

World War II: The Beginnings

During the war fought “to make the world safe for democracy,” the United States was far from ready to extend full equality to its own black citizens. Black workers faced discrimination in wartime employment, and the more than 1 million black troops who served in World War II were placed in segregated units commanded solely by whites. Both at home and abroad, World War II “immeasurably magnified the Negro’s awareness of the disparity between the American profession and practice of democracy,” NAACP president Walter White observed.

Executive Order 8802

On the home front, activists pushed two strategies. First, A. Philip Randolph, whose **Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters** was the most prominent black trade union, called for a march on Washington in early 1941. Randolph planned to bring 100,000 protesters to the nation’s capital to call for equal opportunity for black workers in war jobs — then just beginning to expand with President Franklin Roosevelt’s pledge to supply the Allies with materiel. To avoid a divisive protest, FDR issued Executive Order 8802 in June of that year, prohibiting racial discrimination in defense industries, and Randolph agreed to cancel the march. The resulting Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) had few enforcement powers, but it set an important precedent: federal action. Randolph’s efforts showed that white leaders and institutions could be swayed by concerted African American pressure. It would be a critical lesson for the movement.

The Double V Campaign

A second strategy jumped from the pages of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the foremost African American newspapers of the era. It was the brainchild of an ordinary cafeteria worker from Kansas. In a 1942 letter to the editor, James G. Thompson urged that “colored Americans adopt the double VV for a double victory” — victory over fascism abroad and victory over racism at home. Edgar Rouzeau, editor of the paper’s New York office, agreed: “Black America must fight two wars and win in both.” Instantly dubbed the Double V Campaign, Thompson’s notion, with Rouzeau’s backing spread like wildfire through black communities across the country. African Americans would demonstrate their loyalty and citizenship by fighting the Axis powers. But they would also demand, peacefully but emphatically, the defeat of racism at home. “The suffering and privation may be great,” Rouzeau told his readers, “but the rewards look even greater.”

The Double V met considerable resistance. In war industries, factories periodically shut down in Chicago, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and other cities because of “hate strikes”: the refusal of white workers to labor alongside black workers. Detroit was especially tense. Referring to the potential for racial strife, *Life* magazine reported in

1942 that “Detroit is Dynamite. . . . It can either blow up Hitler or blow up America.” In 1943, it nearly did the latter. On a hot summer day, whites from the city’s ethnic European neighborhoods taunted and beat African Americans in a local park. Three days of rioting ensued in which thirty-four people were killed, twenty-five of them black. Federal troops were called in to restore order.

Despite such incidents, and to some degree because of them, a generation was spurred into action during the war years. In New York City, employment discrimination on the city’s transit lines prompted one of the first bus boycotts in the nation’s history, led in 1941 by Harlem minister Adam Clayton Powell Jr. In Chicago, James Farmer and three other members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a nonviolent peace organization, founded the **Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)** in 1942. FOR and CORE embraced the philosophy of nonviolent direct action espoused by Mahatma Gandhi of India. Another FOR member in New York and proponent of direct action, Bayard Rustin, led one of the earliest challenges to southern segregation, the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation. Meanwhile, after the war, hundreds of thousands of African American veterans used the GI Bill to go to college, trade school, or graduate school, placing themselves in a position to push against segregation. At the war’s end, Powell affirmed that “the black man . . . is ready to throw himself into the struggle to make the dream of America become flesh and blood, bread and butter.”

Cold War Civil Rights

Demands for justice persisted in the early years of the Cold War. African American efforts were propelled by symbolic victories — as when Jackie Robinson broke through the color line in major league baseball by joining the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 — but the growing black vote in northern cities proved more consequential. During World War II, more than a million African Americans migrated to northern and western cities, where they joined the Democratic Party of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal ([Map 26.1](#)). This newfound political leverage awakened northern liberals, many of whom became allies of civil rights advocates. Ultimately, however, the Cold War produced mixed results, as the nation’s growing anticommunism opened some avenues for civil rights while closing others.

Civil Rights and the New Deal Coalition

African American leaders were uncertain what to expect from President Truman, inheritor of the New Deal coalition but not opposed to using racist language himself. Though he did not immediately support social equality for African Americans, Truman supported civil rights because he believed in equality before the law. Moreover, he understood the growing importance of the small but often decisive black vote in key northern states such as New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. Civil rights activists Randolph and Powell — along with vocal white liberals such as Hubert Humphrey, the mayor of Minneapolis, and members of Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), a liberal organization — pressed Truman to act.

With no support for civil rights in Congress, Truman turned to executive action. In 1946, he appointed the Presidential Committee on Civil Rights, whose 1947 report, **“To Secure These Rights,”** called for robust federal action to ensure black equality. With the report’s recommendations in mind, in 1948 Truman issued an executive order desegregating employment in federal agencies and, under pressure from Randolph’s Committee Against Jim Crow in Military Service, desegregated the armed forces. Truman then sent a message to Congress asking that every one of the report’s recommendations — including the abolition of poll taxes and the restoration of the Fair Employment Practice Committee — be made into law. It was the most aggressive and politically bold call for racial equality by the leader of a major political party since

Reconstruction.

Truman’s boldness was too much for southern Democrats. Under the leadership of Strom Thurmond, governor of South Carolina, white Democrats from the South formed the **States’ Rights Democratic Party**, known popularly as the Dixiecrats, for the 1948 election ([Chapter 24](#)). This brought into focus an internal struggle developing within the Democratic Party and its still-formidable New Deal coalition. Would the civil rights aims of the party’s liberal wing alienate southern white Democrats, as well as many suburban whites in the North? It was the first hint of the discord that would eventually divide the Democratic Party in the 1960s.

Race and Anticommunism

The Cold War both helped and impeded the civil rights movement. In a time of growing fear of communist expansionism, Truman worried about America’s image in the world. He reminded Americans that when whites and blacks “fail to live together in peace,” that failure harmed “the cause of democracy itself in the whole world.” Indeed, the Soviet Union used American racism to discredit the United States abroad. “We cannot escape the fact that our civil rights record has been an issue in world politics,” the Committee on Civil Rights wrote. International tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union thus appeared to strengthen the hand of civil rights leaders, because America needed to demonstrate to the rest of the world that its racial climate was improving (America in Global Context).

However, the Cold War, McCarthyism, and the hunt for subversives at home also held the civil rights movement back. Civil rights opponents charged that racial integration was “communistic,” and the NAACP was banned in many southern states as an “anti-American” organization. Black Americans who spoke favorably of the Soviet Union, such as the actor and singer Paul Robeson, or had been “fellow travelers” in the 1930s, such as the pacifist Rustin, were persecuted. Robeson, whose career was destroyed by such accusations, told House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) interrogators, “My father was a slave, and my people died to build this country, and I am going to . . . have a part of it just like you.” The fate of people like Robeson showed that the Cold War could work *against* the civil rights cause just as easily as for it.