton, Two Colored Women, 217.
204 Slotkin, Lost Battalions, 47.
205 Janken, Rayford Logan, 41.
206 Charles H. Williams, Sidelights on Negro Soldiers (Boston: B.J. Brimmer Co., 1923), 73-74.
swaggering, condescending, and bigoted white American troops, the African American troops befriended the French and enthusiastically embraced their language and customs. In one instance, French villagers upon seeing white American troops replacing the black regiment, asked their mayor to request that the “true Americans” be sent back. During the early stages of American involvement in the war, African American troops freely associated with the French villagers, visiting local taverns, sharing music, and generally enjoying each other’s company. The French people’s sympathy for the plight of blacks in America led them to treat African Americans with respect, dignity, and acts of kindness. It is no wonder popular post-war black writers like Countee Cullen referred to France as a haven and a paradise for American Negroes. Two African American nurses, whose account of their time traveling with the A.E.F., provides some of the most authentic first-hand accounts of the experiences of black troops, wrote,

We learned to know that there was being developed in France a racial consciousness and racial strength that could not have been gained in a half century of normal living in America. Over the canteen in France we learned to know that our young manhood was the natural and rightful guardian of our struggling race. Learning all this and more, we also learned to love our men better than ever before.

French soldiers and citizens alike tended to favor the African American soldiers over the white Americans. This favoritism could be attributed to the comparatively few restrictions placed on white soldiers whose intermingling with French society increased the likelihood of situations leading to animosity. The much tighter restrictions on and the more concerted effort of

207 Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris*, 52.
208 Barbeau and Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers*, 142.
African Americans to act appropriately, both to garner respect and prevent harsh punishment, bolstered French partiality towards African Americans. In one incident, a group of French sailors assaulted the fair-skinned African American Rayford Logan and cursed the “sale Americain.” As Logan recalled, he grabbed one of the assailant’s hands and rubbed it on his hair. Realizing he was in fact African American, the sailors stopped their attack and apologized for thinking he was white.\(^\text{211}\)

Reports in the black press of the friendly French treatment of African Americans only enhanced the long-held perception by blacks on the home-front that their boys were fighting in a society they hoped Americans would emulate. Headlines like one in the \textit{Informer} entitled, “Negro Mayor in France,” grabbed the attention of black readers as it continued:

\begin{quote}
Lieut. Wm. Johnson, once an attorney at law, in Omaha now with Co. G, 366\textsuperscript{th} Infantry, in France. He has been mayor of several towns in France. His knowledge of French and legal ability served to a good advantage. One city had a population of over 10,000 where he was acting mayor. There is absolutely no color line in France- such a country is worth fighting for.\(^\text{212}\)
\end{quote}

Regardless of the accuracy of such a story, the black press in America utilized the printed word to disseminate their propaganda, often trumpeting the valor of their boys and the decency of the French. First-hand accounts of the perceptions of French impartiality circulated in black newspapers by means of printing letters African American troops sent home. In one such letter, following a description of the dangers on the battlefield, the soldier wrote,

\begin{quote}
The American colored soldiers are doing great work and deserve credit and respect from all when we get home. There is no difference in race with the French people and why such conditions cannot exist in the states I cannot see…\(^\text{213}\)
\end{quote}

\(^{211}\) Janken, \textit{Rayford Logan}, 41. \\
\(^{212}\) “Negro Mayor in French City,” \textit{Informer} 22, no. 5 (Nov. 1918): 1. \\
Praise in the everyday press for African American troops in battle, as laborers, and for their actions among the French populace, was less common. Yet as more news of African Americans being honored by the French, awarded the *Croix de Guerre*, and serving the war effort in multiple capacities, filtered back to the States, press coverage by major newspapers and the military’s *Stars and Stripes* was unavoidable. Lauding the African American effort, one subscript in *Stars and Stripes* entitled, “Make Good with the People,” stated:

…the authorities of the French towns because, under orders, they have done an immense amount of cleaning, opening up old sewers, carting dirt and contributing muscle generally to the long accumulated work of the neighborhood. But they have made good with the people of the towns by the little odds and ends of helpfulness they give in their off-hours.  

The American public became increasingly aware that the efforts of African Americans often went above and beyond the call of duty. It was these subtle reminders that continued to influence both white and black readers on the home-front. Such news was, for blacks, seen as praise traditionally reserved only for white soldiers, and for whites, news that the war was moving towards a successful conclusion. The black American troops served as the vanguard for the change in the self-perception of their race. But the impact of their integration, in a nation affording them degrees of equality in status they never experienced, soon indoctrinated the entire African American people into a new way of thinking.

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French Women and African American Soldiers

The one French custom mentioned most often by returning black troops and the source of the greatest derision among white Americans, was the French acceptance of the association of black men with white women. The French exhibited far fewer qualms regarding racial mixing between the sexes. Boastful African American soldiers claimed the French ladies were “carried away” with them and said they were told by French villagers to return to France after the war to have their pick of French girls to marry. Like many other perceptions held by the African American soldiers this, too, was likely exaggerated. Nevertheless, it was these kinds of perceptions that were brought back to America and part of the war memories of African American soldiers in years following the war.

A taboo topic for journalists back home, the relationship between the black soldiers and French women rarely received mention in the mainstream American press or in African American papers. Yet one of the most patronizing articles in Stars and Stripes about African Americans during the war years breached that line. A rare piece, extolling the actions of African American troops on the front-lines, rebuilding French towns, and being cherished by the French people, mentioned the relationship with French women.

The women, who were panicky at the news that les noirs Americains were coming into that area, will miss them when they go. You often see a great grinning American black ambling up an old French street with some French woman’s heavy load transferred to his own head. You see them turn in and help with the gardening in the long twilights. They even lend a hand in housework.

215 Bullard, Personalities, 62; Janken, Rayford Logan, 41-42.
216 Lentz-Smith, Freedom Struggles, 107, 110.
The intermixing between African American men and white women, something that struck terror in the minds of many white American men, was something being reported in the columns of the military’s main publication.

These reports, however embellished, were especially alarming to Southern white men. Historian Adriane Lentz-Smith writes,

In France, as in the United States, women became a means through which both black and white Americans expressed their thinking about manhood and civil rights. Because sex figured so prominently in white Americans’ understanding of equality, attempts to circumscribe black soldiers’ sexual behavior also represented attempts to limit African American troops’ self-conceptions and projected images.218

White America believed that if by limiting the integration of African American soldiers with the French women, the sexual contact between the two could be prevented and with that, any ideas of racial equality in the post-war years. Whites intended to prevent cultural integration and the possibility of a true or fabricated story of sexual relations between a black soldier and white woman, which could be circulated back to America. If an anecdote of a black soldier having sexual relations with a white French woman made its way back to the States, the implications could be perceived by the African American community as an indication of French tolerance and the need for greater open-mindedness in white America. Conversely, such stories would be construed by the white male community as a threat to their manhood. Any integration, on the battlefield, among the French citizens, or between African American soldiers and French women, was ultimately perceived by blacks as a transformation, and by whites as a serious threat.

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The futility of the War Department’s effort to maintain a strict segregation of the African American soldiers could be witnessed not only in the integration of black American soldiers in the French military ranks but also with the French populace on the streets of small towns and larger cities. The failure included, of course, preventing the French from “opening their hearts and homes” to African American soldiers and the consequential mingling with the French women.219

African American troops were mindful of the white American alarm of the mixing between the races. By crossing racial boundaries they risked the wrath of white supremacists; yet many chose to take the risk to show their disdain of those that subscribed to its tenets.220 Willie Smith, an African American soldier of the New York 15th, in his memoirs recalls the lure of French women and the attempts to limit racial intermixing,

The French are an affectionate people. They move you…I became very fond of the French girls with the red cheeks and bicycles. One of our big problems was sneaking away from camp at night and getting back in the morning. That was where those bikes came in handy- they would meet us with their bikes. In the dawn, there was always a weird parade of soldiers wheeling toward camp with chicks on their handle bars.221

Smith’s lighthearted story masks more serious accounts of African American soldiers being caught with French women and being severely beaten by white American soldiers. Further, there were numerous accusations of rape which resulted in long jail sentences and executions. These occurrences paint a more serious picture of white efforts to keep African Americans from exercising their sexual freedom. The government-issued investigation by black leader, Dr. Robert R. Moton of the all-black 92nd Division, (singled-out in a memorandum by headquarters

221 Willie “The Lion” Smith and George Hoefer, Music on My Mind (New York: Da Capo, 1975), 75-76.
for its “frequency of the crime of rape”) resulted in the determination that the numbers of incidences were greatly exaggerated. Furthermore, he concluded, rapes by black soldiers were comparatively less than in white divisions, and surmised it was a way to discredit African American soldiers in front of the French.222

The white supremacist propaganda machine, often finding its strength in white officer corps, waged its own battle to discredit African Americans, especially their sexual behavior. Warning French citizens that their wives and daughters would be sexually assaulted by African American troops became the undertaking of Lieutenant Ernest Samusson, intelligence officer of the 371st Regiment.223 Samusson’s mission, to halt these “harmful relationships,” focused on the long-term effect on America and less on its impact on French society. He concluded, “American towns, the population of which will be affected later when the troops return to the United States [will experience]…undue social mixing.”224 The ferocity of the discrimination against African Americans regarding relations with French women, and the suggestion that all were rapists, can be seen in the following Army order.

