HIST 275 Research Essay
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World War II served as a pivotal juncture in U.S. history, marking a transformative period that redefined the contours of race relations in the nation. Against the backdrop of global upheaval, the war had profound and far-reaching implications that extended beyond the battlefield, leaving an indelible mark on American society. At the heart of this transformative era were the experiences of African Americans, both in their military service and on the home front. This paper delves into the multifaceted dimensions of World War II as a watershed moment in U.S. race relations, examining key elements that shaped the trajectory of the African American struggle for civil rights. Central to this exploration is an analysis of the central role played by African American military service, with a focus on the nuanced aspects of recognition of service and the Double V campaign. Additionally, the paper will explore the dynamic changes brought by migration and economic shifts during the war, encapsulated by the Second Great Migration and the economic opportunities it presented. The post-war landscape witnessed the emergence of a robust civil rights movement, fueled by activism and legal challenges, which further propelled the quest for racial equality. A critical aspect of this evolution was the legislative and Supreme Court decisions that followed, particularly the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. By delving into these intricacies, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how World War II acted as a catalyst, reshaping the contours of race relations and setting the stage for pivotal advancements in the ongoing struggle for civil rights in the United States.

The African American military service during World War II marked a critical juncture in the quest for civil rights, as it became both a battleground against external enemies and a key

motivator for the fight against racial injustice on the home front. The War inspired a powerful

movement known as the "Double V Campaign" symbolizing a dual victory that African

Americans sought to achieve: triumph over fascism abroad, represented the first 'V', and the

simultaneous victory against racism at home, denoted by the second 'V'. [1] This campaign, with

its resonating call for equality, galvanized the African American community, laying the

ideological foundation for the civil rights struggles that would follow. Within the military,

however, the reality often fell short of the ideals advocated by the Double V Campaign. African

American soldiers served in segregated units, experiencing systemic discrimination within the

armed forces. [2] Despite fighting for democracy and freedom abroad, they faced a stark contrast

when it came to their own treatment within the military hierarchy. This segregation not only

reflected the racial prejudices prevalent in American society but also underscored the paradox of

fighting for democratic values while racial segregation persisted.

Nevertheless, the valour and sacrifices of African American soldiers during World War II

played a pivotal role in challenging deeply ingrained racial stereotypes. Their commitment to

duty, courage under fire, and sacrifices on the battlefield shattered preconceived notions about

the capabilities and loyalty of African Americans. [3] The recognition of this service, both in the

context of individual acts of heroism and the collective contributions of African American units,

became a powerful tool in the broader struggle for civil rights. In 2010, the United States Postal

Service honoured the remarkable soldier Doris Miller by releasing a commemorative stamp

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[1] B. Bailey and D. Farber, "The 'Double-V' Campaign in World War II Hawaii: African Americans, Racial Ideology, and Federal Power," *Journal of Social History* 26, no. 4 (1993): 817–43, https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh/26.4.817, 817.

[2] Bailey and Farber, "The 'Double-V Campaign in World War II", p. 823.

[3] Robert K. Chester, "'Negroes' Number One Hero': Doris Miller, Pearl Harbor, and Retroactive Multiculturalism in World War II Remembrance," *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2013): 31–61, https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2013.0012, 31-32.

featuring him. [4] Miller's valour during the attack on Pearl Harbour was a defining moment. [5] Operating a machine gun, he successfully downed at least one enemy aircraft, affording fellow soldiers precious time to evacuate the wounded. [6] Subsequently, Miller courageously moved his captain and assisted numerous others to safety, leaving an indelible mark of heroism on that fateful day. [7] In a historic moment, Doris Miller's extraordinary bravery during the attack on Pearl Harbour earned him the Navy Cross in 1942, making him the first black sailor to receive this distinguished award. [8] This recognition marked a profound shift in societal history, symbolizing a departure from entrenched racial norms. Miller's heroic actions not only left an permanent mark on the annals of military history but also catalyzed change, challenging discriminatory practices and contributing to the ongoing struggle for equal recognition and rights for African Americans in the armed forces. The significance of Miller's Navy Cross went beyond individual acknowledgment; it became a beacon of progress, highlighting the resilience and courage of black servicemen and paving the way for greater inclusivity in military honours.

