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Introduction

In the middle of American participation in World War II, racial violence broke out in Detroit. June 20, 1943, was a hot summer day, and many of Detroit's residents, black and white alike, went to Belle Isle, an island park in the Detroit River. Problems began with a few unrelated scuffles, but as tensions increased, rumors of a riot started to spread. By 11 PM, thousands were brawling on the bridge between the city and the island, leading to what one historian described as "a festival of violence against African Americans." By early morning, the police had arrested forty-seven people, and the unrest temporarily subsided. The riot, however, was further propelled by rumors that quickly spread around the city. In Paradise Valley, a predominantly black neighborhood, a rumor spread that a white mob had thrown a black woman and her child over the bridge. Some residents responded by attempting to travel to Belle Isle, only to find access to the bridge barricaded. Angered but without the expected outlet to vent their frustrations, they returned to Paradise Valley and began destroying many of the white-owned businesses. As police began moving into Paradise Valley, another rumor spread among white crowds gathered along Woodward Avenue. This time the rumor was that black men at Belle Isle had raped several white women. A white mob began attacking black residents; police did little to stop it. It would take another twenty hours before the mayor of Detroit and the governor of Michigan went on the radio to proclaim a state of emergency; it would take even longer before federal troops were brought in to bring the riot to a close. In the end, thirty-four people were killed – the largest number of them black men shot by police – and more than 700 were injured. Adjusted for inflation, property damage reached \$28 million. War production in Detroit, the core of what President

Franklin Roosevelt had called “the arsenal of democracy,” came to a halt.¹

Ten days after the riot, an editorial in *The Nation* linked the riot and the racial divisions it represented to the ideological logic of World War II. “The Axis is losing battles in Europe and the Pacific,” the editorial began, “but it can console itself with victories recently won in the United States.” The language only grew stronger from there. “It is time for us to clear our minds and hearts of the contradictions that are rotting our moral position and undermining our purpose,” it read. “We cannot fight fascism abroad while turning a blind eye to fascism at home. We cannot inscribe our banners ‘For democracy and a caste system.’ We cannot liberate oppressed peoples while maintaining the right to oppress our own minorities.” Remaining passive in the face of such racial inequities, the article declared in conclusion, meant Americans “have no right to say complacently: ‘We are not as these Herrenvolk’.”²

Such sentiments were not unusual during World War II. A year later, in 1944, the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal published his mammoth opus on American race relations, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. Over the course of nearly 1,500 pages, Myrdal made the contradiction between the aims of war and Jim Crow clear. This war, he wrote, “is an ideological war fought in defense of democracy.” The nature of the totalitarian dictatorships the Allied forces were fighting “made the ideological issue much sharper in this War than it was in the First World War.” Further, since Nazism is “based on a racial superiority dogma,” American democratic principles “had to be applied more explicitly to race.” The implication of this, to Myrdal, was clear. “In fighting fascism and nazism,” he wrote, “America had to stand before the whole world in favor of racial tolerance and the inalienable human freedoms.”³ Myrdal’s book was,

¹ For an overview of the “Detroit race riot,” as it came to be known, see Harvard Sitkoff, *Toward Freedom Land: The Long Struggle for Racial Equality in America*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 43–64. For the “festival of violence” quote, see Kenneth Robert Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP*, (New York: The New Press, 2003), 275.

² “Defeat at Detroit,” *The Nation*, July 3, 1943, 4. A typographical error in the print magazine excluded a quotation mark, which is edited in here for clarity. Partially cited, among other places, in Maria Hohn, “‘We Will Never Go Back to the Old Way Again’: Germany in the African-American Debate on Civil Rights,” *Central European History* 41, 2008, 616.

³ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers: 1944), 1004.

according to Alan Brinkley, a “major factor in drawing white liberal attention to problems of race – precisely because Myrdal himself discussed racial injustice as a rebuke to the nation’s increasingly vocal claim to be the defender of democracy and personal freedom in a world menaced by totalitarianism.”⁴ Although it received some scattered criticism, the nature of the book – its social scientific language, nonpartisan sponsorship, massive length, Myrdal’s European-ness – led it to seem like a “definitive analysis” of the American race problem in elite discourse.⁵

These arguments by white liberals complemented the wartime rhetoric of civil rights organizations and black newspapers, who advocated what came to be called the “Double-V campaign” for victory at home *and* abroad.⁶ Civil rights leaders like Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters used the wartime context to reshape the nature of their arguments and the structure of their policy agenda. Fighting white supremacy abroad, they thought, might finally give them the tools needed to make a real dent in white supremacy at home.

Others, however, were not so sure. The southern journalist John Temple Graves was among them. Black civil rights leaders, Graves wrote in 1942, had made “plain beyond question an intent to use the war for settling overnight the whole, long, complicated, infinitely delicate racial problem.” He was no fan of the Double-V campaign. “So little are they concerned by the fact that their all-embracing crusade means a domestic war while their country is making supreme war abroad that they have

⁴ Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 168–169.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 169–170; for criticism, see, e.g., Leo P. Crespi, “Is Gunnar Myrdal on the Right Track?” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 9(2), 1945, 201–212. Ralph Ellison also penned a notable critique that the *Antioch Review* declined to publish at the time. Fortunately, this was later published in a collected volume of Ellison’s writing. See Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 303–317. Of course, Myrdal was not the only person writing on this topic. Countless books and articles were published linking the war to racial equality. Another important contribution was Carey McWilliams, *Brothers Under the Skin*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1943).

⁶ For a discussion of the Double-V campaign, see Harvard Sitkoff, “Racial Militancy and Interracial Violence in the Second World War,” *Journal of American History* 58(3), 1971, 668–681; Neil A. Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War: Revised Edition*, (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1993 [1976]); Jonathan Rosenberg, *How Far the Promised Land?: World Affairs and the American Civil Rights Movement from the First World War to Vietnam*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

invited their followers to think in terms of a Double V-for-Victory – victory in battle with Hitler and victory in battle at home,” Graves wrote. “Victory, unhappily, doesn’t work that way.” Later in the same article, while detailing improvements in the conditions of black southerners during the war, he noted the decline of lynchings, but warned, “Unhappily the number may increase now as a result of the agitations of the white man against the black and the black against the white.” For Graves, war meant putting domestic debates aside and doubling down on the war abroad. “This war must be won,” Graves wrote. “And the black man in the South, where most black men live, must get on with the white man in the South, no matter what Washington orders or New York demands.”⁷

Some white southern voices were less constrained. On the floor of the US Senate, Mississippi’s James Eastland declared southern soldiers – presumably he meant the white ones – wanted to return home “to see the integrity of the social institutions of the South unimpaired” and “white supremacy maintained.” According to Eastland, that was the real point of fighting the fascist menace. “Those boys are fighting to maintain the rights of the States,” Eastland declared. “Those boys are fighting to maintain white supremacy.”⁸

These stories are not just interesting historical anecdotes, but rather reflective of the ambiguities of academic scholarship on World War II’s effect on racial politics in America. Political scientists Philip Klinkner and Rogers Smith argue “it is hard to escape the conclusion that it was... the emergence of fascism and Nazism in the 1930s that most set the stage for

⁷ John Temple Graves, “The Southern Negro and the War Crisis,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 18(4), 1942, 501, 514, 516.

⁸ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), 206. Jason Morgan Ward describes the broader rhetoric of this sort that emerged in the white South. In comparison to civil rights advocates’ Double-V campaign, Morgan Ward writes, “defenders of segregation articulated their own vision of Double Victory. Championing white supremacy and demanding freedom from outside interference, Southern conservatives deemed civil rights agitation and federal encroachment to be as dangerous as an Axis invasion. The white South, like African Americans, had entered the war fighting on two fronts.” He later describes this effort as “[m]ore than an elite rhetorical strategy but less than an authentic grassroots rebellion.” Jason Morgan Ward, “‘A War for States’ Rights’: The White Supremacist Vision of Double Victory,” in *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 127, 140. See also Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement & the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936–1965*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

real transformations” on civil rights.⁹ Many historians, too, have been inclined to take a positive view of the war. Pete Daniel argues World War II “unleashed new expectations and, among many whites, taught tolerance.” Taking it a step further, Daniel goes so far as to argue “the war in many ways made the civil rights movement possible.”¹⁰ Among historians, this view was initially developed in the 1960s by scholars who saw the World War II era as the “forgotten years of the Negro revolution.”¹¹