On account of the increasing frequency of the crime of rape, or attempted rape, in this Division, drastic preventive measures have become necessary…Until further notice, there will be a check of all troops of the 92d division every hour daily between reveille and 11:00 p.m., with a written record showing how each check was made, by whom, and the result…The one mile limit regulation will be strictly enforced at all times, and no passes will be issued except to men of known reliability.225

Blame for the actions of these accused black rapists often fell on their black officers. In a letter from Colonel Allan James Greer to Senator Kenneth McKellar of Tennessee, the Colonel

222 Williams, Sidelights on Negro Soldiers, 75-77; Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, 336-7.
223 Slotkin, Lost Battalions, 255.
224 As quoted in Slotkin, Lost Battalions, 255.
225 Williams, Sidelights on Negro Soldiers, 43.
laments, “The undoubted truth is that the colored officers neither control nor care to control their men. They themselves have been engaged largely in the pursuit of French women, it being the first opportunity to meet white women who did not treat them as servants.”

African American officers were instructed by one Georgia General not to even speak to French women.

The actual truth of the number of rapes of white women by black troops is difficult to ascertain. Evidence does suggest that the numbers were no higher than those reported from white regiments. Yet the evidence of bogus accusations, perpetuation of falsehoods, and unjust punishment and restrictions of entire black divisions is clear. Likewise there is evidence of M.P.’s lynching blacks suspected of interacting with French women, not to mention numerous reports of, after witnessing socializing between black troops and white women, attempts to “put back the niggers in their place.” The integrating of African Americans with the women of France was liberating but at the same time risky.

Exporting Jim Crow

In his biography of African American war hero Rayford Logan, author Kenneth Janken wrote, “…one of the most fiercely contested battle terrains in the war was white efforts to dictate the relationship between African American soldiers and the French. The U.S. Army tried to prevent cordial and intimate interaction between the two.” As a way to limit the liberating influences of military service and especially the integration of African Americans into French society, Jim

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226 Scott, Scott Papers (Greer to McKellar, December 6, 1918): 113-115
228 Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, 336-7.
229 Fabre, From Harlem to Paris, 116; Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, 336.
230 Janken, Rayford Logan, 40.
Crow travelled with American troops to France. As one African American YMCA worker explained,

American prejudices had not only been carried across the seas, but had become a part of such an intricate propaganda, that the relationship between the colored soldier and the French soldier is more or less a story colored by a continued and subtle effort to inject this same prejudice into the heart of the hitherto unprejudiced Frenchman…In talking with the soldiers, and ultimately with the French people, we were told that the story of roughness of colored men was being told to the civilians in order that all possible association between them might be avoided. They had been systematically informed that their dark skinned allies were not only unworthy of any courtesies from their homes, but that they were as brutal and vicious as to be absolutely dangerous. ²³¹

From the very onset of American involvement, the propaganda which had flowed across the Atlantic to America, swaying public opinion about the ruthlessness of the German “Hun” carried a hypocritical message on its return voyage. One message Americans expounded was the lofty war aims of democracy and freedom laid-out by their president and yet, on the other hand, a warning to our allies about the lack of virtues of the African American soldiers being sent to aid their cause. The effort to sway French public opinion regarding blacks found its source in the desire to limit African Americans’ exposure to a more egalitarian society.

Army rules were explicitly clear when it came to African American troops intermingling with French society and its citizens. American authorities made conscious and sustained efforts from the very beginning of the United States involvement to the last days of the war, to persuade the French that their comparative openness on race relations was not only unacceptable to American authorities but also potentially detrimental to their own internal stability.

The bigotry of white soldiers, generally much deeper in the military than what was found in the rest of American society, made discriminatory policies of the Army both more acceptable and enforceable.\textsuperscript{232} In the report, “Secret Information Concerning Black American Troops,” which warned of the “mongrelization of America unless blacks and whites were separated,” French Officer Colonel Jacques Linard, made it clear that the French troops do not necessarily have to agree with American “prejudice” just simply understand its form in America.\textsuperscript{233} Based on his belief that African Americans’ lacked intelligence, judgment, and morals, his dictates included guidelines to French authorities to avoid intimacy with blacks, not eat or shake their hands, nor converse with them. Further, it suggested that black officers and soldiers not be lavishly praised. Finally, Linard recommended to the French people, “\textit{qu’elles ne gatent pas les negres}”-- not to spoil the Negroes.\textsuperscript{234} In the American military’s convoluted estimation, the French population had comparatively less exposure to blacks, and therefore needed guidance from Americans who did.

Black newspapers in America reported these attempts to manipulate the opinions and behavior of the French and cheerfully reported the reaction by French commander Marshal Foch to such suggestions. The \textit{Informer} reported in January 1919 in an article entitled, “Negro Head French Army,”

\begin{quote}
Paris, France- The story is told how certain Southern influence is attempting to get Marshal Foch entangled in the web of race prejudice, seeking to segregate Colored officers and soldiers in France, received the following: ‘Gentlemen: When General Pershing came to France he found a black man at the head of the French army. France has no color prejudice and persecutes no man on account of color or creed.’\textsuperscript{235}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{232} Mead, \textit{The Doughboys}, 373.
\textsuperscript{233} Barbeau and Henri, \textit{Unknown Soldiers}, 114.
\textsuperscript{234} Ibid., 114-115.
Despite plenty of evidence of French racial intolerance, the French authorities sought to affect an image towards the races that held no similarities to the form America was trying to export to their nation. Additionally, they believed that being told how to treat people whom they had far more experience dealing with in a capacity they proclaimed as a “civilizing mission” was insulting.

Not only did the injustices brought by many white soldiers to France from America incense French citizens, officials, and the military, but it gradually began to change some of the attitudes of the more progressive and less racially intolerant white American soldiers. In one incident involving the 372nd infantry, a concerted effort was made to rid the company of its black officers. By blaming African American officers for battlefield failures, issuing orders to segregate black and white officers at mess, restricting black officers from entering cafes and saloons frequented by white officers, and eventually trumping-up charges of insubordination leading to their dismissal, white officers and military officials conspired to relieve many of the black officers of their command.\(^{236}\) The result of such action, not uncommon in other regiments, was a bitter reaction by the black troops including denouncing white officers’ orders, resignations and requests for transfers, and diminished troop morale. The segregation of the black officers, once integrated with the white officers, had a profound effect on the soldiers, leading one black officer to declare, “In a word, democracy for which the men were supposed to be fighting was ignored and ridiculed by the conduct and attitude of the higher officials of this regiment.”\(^{237}\) The “Court of Elimination,” as it was called, comprised of white staff officers, fulfilled its mission and created a regiment of nearly all white officers, relieving seventy-seven black officers. The near


\(^{237}\) Ibid., 99.
mutiny that resulted was quelled only when threats circulated that if the black troops continued, they would be converted into a stevedore unit. Yet from this racially-charged incident, black troops made two substantial gains. One gain was the development of a deep trust among the black troops in one another. They conducted secret meetings with discussions of mutinous strategies which, if leaked, would have resulted in widespread courts-martial and severe punishment for the participants. Secondly, the black troops found unexpected allies in some of the white troops and officers, some whose support resulted in their removal to other commands by General Headquarters.238 The impact of the unity of the black troops and the support of some of the whites created unforeseen consequences for the military authorities.

All sorts of methods were tried in order to obtain sentiment from the men; not a man would declare himself. This demonstration of silence and contempt, it was evident, had a tremendous influence on the withdrawal of this pernicious order of a white non-commissioned personnel. The commanding officer was frantic in his efforts to secure white officers to replace the colored ones who were leaving in such numbers as to create unheard of vacancies in the commissioned personnel of the organization. …Such was the condition when the regiment was ordered to be in readiness for a move to the battle area.239

The unity and fellow trust, the unwillingness to be goaded into physical confrontation, support from some whites, and the recognition of their bargaining position all grew as a result of incidences stemming from the export of Jim Crow attitudes across the Atlantic.