Returning African American veterans, having risked their lives for their country, demanded more than just recognition for their service; they demanded the realization of the promises of freedom and equality. The experiences of these soldiers created a groundswell of momentum, contributing significantly to a growing demand for equal rights and the dismantling of discriminatory practices in post-war America. The collective recognition of African American military service became a compelling argument in the broader discourse for civil rights,

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

propelling the nation toward a revaluation of its entrenched racial norms and setting the stage for the transformative years that followed World War II.

The period of World War II ushered in significant demographic shifts and economic changes for African Americans, activating what is known as the Second Great Migration. This migration was a monumental movement as African Americans departed from the rural South, where they had long faced economic hardships and systemic racism and relocated to urban areas in the North and West. [9] The primary impetus behind this migration was the promise of better job opportunities in the booming wartime industries. [10] In search of economic advancement, African Americans sought employment in factories, shipyards, and other vital sectors that were crucial to the war effort. [11] This migration represented not only a geographic relocation but also a deep shift in aspirations and expectations. The migration was fueled by the hope of escaping the pervasive racial segregation and economic limitations of the Jim Crow South.

The economic changes brought about by the wartime effort were transformative for African American communities. The wartime economy created unprecedented job opportunities that, to some extent, allowed African Americans to break away from the confines of traditional low-wage occupations. As industries expanded to meet the demands of the war, African Americans found employment in roles that were previously inaccessible to them. [12] The prospect of better wages and improved working conditions motivated many to seek employment in the North and West, contributing to the urbanization of the African American population. While the economic changes were significant, it is important to note that the promises of equality and

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[9] S.-J. Mathieu, "The African American Great Migration Reconsidered," *OAH Magazine of History* 23, no. 4 (2009): 19–23, https://doi.org/10.1093/maghis/23.4.19, 20.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

upward mobility were not always fully realized. Discrimination persisted in employment practices, and African Americans often still faced unequal treatment and limited opportunities for career advancement. [13] Nevertheless, the economic changes wrought by World War II set in motion a reconfiguration of African American life, fostering a greater awareness of the possibilities beyond the traditional constraints imposed by racial segregation and economic marginalization. This period of migration and economic change became a pivotal chapter in the broader narrative of the African American experience, setting the stage for future activism and the ongoing pursuit of civil rights.

The post-World War II era witnessed a profound and assertive Civil Rights Movement in the United States, fueled by a confluence of factors that had germinated during the war. The experiences of African American soldiers, who had fought valiantly for democracy and freedom abroad while contending with segregation and discrimination at home, became a powerful motivation for change. The stark contrast between their contributions to the war effort and the continued denial of basic civil rights upon their return home spurred a growing discontent that fueled civil rights activism. The dynamics of race relations during and after the war played a central role in shaping the trajectory of this activism. African Americans, having played an integral role in the war effort, were no longer willing to accept the status quo of racial segregation and systemic discrimination. [14] The aspirations for equality and justice, kindled by the experiences of the war, manifested in a more assertive and organized civil rights movement. The post-war activism took various forms, ranging from grassroots mobilization and community

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[13] Mathieu, "The African American Great Migration Reconsidered," p. 21.
[14] Andrew E Kersten, "African Americans and World War II," *OAH Magazine of History* 16, no. 3 (2002): 13–17. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163520, 16.

organizing to high-profile protests and demonstrations. [15] Organizations such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People) and the newly formed Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) emerged as leading advocates for civil rights, pushing for an end to segregation, voter disenfranchisement, and discriminatory practices. [16]

The momentum gained during and after the war also set the stage for landmark legal challenges to the institutionalized racism that permeated American society. African American activists and legal scholars strategically challenged segregation through the courts, seeking to dismantle the legal foundations of discrimination. The culmination of these efforts came with the Supreme Court's landmark decision in Brown v. Board of Education (1954), which declared state-mandated segregation in public schools unconstitutional. [17] This ruling was a seismic shift in legal precedent, overturning the notorious "separate but equal" doctrine established in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) and symbolizing a significant victory for the Civil Rights Movement. [18] Brown v. Board of Education became a major incentive for subsequent legal challenges and legislative changes, setting the stage for the broader civil rights advancements of the 1960s. The decision marked a turning point in American jurisprudence, reinforcing the idea that separate institutions based on race were inherently unequal. The post-war Civil Rights Movement, powered by the experiences of African American soldiers and the shifting dynamics of race relations, laid the foundation for the transformative legal and social changes that would define the struggle for civil rights in the United States.