Historians, however, have increasingly taken a more critical perspective on the war’s relationship with civil rights. “If historians search for the roots of the civil rights movement in the wartime struggle, they will doubtlessly find something in the discordant record resembling the evidence they seek,” Kevin Kruse and Stephen Tuck write. While acknowledging “the turmoil and rhetoric and bloodshed of war did indeed provide a far-reaching challenge to Southern, national and global systems of race,” they argue it “did not push racial systems in a single direction, and certainly not one moving inexorably toward greater equality.”¹² More cynical perspectives can also be found in the work of some political scientists. Daniel Kryder, for example, highlights the correlation between war and instances of racial crowd violence, especially during World War II, while Ronald Krebs demonstrates the limits of military service as a tool for black civil rights gains more generally, particularly in comparison to other cases.¹³

Both perspectives contain kernels of truth. The logic of a war against Nazi racism gave civil rights groups a compelling rhetorical framework and made it intellectually more difficult to justify domestic Jim Crow. Yet the war also coincided with significant incidents of racial

⁹ Philip A. Klinkner and Rogers M. Smith, *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 137.

¹⁰ Pete Daniel, “Going Among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II,” *Journal of American History* 77 (3), 1990, 910.

¹¹ Richard M. Dalfiume, “The ‘Forgotten Years’ of the Negro Revolution,” *Journal of American History* 55(1), 1968, 90–106.

¹² Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck, “Introduction: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement,” in *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck, (New York: Oxford University Press: 2012), 11–12. They further note that the historian Harvard Sitkoff actually became somewhat more cynical about the war and civil rights as well. *Ibid.*, 5, 13f6.

¹³ Daniel Kryder, *Divided Arsenal: Race and the American State During World War II*, (New York: Cambridge University Press: 2002), 251; Ronald R. Krebs, *Fighting for Rights: Military Service and the Politics of Citizenship*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

violence, many concentrated near military bases. Some black veterans returned home only to be beaten by white mobs, which sometimes included law enforcement. And as the writing of John Temple Graves suggests, there was no shortage of whites who found the attempt by civil rights activists to use the war's antifascist logic to be troubling. Not everyone was so convinced that, to use a phrase from *The Nation's* editorial page, the war could not be fought against fascism abroad while also maintaining elements of fascism at home. For many white Americans, the war was fought to defend the status quo, white supremacy and all.

Taking note of the discrepancies between these contradictory narratives, this book examines the potentially heterogeneous consequences of World War II for American racial politics. In particular, I focus on trends in white racial attitudes and the executive branch response to black civil rights advocacy.¹⁴ Stated in its most extreme form, I am interested in what this response might look like in a world with no World War II. Perhaps more realistically, I hope to at least provide a theoretically and empirically grounded assessment of the specific ways in which the war influenced the politics of civil rights in its aftermath, as distinct from – although almost certainly interacting with – the New Deal and its resultant coalitional and ideological pressures.¹⁵

Perhaps the most novel contribution of this book is a historically grounded assessment of the war's effects on white racial attitudes. Until recently, American political development scholars rarely engaged with

¹⁴ While acknowledging the complexity of American racial politics during the wartime period – which I discuss in more detail in the concluding chapter – I argue that the focus on black civil rights is still merited. In 1940, African Americans represented 10 percent of the population overall, and 24 percent of the population in the South. In some states, they approached a majority. In Mississippi, to take the closest example, 49 percent of residents were African Americans (this was a slight decrease from the 1930 Census, when Mississippi had more black residents than white residents). Residents of “Hispanic origin (of any race),” by contrast, constituted only one percent of the national population, while residents who identified as “Asian and Pacific Islander” represented just 0.2 percent. In 1940, even Texas had more African American residents than Hispanic residents. Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, “Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States,” Working Paper No. 56, Census Population Division. As such, black civil rights advocacy drew more national political attention than the rights claims of other marginalized groups, meaning there was more focus on this issue in the executive branch and more public opinion polls that asked questions about it.