238 Ibid., 101.
239 Ibid., 102.
French Racism Experienced by African American Soldiers from the French

Despite the propagandized and actual liberation from the harshness of the American brand of racism, especially the rigidness of the southern Jim Crow laws, black troops in France continued to encounter many white French soldiers and citizens who also harbored strong xenophobic and racist attitudes. As historian, Adrian Lentz-Smith states,

It made sense that Jim Crow would travel abroad with the AEF; it headed toward hospitable terrain. The Great War had arisen from the rivalries of European powers jockeying for land in Africa and Asia, and Europeans’ imperial dreams rested on a racial ideology that made it the white man’s burden to subdue and civilize people of color. The system of white supremacy consolidating in the United States resonated with the racial systems of empire and colony.\(^{240}\)

Yet French racism, not nearly as pervasive as racism in the United States, took on a more subdued tone. The trepidation with which some greeted the African American troops was a result both of their uniqueness in a predominantly white population (especially outside of Paris) and because of misperceptions fomented over the years from the French colonial experience in Africa.\(^{241}\) The French also asserted white superiority and morality. As African American activist Alain Locke warned black troops, “You will be enjoying Paris but don’t prejudge...French people are only different-- that’s all.”\(^{242}\)

Race relations in the United States differed by being more formalized and, principally in the South, enforced through legislation. The French saw their relationship with blacks as more of a civilizing mission and thus afforded them more opportunities, rights and liberties. The perception of a more open society in France by the African American soldier was well-grounded,

\(^{240}\) Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles*, 4-5.
\(^{242}\) Ibid., 47; Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris*, 69.
although the French were definitely not as open-minded as many hoped it would be or later claimed that it was.\textsuperscript{243}

French racism experienced by African American troops was at times very overt. The characterization of blacks as feeble, harmless, and impotent was common in French advertisements and in the popular culture.\textsuperscript{244} The French exploitation of blacks for economic gain both in France and in their colonies did not go undetected by African American writer Claude McKay. In his novel \textit{Banjo}, McKay refused to exonerate France, saying that blacks were treated like “stupid children” and pointing out that the French “transformed them to labor under its laws and yet lacked the spirit to tolerate them within its walls.”\textsuperscript{245} McKay further decried the misperception of the liberal French by pointing out their colonial hypocrisy, patronizing treatment of blacks, and inflated sense of themselves for being such a civilized and tolerant people.\textsuperscript{246} Many French families put strict restrictions on their daughters and limited or forbade their association with black troops, warning them of their physical differences, non-Christian beliefs, and “uncivilized nature.” While confiding to an African American soldier whom she thought was white, the remark of one French woman, “We ought to form a society here to teach the ‘darkies’ that they have no more rights than in America,” stands in sharp contrast to the colorblind society touted in the remembrances of the African American soldiers in the years after the war.\textsuperscript{247} Although the color lines drawn by the French were different than those experienced by African Americans in the United States they were by no means non-existent.

\textsuperscript{243} Janken, \textit{Rayford Logan}, 51; Berliner, \textit{Ambivalent Desire}, 49.  
\textsuperscript{244} Berliner, \textit{Ambivalent Desire}, 17.  
\textsuperscript{246} Berliner, \textit{Ambivalent Desire}, 17; McKay, \textit{Banjo: A Story without a Plot}, 267; Fabre, \textit{From Harlem to Paris}, 107.  
With the overt implementation of Jim Crow in the ranks of the military and the persistent attempts to convince the French to accept its premise, African American troops had contended with two enemies-- the German army as well as the pervasive racism largely from their fellow American soldiers. The tensions that existed between the African American soldiers and the French military, French citizenry, and fellow white American soldiers are well documented. In the midst of fighting the war, the anxiety created by the relentlessness of racism put all those involved on edge. Black counter-intelligence officer Major Walter Howard Loving, appointed by the War Department, issued a report in 1918 after witnessing the actions of African American soldiers in France:

The American white man is not unmindful of the fighting value of the Negro soldiers, and will fight with them in the trenches and on battlefields, but when it comes to meeting the Negro at social functions and other places of amusement where the latter comes in contact with white women-- it matters not to what race they belong- the white man draws the line… No American white man, whether he comes from the North or from the South, wants to see colored men mingling with white women in sporting houses and other questionable places…If colored and white soldiers meet under the circumstances above mentioned, I cannot see anything but an American race war in France.248

The anticipation of what blacks hoped would happen at the end of the war and what whites feared could happen at the end of the war, formed the basis for the race war in the aftermath of World War I. The battle-lines for this inevitable clash were being drawn in France in 1918 and among its distracted people. American attempts to spread Jim Crow to France were founded in the racial tenets long-perpetuated in the States. Greater efforts at segregation became an

imperative to many whites when they considered the ramifications of African American troops enjoying a new sense of liberty in France, becoming infected by ideologies of racial equality, and demanding more equal treatment at home. This intolerable pretense to equality served as further justification whites used to marginalize the black soldiers. Racially dogmatic whites believed that the enactment of harsh rules against blacks were vital measures necessary to quell their radicalization from interaction with the French and other liberty-seeking colonial troops.249

Formal army restrictions on African American soldiers included mess hall segregation, rail-travel segregation, bans on entering French homes, fraternization with French civilians, and alcohol consumption.250 Moreover, there was a plethora of unofficial racist propaganda against African American soldiers including rumors of their proclivity to engage in rape and larceny, implications they were diseased and alcoholics, and ubiquitous use of the derogatory, “niggers,” “darkies,” and “coons.”251 Additionally, the French populace was warned of the corruption of their race through racial mixing, fabricated stories of cowardliness of African American soldiers, and reports of blacks killing their white officers.252

Despite these attacks on African Americans, the French people rallied against the unfair treatment of the “soldat noir” and the attempt by the military to degrade black soldiers. Sympathetic French citizens offered the African American soldiers a refuge from the racial

249 Slotkin, Lost Battalions, 253-4; Barbeau, The Unknown Soldiers, 167-8.
250 Shack, Harlem in Montmartre, 19; Barbeau, The Unknown Soldiers, 115,142-3; Rosenberg, How Far the Promised Land?, 59.
251 Roberts, American Foreign Legion, 176; Barbeau, Unknown Soldiers, 166; Slotkin, Lost Battalions, 253-7; Mead, Doughboys, 345-6; Painter, Creating Black America, 196; Rosenberg, How Far the Promised Land?, 59; Hunton, Two Colored Women, 186.
252 Ibid.
insults and the demoralizing actions. A French village held a Fourth of July celebration for the black 369th Regiment and indulged the troops by sharing their homes, food, and wine.253

Yet, actions like these were overshadowed by the sheer necessity to appease the white American officers. White attempts to “put the niggers in their place” were grudgingly tolerated by the French who often looked on in astonishment commenting, “If the [white] American soldiers had on German uniforms, they could not be told from the Huns.”254 More often, the French citizens and military complied with the U.S. Army and its segregation policies, even if it was an affront to their national character.

The freedom that African American soldiers hoped to find in France was limited by subtle French racism and the continuous efforts of the American military. Nonetheless, the contrasts they experienced between the relative freedoms in France to the utter lack of freedom they left behind in America were considerable. The ugliness of Jim Crow had followed them to Europe. However, it was in France that the unrelenting attempts by white Americans to indoctrinate the French people, long proud of their own way of handling racial issues, exacerbated a growing intolerance by African Americans for the American system of racial discrimination they had left behind.

Interacting With Other Subjugated People

The divide and conquer strategy of white America to segregate blacks from whites was also applied when considering the interaction between African American troops and their African

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brothers. The respectful treatment the African American soldier received in France during the war was not the only experience that shaped their rapidly-evolving self-image. The “New Negro,” as some African Americans coined their change in attitude, had a new international viewpoint stemming from the cultural intermixing with black colonial African and Asian soldiers that occurred while serving in the Allied army. Over 1,200,000 Asian Indians, 175,000 Africans, and more than 200,000 East Asians served as combatants. In this sense, this war was significantly different for African Americans than was their service in the American Civil War, American Indian Wars, and in the Spanish-American War because it involved communication with similarly oppressed people throughout the world. This formulation of solidarity with Africans and Asian people, long subjected to colonial repression, exposed and confirmed African American soldiers’ understanding that their pre-war situation and post-war aspirations were far from unique. At the same time, World War I offered black soldiers the chance to imagine different cosmopolitan identities and solidarities beyond national borders.

Likewise, contact with the soldiers of subjugated India, also obeying their leader’s call to serve with the anticipation of attaining more freedom after the war, instilled new ideologies and tactics for achieving those goals in the minds of the African Americans. The technique of passive resistance, expounded by Mohandas Gandhi, was just one tactic African Americans may have been first introduced to during the war and later saw in action in post-war India. Black soldier Ray Logan’s perception, “…that differences in nationality, language, religion, and

256 Rosenberg, How Far the Promised Land?, 94.
traditions created as many intra-racial problems as did Negro-white relationships in the United States,” was ubiquitous. 257

The French treatment of the colonial troops from Africa and Asia was in many ways similar to their treatment of the African Americans. The French were pleased with the commitment of these troops to their cause and being in desperate need for troops, afforded them a degree of liberty previously limited in France and especially in the colonies themselves. Troops from the colonies were, in the early years of the war, often made to take on some of the riskiest missions as “shock troops” and received poor equipment and training. 258 But as the war progressed, the French military recognized the value of these men by improving their treatment and decorating them for their efforts. The African American troops, arriving later in the war, were the beneficiaries of the change in the French military’s perspective. Coupled with the French desire to convey a positive image to America regarding their treatment of American troops, these factors enhanced the African American perception of the fair-minded French. 259

Within the shared experiences among black troops from all over the world, African American soldiers came to see the uniqueness of America’s racial tyranny. By witnessing the level of education, culture, freedom, pride, and comparative prosperity achieved by some colonial blacks, especially those living in France, African Americans were chagrined by their plight in the United States. 260 So strong was this resentment that at times African American soldiers were known to masquerade as Sudanese soldiers in order to break from their identification with the nation that was treating them so poorly. 261 The cultural interchange and inevitable sharing of ideas which

257 Janken, Rayford Logan, 46-7.
258 Roberts, American Foreign Legion, 140-3; Barbeau, Unknown Soldiers, 96-7.
259 Lentz-Smith, Freedom Struggles, 21-24, 115-117.
260 Ibid., 94.
261 Lentz-Smith, Freedom Struggles, 110.
occurred was just an additional way that the African American troops gained divergent perspectives on their own situation.