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[15] Kersten, "African Americans and World War II", p. 14.
[16] Kersten, "African Americans and World War II", p. 15.
[17] Mark Tushnet, "The Significance of Brown v. Board of Education," *Virginia Law Review* 80, no. 1 (1994): 173–84, https://doi.org/10.2307/1073595, 176.
[18] Tushnet, "The Significance of Brown v. Board of Education,", p. 179.

The post-World War II period marked a watershed moment in U.S. race relations with significant legislative changes and landmark Supreme Court decisions that addressed systemic racism and dismantled legal segregation. The experiences of African American soldiers during the war, coupled with the momentum generated by the Civil Rights Movement, paved the way for transformative legal and legislative advancements. In the realm of legislative changes, the 1960s became a pivotal decade. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson, was a critical piece of legislation that sought to end discrimination based on race, colour, religion, sex, or national origin. [19] The act dismantled the legal framework that had allowed racial segregation in public spaces, such as schools, restaurants, and hotels. It also prohibited employment discrimination based on race, colour, religion, sex, or national origin, providing a comprehensive legal foundation for the protection of civil rights. [20]

Following closely on the heels of the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was another significant piece of legislation that aimed to address racial discrimination in voting. [21] This act aimed to overcome legal barriers that prevented African Americans from exercising their right to vote, particularly in the Southern states where discriminatory practices such as literacy tests and poll taxes disenfranchised minority voters. [22] The Voting Rights Act had a profound impact, substantially increasing African American voter registration and representation. [23] Supreme Court decisions during this era were equally instrumental in reshaping the legal landscape of civil rights. The legislative changes and Supreme Court decisions in the post-World

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[19] Juliet R. Aiken, Elizabeth D. Salmon, and Paul J. Hanges, "The Origins and Legacy of the Civil Rights Act of 1964," *Journal of Business and Psychology* 28, no. 4 (2013): 383–99, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-013-9291-z, 383.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ronald J. Terchek, "Political Participation and Political Structures: The Voting Rights Act of 1965," *Phylon (1960-)* 41, no. 1 (1980): 25–35, https://doi.org/10.2307/274665, 467.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

War II era were integral to dismantling systemic racism and legal segregation. These essential moments in American history were a testament to the enduring impact of the Civil Rights Movement and the collective effort to forge a more inclusive and just society. The legislative and judicial strides made during this period laid the groundwork for ongoing advancements in civil rights and social justice in the United States.

In conclusion, the impact of World War II on U.S. race relations was nothing short of transformative, ushering in a new era that challenged deeply ingrained racial norms and set the stage for significant advancements in civil rights. The experiences of African American soldiers, as explored through the lens of military service, became a powerful catalyst for change. The Double V Campaign, with its resonating call for victory against fascism abroad and racism at home, galvanized the African American community, laying the ideological foundation for the civil rights struggles that followed. The recognition of African military service, exemplified by individuals like Doris Miller, marked a departure from entrenched racial norms. The War's impact extended beyond the military, influencing African Americans to seek better opportunities in urban areas, contributing to the reshaping of economic and social landscapes. While the promises of equality and upward mobility were not always fully realized, the economic changes wrought by World War II set in motion a reconfiguration of African American life. The post-war period also witnessed the emergence of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which addressed systemic racism and provided a comprehensive legal foundation for the protection of civil rights. The sacrifices of African American soldiers, coupled with the societal changes catalyzed by the war, created a momentum that propelled the nation towards a revaluation of entrenched racial norms and set the stage for the ongoing struggle for civil rights. The legislative and judicial strides made during this period were not only pivotal in their time but

also laid the foundation for ongoing advancements in civil rights and social justice in the United States.

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