¹⁵ As noted later in this chapter, I define the World War II era somewhat more broadly than just the period of US participation in warfare.

public opinion data, focusing instead on the elite institutions that make up the American state. This is particularly true of scholarly accounts of World War II. Did the war lead white Americans – civilians and veterans alike – to liberalized views on race relations and civil rights in its aftermath? Or were white Americans able to maintain an acceptance of – and in some cases a commitment to – white supremacy despite the experience of the war against Nazism? Relying on rarely used survey data from the 1930s and 1940s, I find that the war's effects on white racial attitudes were more limited than is widely assumed. While there is some evidence of declining racial prejudice, white attitudes towards antilynching legislation actually seem to have moved in the racially conservative direction. While there are fewer available surveys that asked about wartime issues, I also demonstrate that whites were overwhelmingly opposed to integrating the armed forces and extending job discrimination protections in the postwar period. I follow this analysis of aggregate white opinion with an analysis of white veterans, relative to their nonveteran counterparts. While veterans were not widely liberalized on racial issues as a result of their service, I do find some intriguing exceptions from this general trend.

After demonstrating far less change in white racial attitudes during the war than many have assumed, I turn my attention to the presidency.¹⁶ In the context of a war against Nazism abroad, wartime civil rights activists emphasized the possibility of unilateral executive action as a means for achieving their policy goals, which were often framed as pertaining directly to the war effort. Did this wartime advocacy lead the Roosevelt and Truman administrations to address civil rights differently and earlier than when they would have otherwise? Relying on a wide range of archival evidence, I demonstrate how wartime activism succeeded in pressuring Roosevelt to issue an executive order combatting discrimination in the defense industry, but failed to convince him to act on segregation in the military. I then describe how the military integration movement continued into the Truman presidency, eventually succeeding in beginning the process of integration the nation's armed forces in the postwar period. Along the way, I highlight the ways in which the wartime context both helped and hindered the goals of the movement. While the probability of any change at all occurring was likely higher as a result of the war, advocates were also incentivized to focus on these war-specific

¹⁶ Later in this chapter, I offer a more detailed justification of my focus on the executive branch rather than other national political institutions.

measures and frame their demands as consistent with the foreign policy goals of the president.

In this introductory chapter, I begin with a discussion of the relationship between war and rights claims in general, and World War II and black civil rights claims in particular. I also provide historical background on the “long” civil rights movement and offer a critical overview of existing scholarly accounts of the place of World War II in the study of race and American political development. I then discuss several definitional issues, including the temporal boundaries and scope of the project, as well as how I unpack “World War II” as an explanatory variable. I conclude with a roadmap of the chapters that follow.

WAR, RIGHTS CLAIMS, AND AMERICAN POLITICS

There is a long intellectual lineage behind the idea that war might be related to the incorporation of marginalized groups. For some, the reason is that war is a time of upheaval, which might carry over to domestic politics as well, as such disruptions can provide opportunities for groups to make rights claims in new ways. For others, the reason relates more to rights claims associated with military service, an idea that has a long tradition in republican political thought. Historically, this existed as least as early as ancient Rome.¹⁷ In the High Roman Empire, for example, the distinction between legionaries and auxiliaries in the army was partly based on citizenship. Citizenship was required as a condition of joining the legionaries, while auxiliary soldiers were generally not citizens upon enrollment, but were instead granted citizenship after twenty-five years of service.¹⁸ The historian Otto Hintze has noted more generally that there exists a common notion that one who serves in a nation’s military “must logically and fairly be granted the regular rights of citizenship.”¹⁹

This theoretical linkage between war and military service and rights claims is part of the American political tradition as well, dating back to the American Revolution. Thousands of black soldiers served in the military during the Revolutionary War, some of whom received freedom in exchange for their service. For many others held in slavery, the war

¹⁷ Krebs, *Fighting for Rights*, 17

¹⁸ Mark Hassall, “The Army,” in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, ed. Alan K. Bowman et al., Vol. 11, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 336.