Aware of this, the American military’s attempt to keep the African American soldiers from coming into contact with black colonial soldiers proved inadequate. Despite the language barrier, the two groups fraternized and formed bonds which only war could facilitate.\textsuperscript{262} Furthermore, it instilled in them the intention to return to America and instigate change, armed with a new self-image, new ideas, and new tactics for their struggle for equality. The crucible of the war-- a melting pot of peoples and ideas-- and the rhetoric of it as a fight for democracy for those who were suffering under the yoke of imperialism and oppression, created a new internationalized vision for the African American soldiers.\textsuperscript{263} The internationalization of black attitudes put the efforts of the African Americans in a global context. The growing worldly vision among the blacks in America generated a sense of a shared mission with their subjugated brothers and sisters. When the events in the 1920’s portended the unlikelihood that racial equality would be a by-product of the war, the African American community used their global connection to broaden their struggle rather than accept defeat. Many frustrated African Americans felt that if equality was not to be on the agenda of the United States Government, then with the support of the world’s black population, it would be on the international agenda.

French Praise

In the closing months of the war when African American troops prepared to leave, further examples of the mutual affinity between African Americans and the French were expressed.\textsuperscript{262} Sweeney, \textit{History of the American Negro in the Great World War}, 149.  
\textsuperscript{263} Lentz-Smith, \textit{Freedom Struggles}, 8-10; Reich, “Black Texans,” 1482; Painter, \textit{Creating Black Americans}, 198.
Moved by the many orphaned children of France, African American soldiers, who often had their pay delayed or reduced, contributed 300,000 francs to the war-orphans’ fund. The charitable acts of the African American soldiers were well-known to the French, and progressively to the American public as well. *Stars and Stripes* heralded the African American’s participation in the adoption of war-orphans. In a May, 1918 article, it stated:

> The colored troops of the A.E.F. got into the list of God-fathers for the first time this week. They got in twice, in fact, two stevedore companies taking one each. ‘The colored stevedores are desirous of doing their share toward the adoption of these orphans,’ one of the units wrote, ‘and if the editor will make us a visit, he will understand why we have not been heard from before.’ Maybe it’s another belated payday. Anyhow, the stevedores conclude, ‘Now that the work has been started, you will hear from us again.’

Despite innumerable opportunities to simply “do their time” in the war, African American troops readily participated in every opportunity to prove not only their loyalty and patriotism to America, but to reciprocate the respect and honor the French had afforded the black man.

The French held parades, played farewell songs, cheered, wept, and implored the African Americans to return to France. The awarding of medals followed by speeches of praise infused the African American soldiers with a sense of pride rarely felt in previous military endeavors. Coupled with the overt admiration of many of the French citizens, including the women, African American soldiers’ memories of their wartime experience was formulated in the culminating events of praise, thanks, and fond farewells. As a member of the “Red Hand Division” encamped in a French village at the end of the war noted,

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265 “Colored Troops Adopt Mascot; Total Hits 171,” *Stars and Stripes*, 1, no. 17 (May 31, 1918): 3.

The inhabitants were cordial and gave every attention to the men, whom they frankly admired. They rented many of their rooms to those who were able to pay and gave to these war-hardened heroes the use of the entire home….The inhabitants devoted so much attention to the black heroes that an attempt was made to prevent their socializing with the young French girls, who were quite carried away with the American Negroes. The musical, happy-go-lucky characteristics of the Negroes had made them the favorites in more than one town.  

In the concluding days celebrating the end of war, participants enjoyed the bliss of a hard-fought victory and reveled in feelings of elation. The African American soldiers and the joyous French left indelible marks on one another. The nightmare of war, the bloodshed of the battlefield, and the ever-present racism experienced by the African American troops was lost amid tears of merriment, the eagerness to return home to be reunited with friends and family, and the expectation of a new American attitude on race.

Even though tributes from the American military to the heroism of African Americans were modest at best, the French showed little restraint in their willingness to acknowledge the “soldat noirs Americains.” As Christmas approached in 1919, a month following the armistice, and amid rumors they would be soon returning home, the 371st and 372nd were, after serving with the French, placed under American Command. The French 157th Division Commander, General Mariano Goybet, paid a final tribute to the African American soldiers who served under him in what was known as the “Red Hand Division.” It was these soldiers who had spearheaded the campaign into Germany and had endured some of the most brutal fighting of any American soldiers. His tribute included,

During seven months we have lived as brothers in arms, sharing the same works, the same fatigues, the same dangers. Side by side we have participated in the great Champagne battle which was crowned with a prodigious victory. The 157th

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D.I. will never forget the irresistible dash, the heroic push of the Colored American regiments…

He later concluded,

Dear friends from America, after you have crossed the ocean anew, forget not the Red Hand Division. Our pure fraternity of arms has been soaked in the blood of braves. These ties will be indissoluble.\(^{268}\)

The French appreciated the service rendered to their country by the African American troops and respected the fact they had come to fight for liberties they did not enjoy at home.\(^{269}\) A black Jazz musician, and returning soldier, summed-up the African American experience best, \textit{Vive la France} should be the song of every black American over here and over there.\(^{270}\)

The return of African American soldiers to the States left them as W.E.B Du Bois suggested, “at once bitter and exalted.”\(^{271}\) As the African American troops prepared to head home, French General Joseph Vincendon, commander of the 59\(^{th}\) Division, put it succinctly: “The blood of your comrades who fell on the soil of France mixed with the blood of our soldiers, renders indissoluble the bonds of affection that unite us…A last time- \textit{Au revoir}.”\(^{272}\)

\(^{269}\) Fabre, \textit{From Harlem to Paris}, 54.
\(^{270}\) Slotkin, \textit{Lost Battalions}, 60.
\(^{271}\) Rosenberg, \textit{How Far the Promised Land?}, 60.
POST-WAR EVENTS AND ATTITUDES

What Did Integration and Immersion in France Accomplish?

The long-term impact of the war experience for African Americans and white Americans alike was to further the integration of white and black races. The migration of blacks to Northern and Mid-western cities brought to those regions a new necessity to confront America’s racial issues. The training of African American soldiers not only brought them into greater contact with whites in the military, but also in contact with compassionate white civilians. As alluded to earlier, these desegregating moments were at times highly confrontational and appeared to further racial animosities rather than begin to heal them. Yet, for as many stories there were of altercations and conflicts between the two races, there exists numerous examples of racial differences beginning to slowly melt away.

The integration of African Americans into the French military, and to some degree into their society, had the most dramatic effect on America and the African American community. Black newspapers were rife with articles, letters from soldiers, and editorials citing the cooperation between the French and the African Americans with the expectation that in America, as one Dayton Forum letter to the editor hoped, “…hateful race prejudice will be abolished…forever and the colored man can work and live side by side with the white man, as he is now fighting and dying side by side him on the seething battlefields of Europe.”273 In another article, “Will the Negro Be Prepared,” writer W.A. Tedford pointed out,

The Great War is our new emancipation. On the battlefield and in the workshop the white man is learning that the black man eats and sleeps and bleeds as he. Shoulder to shoulder we are helping to carry the burdens of war. Sending our boys to the front and buying Liberty Bonds. On thinking over the condition of

our race; it appears to my limited judgment, that our greatest need as a race is unity; as we search the great records we find we are related to the crab which, when one tries to climb to the top in order to become free, the others reach up and drag him down. We can recall no other race which has so little confidence in itself as our people.274

African Americans began to see the possibility of not just a new unity with their white neighbors as an effect of the war, but also the need for unity among themselves to achieve their goals.

African American war correspondents also experienced the integration of races and ethnicities which is an inevitable outcome of war. Ralph W. Tyler, correspondent for the black periodical, the Dayton Forum, found that his experience of integration began before he reached the shores of Europe. Traveling on a trans-Atlantic ocean liner, Tyler found himself among a “galaxy of notable writers” all headed to the war-front to write “straight stuff” for their dailies.275 Besides the invigoration of being amidst people sharing a “democratic spirit” the experience gave him a “most satisfactory taste of world democracy.”276 Most noteworthy on the mundane ocean passage was his feeling that,

Each and every one of the these notable writers- former newspaper reporters, seemed to have made an especially effort to make me forget- which I did- that my skin was several shades darker than theirs, and by doing so to convince me that this ‘world democracy’ for which the Allies are fighting is neither a barren reality or a rainbow vision, but an actual possibility whose advance courier is discernable with the naked eye.277

This belief of his not only conveyed to African Americans his hopes, but also one that whites too shared his vision of equality.

276 Ibid., 1.
277 Ibid., 1.
Although the bulk of the stevedore work was done by African Americans, their co-workers included many whites. Sharing in the labors and success, the two groups were forced to cooperate during the war effort in a manner similar to troops at the front. Competitions between companies to see which could unload the most tonnage in the shortest period of time were held, not only creating spirited rivalry and cooperation, but exhibiting a patriotism and earning praise usually reserved for soldiers on the front. The 835th Stevedore Company, pledging not to eat for a day if it lost one such competition, showed up a half hour early on a Saturday to reclaim the lead and eventually win. Their rewards included leading a parade, carrying the Company banner, and enjoying special privileges at the camp for a week.278

For the predominantly white readers of Stars and Stripes, the patriotic spirit of African Americans gradually had an effect on their views of race and the black commitment to America. A telling example of the halting, yet progressive change in white attitudes, at least in the press, is a December 6, 1918 letter to the editor of Stars and Stripes from a U.S. Army Captain, entitled “A Lone Yank.” The compassion of the brief letter is an appeal as well, to those who perhaps were already beginning to overlook the commitment of the African American soldier in the war. The Captain wrote,

While going through a French hospital in Lyon some time ago, I ran across a poor, lone Negro soldier who had been wounded and sent there for treatment- the only American in the large ward in which I found him. Over his bed, on the bottom of soap box, scrawled in heavy, black pencil, appeared these words: “English spoken here.”279

To the author of the letter, Captain Thomas B. Shine of the Quartermaster Corps, an African American was an American, plain and simple.

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279 “A Lone Yank,” Stars and Stripes, 1, no. 44 (December 6, 1918): 4.
Further integration in France brought on by the war included competition in sporting events. While in America it remained rare that Negro baseball clubs would play against white teams, in France, when the opportunities arose, games between the races were common. In an article in *Stars and Stripes* a colored baseball team was soliciting teams to play them, “anxious to obtain games with either white or colored clubs in the A.E.F.”\(^{280}\) In a less docile manner and more often involving both blacks and whites, boxing earned wartime African Americans’ greater respect from their white comrades. Black Corporal Leo Patterson was one of many boxers who was, as *Stars and Stripes* put it, was, “…battling his way against all comers and downing race-prejudice where it existed by clean, clever fighting…”\(^{281}\) The impressionable black and white soldiers of the American military, far from home, subjected to pro-democracy propaganda, serving in a more racially tolerant country, and immersed in a war of “us versus them,” began to see integration as more acceptable.

The End of the War and the Return Home

With the 1918 armistice ending hostilities, American troops began the process of demobilization and prepared to return to an America altered by the war. The freedom they experienced had been real, it had been liberating, and it was a step closer to the liberty they hoped they would find in America upon their return home. For the returning troops the difference was more than subtle and had been in many ways a continuation of their long struggle for equality. The comparative freedoms afforded to them by the French, the battle against the extension of American-style racism and Jim Crow, their contact with other similarly subjugated


\(^{281}\) *Stars and Stripes*, 2, no. 11 (April 18, 1919): 2.
peoples, and a new confidence gained through their successful prosecution of the war, all transformed the African American self-image. African American soldiers began to return to America imbued with a new sense brought about in no small part by the “fortifying effects of French good will.”

A new collective attitude among African Americans sought to carry the European war for liberation to a white-dominated America reluctant to change. For many in the African American community, their attitude was, “As this hath been no white man’s war, neither shall it be a white man’s peace.” The patriotic fervor and generally elated national mood greeting returning troops temporarily subdued the race issue.

However, racial battle lines were being re-drawn with whites intending to reinstate the pre-war racial status quo and blacks feeling they were in a position to demand change. Being cognizant of the shift in attitude of African American soldiers, President Wilson and Secretary of War Baker arranged for Dr. Robert R. Moton, successor to Booker T. Washington as principal of Tuskegee Institute, to travel to France and speak to the blacks of the A.E.F. This strategy was to placate the soldiers, prepare them for the end of the integration and tolerance they had either perceived or experienced among the French, and ready them for a white America preparing to resist racial tolerance. Dr. Moton’s two-week long, one-thousand mile automobile trip in France brought the government message, and his own, to over 250,000 African American troops. Praising the troops for bravery and dedication, Dr. Moton’s message included assurances that white America would welcome them home.

Realizing monumental changes in the African

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282 Lentz-Smith, Freedom Struggles, 113.
283 Miller, Kelly Miller’s History 474.
284 “Head of Tuskegee Sees Colored Units,” Stars and Stripes, 1, iss. 48 (Jan. 3, 1919), 5.
American troops had transpired and seeing it necessary to temper their expectations, Moton, as *Stars and Stripes* reported,

…stressed the importance of the colored soldier’s going back to the United States in a manly, yet modest, unassuming manner. ‘In war’ said Dr. Moton, at one point, ‘you have met the test and won, but a far greater test and a much more doubtful victory awaits you now than you faced during the past year and a half. It is a greater test and much more severe and important battle that you ever fought before. It is a battle not against Germans, but against black Americans.’

The appeal to show self-control upon their return to their nation already showing reluctance to neither exalt the African American soldiers for their contribution nor reward them for their efforts, gave a hollow tone to Dr. Moton’s message. Black soldiers, intent on seeing changes implemented and unwilling to continue to adopt the past policy of accommodation and gradualism found Dr. Moton’s mission and his message particularly galling. To the black community, Dr. Moton and other black leaders who elevated their positions by accepting government jobs to placate “their people,” represented the failures of the past struggle and appeared to be sell-outs to self-interest. In the same speech Dr. Moton’s words suggested he too had adopted the racist white point of view, saying,

This battle is against the men into whose faces I now look. It is your individual, personal battle- a battle of self-control, against laziness, shiftlessness and willfulness. The best time to begin self-control begins right here in France. Leave such a reputation here as will constrain our Allies, who have watched as with interest, to say forever that the American negro will always be welcome not only because of his courage but because of his character.

285 Ibid., 5.
286 Barbeau and Henri, 179; Sweeney, *History of the American Negro*, 236; Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 337.
287 “Head of Tuskegee Sees Colored Units,” *Stars and Stripes*, 1, iss. 48 (Jan. 3, 1919), 5.
The messages of the black press, including Challenge, the Messenger, and the Crisis, had a far more appealing tone to the war veterans. Their brash words spoke of how the French, and even the Germans, treated blacks better than in America. Some published statements that went as far to say that “the transition from shooting a white German is not very far from shooting a white American,” indicating some African American troops gravitated to the very stance Dr. Moton warned against.288

Prior to their return, the French held parades and lavished praise and awards upon the African American soldiers. Later and long before America did, the French established memorials and erected statues honoring blacks’ service. The entire 369th Battalion, the famed “Harlem Hellfighters,” was given the Croix de Guerre. The 93d Division had dozens of Distinguished Service Cross recipients and French awards for gallantry in combat.289 The American military, though, was less inclined to sing their praises or memorialize the African American troops. African American achievements were deliberately disregarded and under-reported. Black Americans were not allowed to participate in the Paris victory parade-- the greatest military demonstration in the history of the world-- on Bastille Day in 1919.290 The black French and British colonial troops marched down the Champs-Elysees and through the Arc de Triomphe while African American troops quietly prepared for, or had already made their return home.291

Racism, intentional exclusion from the historical accounts of the war, and ignorance led some younger African Americans to believe for decades that the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) was an all-white army. The French, on the other hand, honored the “Sammies” and venerated

289 Slotkin, Lost Battalions, 407; Roberts, American Foreign Legion, 200-1; Fabre, From Harlem to Paris, 48.
290 Williams, Sidelights on Negro Soldiers, 246.
291 Bullard, Personalities, 76; Roberts, American Foreign Legion, 200-201; Slotkin, Lost Battalions, 407.
their contribution in the war. It is little wonder that as African Americans readied for their journey back to the United States and uplifted by the treatment they had received in France sang the praises of the French. Many considered a return to France as their only real hope of living a life free of oppressive racism and discrimination.