¹⁹ Otto Hintze, “Military Organization and the Organization of the State,” in *The State: Critical Concepts*, ed. John A. Hall, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 200. Cited in Krebs, *Fighting for Rights*, 17.

presented an opportunity to flee to freedom. It is estimated that as many as 20 percent of the enslaved population could have gained freedom during the war. In the war's aftermath, states in New England started to ban slavery. Vermont led the way, but a handful of other states followed suit. Some states even extended suffrage rights to black men, although in many cases this was later restricted.²⁰

Of all the wars in American history, the Civil War was most clearly linked to the rights of African Americans. The eleven Confederate states attempted to secede to preserve slavery, and emancipation eventually came to be seen as a military necessity for the Union forces. The period of Reconstruction that followed was, in the words of Eric Foner, a “massive experiment in interracial democracy without precedent in the history of this or any other country that abolished slavery in the nineteenth century.”²¹ During Reconstruction, black freedmen voted and held elected office and progressive taxation was implemented to fund social expenditures, all protected by national oversight.²² Ultimately, however, white southern “Redeemers” succeeded in winning back control of state governments, eventually leading to the rise of Jim Crow.²³

Civil rights advocates were initially optimistic that World War I might offer an opportunity to break down these postemancipation barriers, particularly if African Americans served honorably in the armed forces. Warning that “the German power” posed a significant threat to African

²⁰ Numbers drawn from Klinkner and Smith, *The Unsteady March*, 19–20. For fuller historical accounts, see Thomas J. Davis, “Emancipation Rhetoric, Natural Rights, and Revolutionary New England: A Note on Four Black Petitions in Massachusetts, 1773–1777,” *New England Quarterly* 62(2), 1989, 248–263; James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and ‘Race’ in New England, 1780–1860*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Lois E. Horton, “From Class to Race in Early America: Northern Post-Emancipation Racial Reconstruction,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 19(4), 1999, 629–649. Along with the rewards-for-service framework, it is also possible that other factors, like revolutionary ideas of natural rights, played a role for at least some. For an examination of state-level variation in nineteenth-century black suffrage rights, see David A. Bateman, *Disenfranchising Democracy Constructing the Electorate in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

²¹ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), xxv.

²² *Ibid.*; W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935).

²³ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955).

Americans and other racial minorities, W. E. B. Du Bois called for African Americans to enthusiastically support the war effort. “Let us not hesitate,” he told his readers. “Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy.”²⁴ Despite the hopes of civil rights advocates, however, World War I did not prove to be a fruitful period for racial inclusion. Indeed, racial violence increased in the war’s aftermath, most notably in the “Red Summer” of 1919.²⁵

World War II, by contrast, is often thought of as the exemplar of the good war, both in terms of its justification and its linkage to minority incorporation. Despite their disappointments with World War I, civil rights advocates again supported the war effort. This time, they hoped, their rights claims would be more successful. If any war were to be a positive force for black civil rights advocates, World War II – a war waged in part against a racist regime, regularly justified in broadly egalitarian rhetoric – is an extremely likely candidate. Inasmuch as I want to complicate this notion and highlight the diverse, even contradictory effects of this particular war on American racial politics, this project has implications for broader scholarly debates about the extent to which wars are, to simplify matters somewhat, “good” or “bad” for marginalized groups. But before turning more directly to the case of World War II, the next section provides historical background information on civil rights politics in the first half of the twentieth century. By examining this historical lead-in, the role of World War II can be more readily gleaned.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Although popular accounts of the American civil rights movement focus on the 1950s and 1960s, historians have increasingly emphasized the importance of earlier periods of civil rights organizing.²⁶ The Niagara

²⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Close Ranks,” *The Crisis*, July 1918. For a discussion of historical debates regarding Du Bois’ editorial, see William Jordan, “‘The Damnable Dilemma’: African-American Accommodation and Protest During World War I,” *Journal of American History* 81(4), 1995, 1562–1583

²⁵ Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 225. See also Chad Williams, “World War I in the Historical Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois,” *Modern American History* 1(1), 2018, 3–22.

²⁶ Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American History* 75(3), 1988,