The homecoming for the African American troops was bittersweet. Parades and accolades welcomed them back, especially in New York City where tens of thousands blacks and whites lined the parade route to hail the “Old Fifteenth.” A reporter for the World commented that “New York is neither race-proud nor race-prejudiced. That this 369th Regiment…was composed entirely of Negroes, made no difference in the shouts and flag waving and handshakes that were bestowed upon it.” Indeed, there were some indications of a change in the nature of race relations in America sparked by the African American contribution to the Allied victory. The military, long seen as harboring strong racist views in its ranks, made progressive changes during the war to allow African Americans to serve in a various capacities. By the end of World War I, African Americans were in cavalry, infantry, signal, medical, engineer, and artillery units, as well as serving as chaplains, surveyors, truck drivers, chemists, and intelligence officers.

Subtle signs of changing attitudes of blacks and whites were taking shape. In 1919, the establishment of a Federal Commission on Interracial Cooperation made its focus on improving education and ending lynching and discrimination. Although moderate in its stand on ending segregation, blacks sought and found white allies in these newly formed political organizations. Support also came from influential leaders and the mainstream press which

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292 Bullard, Personalities, 76.
293 Ibid., 68.
294 Slotkin, Lost Battalions, 401; Harris, Harlem Hellfighters, 80.
295 World, as quoted in Slotkin’s Lost Battalions, 399.
reported, “Roosevelt Lauds Our Negro Troops” and “...the Value of the Negro Race Has Been Proved Over There.” 297 One New York Times article declared and added, “As a result of the war...he expected that a greater degree of justice would prevail, and that the Negro would be treated on the basis of a ‘Square Deal’.” 298 Yet it also intoned that Roosevelt “warned against an over optimism leading to the belief that with the ending of the war and era of universal peace and brotherhood will prevail.” 299 A Southern officer was quoted, “I can never again think of Negroes as I used to think,” and the War Department attempted to ban the use of ‘Nigger’ and ‘Coon’ in the U.S. Army. 300 The leader of American Federation of Labor, Samuel Gompers, sought to end the exclusion of blacks from organized labor saying, “If you can take in immigrants who cannot speak the English language, why can’t you take the Negro, who has been loyal to you from Washington to the battlefields of France?” 301 Elsewhere, whites did appear more agreeable to addressing African American injustices, including discrimination in housing and hiring, lynching, and supported the extension of some civil rights. 302 Yet, the fleeting nature of this seemingly new national consensus to improve race relations became all too real for the African American community.

The beleaguered African Americans knew that the deep-seated racism they hoped would disappear would require more than simple patriotism, loyalty, and the efforts of a few outspoken individuals. When one woman left the cheering crowd to hug her marching husband, just returned from the war, she wondered if a white officer would arrest her. His reply, “Not today!”

298 Ibid., 12.
299 Ibid., 12.
300 Slotkin, Lost Battalions, 148, 237, 403.
301 Ibid., 148, 237, 403.
302 Ibid., 236.
could have been seen as a new acceptance of blacks. But the comment may have been more
telling if he had said, “Not today, but just for today!”

For the returning black soldiers, the America they found and the lives they returned to
appeared much like how it was before the war. The conversion of the economy from war-time to
peace-time ushered in difficult economic times that included high unemployment for war
veterans. The Jim Crow system, something the African American soldiers hoped to see waning
when they returned, remained intact throughout the South and had been adopted in cities of the
North and Midwest. In Chicago during the summer of 1919, black veteran Harry Haywood
noted the segregation of the beaches on Lake Michigan and stepped into one of the bloodiest race
riots in American history. Haywood commented, “It came to me then that I had been fighting
the wrong war. The Germans weren’t the enemy- the enemy was right here at home… and a lot
of other black veterans were having the same thoughts.” But the difference between these race
riots, and the scores which preceded them, was that blacks’ were more apt to fight back.

But had the foundation of discrimination, namely racial prejudice, truly weakened? For many
like Harry Haywood it had not, “I knew better. Conditions in the States had not changed, but we
blacks had. We were determined not to take it anymore.” Rayford Logan stayed in France
after his service in war and enjoyed the more lenient society. In 1924, well-aware of the
heightened racial tensions in America in the post-war decade, he boarded a U.S. steamer and
later recalled,

303 Ibid., 400.
Harry Haywood,” 228, Robert Bullard, Personalities, 149.
305 Ibid., 226.
As I stepped on deck, my first time on American ‘soil’ in six years, over the strains of the band playing the Star Spangled banner, I heard a steward say: ‘Look at that damned nigger.’ For a moment I felt like getting off the ship and returning to France, but my decision had been firmly made.307

Like most returning African Americans both before and after him, Logan’s episode reflected the inevitability that change would be slow. But in a similar vein, men like Logan also realized that change would not come to America if those who had experienced the liberating influence of integration remained behind in France.

The Fight by White America to Retain the Racial Status Quo

As the victorious soldiers returned, many white Americans feared an impending race revolution. Government intelligence reports warned of a new black attitude predicting a “strong probability” of “numerous racial clashes in the South.” The situation stemming from blacks’ service in the war, exposure to French ideals, and a general demeanor described in these reports as arrogant, imprudent, and no longer being the “same sort of Negro,” terrified many whites.308 There are varying viewpoints as to the degree and validity of the fears among whites, but their response to this perceived threat of blacks infused with new and radical ideals, fomented a period of heightened anxiety. As one blunt white speaker said in an address to blacks in New Orleans,

You niggers are wondering how you are going to be treated after the war. Well, I’ll tell you, you are going to be treated exactly like you were before the war; this is a white man’s country and we expect to rule it.309

307 Janken, Rayford Logan, 61.
The northward and largely urban migration of African Americans during and after the war generated an increasingly national, rather than regional, fear of black aggression. It also led to a more nationwide desire to mitigate its impact. Following a race riot in Nebraska, the *New York Times* reported, “Omaha is not ashamed, but Omaha is frightened.”310 With the growing consternation stemming from the “Red Scare” and the specter of anarchists, socialists, and communists arriving from war-torn Europe, the suspicion of blacks and reactionary measures by whites should not be surprising. The actual culprit of the racial tension was the omnipresent determination among whites not to cede ground to blacks or any other group and strengthen their resolve to preserve their role as the “guardians” of the country’s “civilization.”311

The results of such attitudes were manifested in what was called the “Red Summer.” In 1919 while Woodrow Wilson was being hailed by Europeans as a “savior” and expounding his interpretation of the war’s principles of liberty and self-determination, the United States was embroiled in a clash between the races unparalleled in American history. Fueled by a largely irresponsible press, ever more intolerant and militant blacks, and unrelenting white supremacy ideologies, racial violence in South Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, Nebraska, Washington, D.C., and Illinois led to seventy-six lynchings (ten of which were black soldiers still in uniform) and hundreds of dead and wounded.312 In the Chicago uprising alone, twenty-three blacks died but so did fifteen whites.

Lacking government support, many middle-class blacks began fighting back, taking up arms, and joining with lower classes to protect their lives and property.313 Not only did the

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government do little to quell the violence and protect blacks, many black veterans became targets of surveillance by the Justice Department and the Military Intelligence Division.\textsuperscript{314} Congress considered, but never did establish, a commission to investigate the “Racial Question.” It did, however, manage to introduce bills to segregate street cars in the District of Columbia and threaten to cut off federal aid to black colleges like Howard University.\textsuperscript{315} Further appeals from William Trotter to Woodrow Wilson to propose a law making lynching a crime against the federal government fell on deaf ears.\textsuperscript{316} The temporary efforts of the federal government to act as a type of “broker state” to mediate disputes within the states during the war quickly evaporated in the subsequent decade, only to re-emerge in the economic turmoil of the 1930’s.\textsuperscript{317}

Woodrow Wilson’s record on race issues was poor, and succeeding Presidents Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge also showed little interest in fostering racial harmony. Harding’s denial that the Ku Klux Klan, (whose membership reached all-time high in the 1920’s) was hostile towards blacks was indicative of the approach the federal government took on the race conflict.\textsuperscript{318} For African Americans seeking change, the Harding campaign slogan of “A Return to Normalcy,” could not have been more depressingly apropos. The correlation between the surge in racial tension and the conclusion of the war was not coincidental. Often white attitudes generally mirrored a comment in a Vicksburg, Mississippi, newspaper that “no nigger” would be allowed to wear in the streets “a uniform that a white man was bound to honor.” Conversely, black America heeded the advice of W.E.B. Du Bois-- that the United States needed “to make

\textsuperscript{314} Slotkin, \textit{Lost Battalions}, 237-8.
\textsuperscript{315} Barbeau, \textit{Unknown Soldiers}, 188.
\textsuperscript{316} Fox, The \textit{Guardian}, 229, Letter from William Trotter to Woodrow Wilson, May 31, 1919.
\textsuperscript{318} Fox, The \textit{Guardian}, 249.
America safe for Americans.”319 By 1919, it appeared as though violence would be the sole determinant of which side would succeed.

New African American Attitudes and Demands-- A Call to Arms

The wartime experience, for blacks on the battle field and on home-front, fomented a new inner-spirit in many African Americans. Further, the war gave their plight in an international perspective and generated the attitude that the fruits of victory ought to be the acceleration of the pace of racial progress.320 Described by William Pickens, the dean of Morgan College, America was, “pregnant with both opportunity and danger” and like a great fire the war, “destroy[ed] old buildings that ought to have been destroyed long ago… and it [gave] us the privilege of building new ideas into new structures.”321 Further, his claim that an African American would expect “to be nothing less than an American citizen with equal rights before the laws” was the pervasive attitude among blacks.322

The future appeared bright for blacks in America, although most were realistic that the changes they hoped for were going to be halting and gradual. Likewise, they knew that the struggle would involve a commitment of body and spirit often lacking in the previous decades attempts to bring about changes. The black newspaper the Ohio State Monitor printed the opinions of one whom the editor believed, “has had years of experience as an observer in nearly every part of the country, and even more years of intimate association with Negroes.” In October of 1919 he wrote,

319 Slotkin, Lost Battalions, 237; The Vicksburg Post as quoted in Rosenberg’s, How Far the Promised Land?, 63.
320 Rosenberg, How Far the Promised Land?, 54.
321 Ibid., 54.
322 Ibid., 54.
This war has had its effects upon the Negro. It produced a sort of cohesiveness, and solidarity which has heretofore been conspicuous by its absence…discontented with clippings from white dailies, the Negro has organized a press association of its own. Likewise, many race papers maintain a staff of correspondents who furnish stories of Negro lynching’s that are often quite different from those sent through the regular news channels of the South. Another noticeable feature is the increase in Negro stores and markets and the willingness of their compatriots to search for a Negro dealer when marketing.323

W.E.B. Du Bois implored blacks to marshal “every ounce of [our] brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, and more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land.”324 The new attitude of African Americans included a growing militancy and a willingness to fight back against the violence being inflicted upon them.

The new black posture of retaliation is expressed in the poem signed “Razafkeriefo”:

For by the blood you’ve spilled in France
You must and will be free,
So from now on let us advance
With this: Don’t tread on me!325

Publicizing this message were many newer African American publications such as The New York Age, Half-Century Magazine, and the Crusader. These joined the Crisis, Opportunity, the Messenger, and the Guardian to disseminate the demands of the “New Negro” and to rally their energies to exploit the opportunities fostered by the war. The “New Negro” was different than the earlier stereotypical “Negro” of the rural South. The “New Negro,” imbued with a “new spirit” and “new psychology” forged on the battlefields of Europe, was self-confident, dignified, determined, non-deferential, defiant, retaliatory, urban, and Northern.326 Furthermore, the “New

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324 Crisis, May 1919.
325 Painter, Creating Black America, 199.
326 Rosenberg, How Far the Promised Land?, 66,86; Painter, Creating Black America, 189, 200; Barbeau, Unknown Soldiers, 187-8.
Negro” represented a merging of the integrationist blacks with those of an earlier generation who advocated factionalism.327

African Americans unanimously agreed that the time was ripe for revolution, but lacked a consensus on the methods and tactics to use to try to achieve conflicting goals. The war acted as the fuel for the machine that was to drive the change that the African American community sought. The question of how efficiently that machine would work, who would determine its output, and what hazards it engendered was a source of anxiety among America’s blacks. Fragmented leadership, stiff white resistance, the lack of government support, and comparatively lofty demands all conspired to limit black America’s attainment of justice and equality.

The “Lost Generation” white writers of the 1920’s had lost hope and faith in America because of its excesses. Blacks of the 1920’s felt another form of disenchantment. Writer Arthur Barbeau put it simply, “War had taught him [the African American] self-reliance; peace taught him that was all there was to believe in. The rest was pie-in-the-sky.”328 What demands they would make, what strategies they would employ, and what results they would achieve was to be played out for the next five decades in America.

The more radical views of blacks were often exaggerated by fearful white propagandists, a sensationalized press, and the polarizing views of the some outspoken African American leaders like William Trotter and Marcus Garvey. These actions included fighting back, attacks on whites, voluntary segregation, and advocating violent means to achieve change. The ensuing racial strife was played out on the streets of northern cities and small southern towns. Regardless of the approach to change, African-American soldier Kelly Miller’s view of what blacks in

America had become is telling, “Today he is no longer Negro, nor Afro-American, nor is colored American, not American of African descent, but he is American- simply this, and nothing more.” What America would do for these Americans was to a large part contingent upon how African Americans sought change and how willing white America was willing to grant it.

The Harlem Renaissance, African American Expatriates, and Jazz Music

The post-war alteration in the attitude and self-image of African Americans was not only played out in violent confrontations. The moderate black approach to fomenting change included attaining an education, doing battle in the courts to end segregation, and appealing to the white citizens of the United States and the world. The Harlem Renaissance-- “a movement marked by a belief that aesthetic experience could be a powerful impetus to the destruction of social convention, the awakening of new types of consciousness, and the creation of new forms of solidarity across traditional boundaries,” gripped the African American people throughout the decade of the 1920’s. The black literary movement celebrated African American culture and attempted to channel black activism by enhancing their degree of social awareness, education, and self-respect. Likewise, the Harlem Renaissance was, as author C. Vann Woodward believed, “of great importance in arousing sympathy and stimulating the support of white intellectuals and philanthropists.” The war had stimulated the desire of blacks to shed, as writer Langston Hughes wrote “… the urge within the race toward whiteness…and [desire] to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.” The international exchange between soldiers from

329 Miller, Kelly Miller’s History, 479.
different parts of the world was the vehicle for this more worldly approach in black literature. This positive self-image known as the “Harlem Renaissance,” commemorated “blackness” and entered into the African American collective.

A theme in much of the black literature of the Harlem Renaissance was the almost mythological view of the French. Contrary to popular belief, the writers and poets rarely addressed the war itself in their works and a small cadre of renowned writers like James Weldon Johnson, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay had any military experience. The omission of the fighting in the war and the writer’s lack of military credentials did not negate the impact the war had on black American writers. As the art often does, those that did write of the war, shed light on the issue of injustice to a people long desensitized after centuries of oppression. New York became the hub of writer Alain Locke’s “New Negro,” leading some to compare Harlem to Paris. Black poet Arna Bontemps put the impact of the “renaissance” in Harlem as simply, “it was fun to be a Negro,” and surely its enlightening aura was shared by many blacks in the post-war.

Other forces stimulated a growing black pride and a global vision during and following the Great War. Jazz, in essence “Negro American” music, had reached new levels of acceptance among white Americans and the world. The important role the war played in the dissemination of this art form is indisputable. The limited French exposure to Jazz took on a new meaning with the arrival of the 369th African American troops on New Year’s Day in 1918. James Reese Europe, a popular black musician prior to the war, led the Regimental Band of the “Hellfighters” over 2,000 miles throughout France, playing in twenty-five cities, and is widely credited with

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333 Slotkin, Lost Battalions, 518.
334 Shack, Harlem in Montmartre, 133; Harris, Harlem Hellfighters, 97.
335 Harris, Harlem Hellfighters, 96.
infecting the French with the “Jazz germ.”\textsuperscript{336} The relationship between the African Americans and the French blossomed as a result of Jazz music. The symbiotic relationship that developed, one in which the African Americans entertained with their upbeat music and the French accepted blacks on relatively equal terms, proved to be mutually beneficial for all those involved. The joyously performed music, such as a highly syncopated version of \textit{“The Marseillaise”} offered laughter and lightheartedness to the war-weary French people.\textsuperscript{337} The role that Jazz music played in nurturing a long-lasting bond between the French and the African American is significant. The French peoples’ embrace of the new music was also an embrace of the African Americans who played it. African Americans were imbued with a new sense of pride that stemmed from their reception to the white-dominated world of the arts. Upon their return to America, the recognition of black-inspired Jazz music would manifest itself in not only the Harlem Renaissance but also in a new spirit that would demand an acceptance on other fronts as well.

The lure of a more just French society, trumpeted by returning veterans and Francophiles like W.E.B. Du Bois, drew some blacks to seek a new life through expatriation to France. For many African Americans, post-war America included more intense racial upheavals, seemingly endless repression, and a continuation of a white-dominated government opposed to enacting few changes regarding race relations. Across the Atlantic, in France, lay what some had referred to as “the promised land.”\textsuperscript{338} Descriptions of Paris as a “sympathetic and tolerant world a peerless city, a ‘true civilization,’” were convincing, albeit often overstated.\textsuperscript{339} Many expats found out upon arrival that the trumped-up tales told of French tolerance during the war fell far short of

\textsuperscript{337} Slotkin, \textit{Lost Battalions}, 127; Bullard, \textit{Personalities}, 75.
\textsuperscript{338} Bullard, \textit{Personalities}, 87.
\textsuperscript{339} Fabre, \textit{From Harlem to Paris}, 81-2.
reality. The French continued to embrace their “civilizing” role but they often treated blacks as exotics. Many of the French saw them as only helping the economy and generally embraced only the popular Jazz musician stars like Josephine Baker. Coupled with the substantial number of racist white American expatriates and tourists, the plight of the average African American seeking refuge in post-war France, rarely lived up to its billing. Economic considerations often took precedence over racial toleration and many Parisian restaurants, cafes, cabarets, and hotels often grudgingly imposed segregation to please adamant whites.

Yet many French spoke out against the reinvigoration of racism brought to their soil from white Americans. France too had changed, with the recent influx of white American soldiers and tourists, this transformation was not unexpected. One black reporter observed; “Wherever they go, they carry their propaganda of race prejudice,” France’s imperialism is bad enough without her taking on any more of our bad American customs.” Post-war France, like America, had changed but not necessarily for the better. In one sense though, African Americans discovered new opportunities and the spirit of liberation was firmly established in their minds. A new and clearer choice of how and where they wanted to live their lives became more apparent. Like blacks who stayed in the United States, the war had given African Americans in France a new sense of black entitlement and black pride. But like the freedom they experienced in other ways, this too succumbed over time, perhaps to a lesser degree, to disillusionment and disappointment.

340 Berliner, *Ambivalent Desire*, 2-6, 236-238.
341 Bullard, *Personalities*, 86.
CONCLUSION

America’s decision to enter the war was influenced by official government propaganda that sold a hesitant public on a principled and humanitarian interpretation of the war as a fight for worldwide democracy and liberty. These lofty goals led to post-war expectations that, for many, fell well short of reality. Among the disenchanted, yet at the same time invigorated, were millions of African Americans who saw this war as a stepping-stone to their own liberation.

Unlike a Europe ravaged by over four years of war, the United States exited this conflict lacking Europe’s physical and economic scars and bearing a considerably less emotional one as well. Historians have demonstrated how the horrible memories of death and unprecedented destruction associated with this conflict and its brutal trench warfare almost eclipsed all other European memories. This selective memory often marginalized or rendered invisible other wartime experiences including interactions with the citizens, camaraderie with fellow soldiers, or precious light-hearted moments amid such devastation.343 American soldiers though, because of a comparatively abbreviated experience, did recall more non-combat memories which they sought to use as a way to make sense of the death and destruction.

African American soldiers, many of whom entered the service with expectations exceeding those of their white counterparts, anticipated that their experiences in the war would have lasting ramifications on their post-war lives. Many blacks entered the military with the belief that the war could serve to advance their rights as citizens and their integration and acceptance into the fabric of American culture. Although the hope of achieving these expectations quickly fell humiliatingly short of that timeline, African Americans refused to accept the war as a “lost

cause” as did so many other disappointed Americans and Europeans. The collective impression of a shining moment in the history of African Americans did not vanish because of intractable white America’s desire to put the lofty principles of the war behind them. For many of these Americans, President Warren G. Harding’s declaration that the country now sought a “return to normalcy” implicitly included a commitment to maintaining the racial status quo.

African Americans did not anticipate the level of white resistance that followed the war yet they were hardly delusional in their belief that a single event could erase centuries of bigotry and discrimination. White Americans saw this “European war” as something fought both literally and figuratively “over there.” From the very onset of America’s decision to enter the war, African Americans viewed the war with a level of optimism that is often touted as part of America’s national character. Seeking to use the war as a catalyst for change, African Americans saw opportunities in service that white America overlooked, could not imagine, or quickly rejected.

The participation of African Americans in the First World War was a mechanism for change in the history of race relations in America. Historian Neil McMillen observed that the war was, “a racial watershed [which]…signaled the beginning of a journey toward freedom, the early departure point for the freedom struggles of our time.”\(^{344}\) As a result of their exposure to French people who clearly did not hold similar racial attitudes as whites in America, the African American soldier was introduced to an unprecedented degree of respect, admiration, integration, and equality. Black soldiers chose to marginalize the varying degrees of racial bigotry experienced while serving among the French. Instead, the black American soldiers’ narrative

focused on the perceived egalitarianism of French society and demanded the same treatment in America.

War-time propaganda and rhetoric also contributed to African Americans’ insistence for equality. A war fought ostensibly over principles such as liberty and democracy, a cause suggested by President Wilson in his call to “make the world safe for democracy,” carried an implied promise of self-determination for oppressed people worldwide. This rhetoric was internalized by African Americans in a victory achieved with the help of their dedicated and unwavering service. Further, the war expanded the horizons of African Americans by bringing them in contact with other subjugated people, an experience that fostered a sense of shared purpose in their endeavors to initiate democratic change. Before the war, the efforts of black America to dismantle institutionalized racism lacked a coordinated effort, a sense of shared purpose, and a collective spirit of black pride. The war provided some of the reform tools needed to advance the cause of black American equality. James Weldon Johnson, a black activist, later recalled of the era of World War I,

> At no time since the days following the Civil War had the Negro been in a position where he stood to make greater gain or sustain greater loss in status. The Great War in Europe, its recoil on America, the ferment in the United States, all conspired to break up the stereotyped conception of the Negro’s place… and to allow new formations.\(^{345}\)

If there truly was a window of opportunity created by the war, it closed quickly on African Americans. The surge of racial intolerance that occurred after the war and re-established white supremacy was the unfortunate and temporary victor of the struggle that ensued. All the same, the outgrowth of black pride manifested in the richness of the Harlem Renaissance, the

\(^{345}\) Fox, *Guardian*, 214.
popularity of jazz music, and the continued celebration of the black soldiers who served with distinction and answered their nation’s call, advanced the African American’s cause for racial equality.

Ultimately, the war and its aftermath readied America’s long suffering blacks for the subsequent civil rights struggles fought over the ensuing decades. On the political front, the participation of African Americans in World War I did not directly lead to institutional changes granting them equality. But for many Americans both black and white, it did raise awareness of the chasm which existed between American rhetoric and reality. As A. Philip Randolph remarked on their efforts in the war, “I want to congratulate you for doing your bit to make the world safe for democracy and unsafe for hypocrisy.”

Irvin Cobb was a popular writer of the *Saturday Evening Post*, a newspaper with a circulation over 2,000,000 and one of the most widely read publications in America. More people read his column than any other contemporary writer. Perhaps the greatest recognition African American troops received following the war came from Cobb’s story “Young Black Joe.” The story, based on black private Henry Johnson, gave African Americans everywhere an inspiring story of an ordinary man’s extraordinary valor. The irony is that Cobb was a bigot who told racist jokes and characterized blacks as inferior. As one of America’s most respected writers his words are perhaps the most telling of the war’s gradual impact on white perceptions of African Americans,

They were soldiers who wore their uniforms with a smartened pride; who were jaunty and alert and prompt in their movements; and who expressed as some did vocally in my hearing, and all did by their attitude, a sincere heartfelt inclination to get a whack at the foe with the shortest possible delay…. I am of the opinion personally, and I make the assertion with all the better grace, I think, seeing that I am a Southerner with all the Southerner’s inherited and acquired prejudices touching on the race question—that as a result of what our black soldiers are going to do in this war, a word that has been uttered billions of times in our
country, sometimes in derision, sometimes in hate, sometimes in all kindliness—but which I am sure never fell on black ears but it left behind a sting for the heart—is going to have a new meaning for all of us, South and North too, and that hereafter n-i-g-g-e-r will merely be another way of spelling the word American.346

Although only a small step in the advancement of the rights for African Americans, World War I served as a momentous stage in that journey. The racial discrimination that would lead whites on a train car to demand that a decorated and disabled black war veteran move to the all-black, Jim Crow car was painfully still present. But what had changed was the willingness of other whites to see the shame in this treatment of a fellow American. It is perhaps that change in perception which made the black experience in World War I a harbinger for the more substantial changes that took decades to become reality.

This examination of the impact of World War I on the larger struggle for civil rights suggests new avenues for exploring the larger role of the war in the shaping of African American history. A focus on racial divergence during the interwar years may help to advance the impact of World War I. Likewise, a consideration of the relative absence of racial conflict, due to the re-entrenchment of white racism, could also be attributable to the impact of the war. Research may include a more in-depth examination of why a larger civil rights struggle did not emerge in the 1920’s and greater reflection on the interaction between African Americans and other subjugated people worldwide. Further, additional studies could consider the African American expatriates in France in the post-war years or research the ways in which the African American experience in World War I differed from the American-Indian wars or the Spanish-American War. Likewise, this research suggests that it is perhaps necessary for a closer reflection on the

346 Heywood, Negro Combat Troops in the World War, 49; Sweeney, History of the American Negro in the Great War, 148.
variation in viewpoints within the African American community on how to best utilize the war experience to achieve lasting gains in their civil rights. Such a study could take into account black economic, social, and geographical variations which may have contributed to a unique view of the war. It is the intent of this thesis to encourage additional studies in the hope that we will begin to fully understand the impact of the Great War on African Americans. In doing so, blacks will, as historian Thomas Holt states, “…no longer be relegated to nonspeaking roles, the passive victims of white hostility or beneficiaries of white benevolence. They would be actors with top billing, creating institutions, sustaining communal values, and passing on a legacy of struggle and creativity to their posterity.”347

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