

ne month before D-Day, Pvt. Charles F. Wilson—an African American medical corpsman stationed at Davis-Monthan Army Air Field near Tucson, Arizona—wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt applauding his recent affirmation of the central goals of the Allied armies: freedom, equality, and justice for all, regardless of race, color, or creed. As Private Wilson pointed out, however, “the picture in our country is marred by one of the strangest paradoxes in our whole fight against world fascism. The United States Armed Forces, to fight for World Democracy, is within itself undemocratic. Are the Chinese people to believe that we are fighting to bring them freedom, equality, and justice, when they can see that in our Armed Forces we are not even practicing ourselves what we are preaching?”¹

Private Wilson’s perceptive comment identified a core irony of the conflict: namely, that the United States military remained segregated during World War II, reflecting the values of the Jim Crow society it purported to defend. But as several scholars have maintained, the war also stimulated a shift in the social landscape that upheld racial segregation and thereby created a favorable setting for the postwar civil rights movement. Historian Beth Bailey writes that during the war, the federal government expanded its reach into the social and economic lives of American communities, disrupting many local practices—Jim Crow among them—for the sake of national mobilization against the Axis powers. Effective mobilization required centralization, and, by the end of the war, many military officials concluded that centralization, in turn, required multiracial integration, not for purposes of social justice necessarily, as Private Wilson might have liked, but for purposes of creating a stronger, nationally unified military that protects the shared interests of a nationally bound citizenry.²

Several factors combined during World War II to produce this reassessment of racial thinking. In both Japan and Germany, militaristic factions had risen to power through strident assertions of racial supremacy. In an attempt to clearly distinguish itself from its enemies, the U.S. government employed the rhetoric of racial justice and equality. Though such rhetoric amounted to little more than official propaganda, an increasingly militant black civil rights movement had been lobbying for years to reconcile such rhetoric with reality. Black newspapers like the *Crisis* had drawn comparisons between Nazism and Jim Crow since at least the mid-1930s. Charles Hamilton Houston, for example, chief counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and himself a World War I veteran, wrote Roosevelt in 1937 that given the racist nature of Nazi Germany, the support of African Americans would be crucial in any future war against the fascist state. Black leaders like Houston, as well as black soldiers like Wilson, were likewise quick to emphasize the international dimensions of the struggle; the United States would need to work closely with dark-skinned people from around the world who were themselves challenging colonial systems of racial supremacy.³ Leaders of the U.S. war effort took these lessons to heart, evidenced in an April 1942 memorandum to Maj. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower: “While military necessity adequately justifies our use of colored troops, the importance of an example of racial cooperation must not be overlooked at a time when so much hinges upon the actions of India and China.”⁴

But both black militancy and the need for multiracial alliances had been present in World War I, which produced no serious reforms regarding segregation. The most crucial new factor that distinguished the Second World War lay in the role played by the social sciences. In the 1940s, the federal government recruited numerous sociologists and anthropologists to monitor public morale and analyze the foreign cultures with which it worked. The war also appeared to legitimize the ideas of scholars like Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict who wrote popular studies describing race as a historical and social construct rather than a fixed biological trait. The most prominent of these studies, Gunnar Myrdal's 1944 *An American Dilemma*, predicted that the war against fascism would hasten the traditional clash between the United States' cherished national ideals and the country's local realities, ultimately resulting in planned, centralized social reform. Historians have questioned the extent to which white Americans actually adopted a more liberal perspective regarding race during World War II; certainly their racial behavior, if not their minds, did become more progressive. The war caused both soldiers and civilian workers to encounter more racial diversity than they had probably known before, and the Office of War Information (OWI) issued posters showing blacks and whites working together in a common cause. While most white Americans perhaps did not accept the professed goal of the war as a struggle to end racism, such a goal did at least become part of mainstream discourse. As a result, many southern whites came to believe that World War II marked the greatest threat to traditional race relations in their region since Reconstruction.⁵

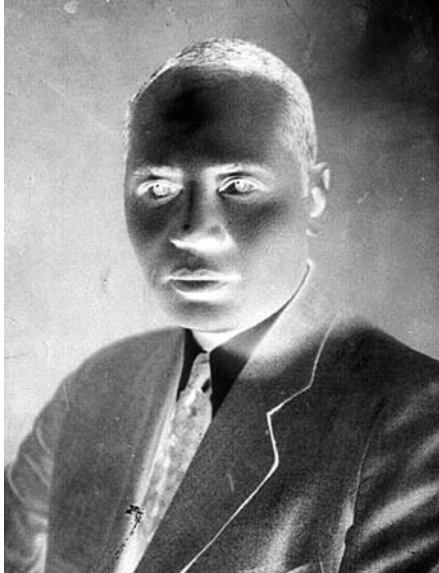
African Americans had served in every U.S. war since the Revolution, including World War I when the 92d and 93d Infantry Divisions had fought briefly in active front areas. Prompted by reports of cowardice and abuse of black troops by their white officers, a subsequent study by the War Department concluded that while leadership by black officers might enhance the performance of these outfits, such units would always be second-rate. Although the study was never widely disseminated, it did serve as an unofficial guide for policymakers through the interwar years.⁶ By 1940, the seeming

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Executive Order 8802 in June 1941. This created the Committee on Fair Employment Practices (FEPC) within the Office of Production Management, which was authorized to investigate and redress charges of workplace discrimination. The previous year, the Selective Service Act had required the armed forces to absorb blacks at the same level as their proportion in the national population. Roosevelt also made a handful of significant black appointments, including that of Col. Benjamin Davis to the rank of brigadier general and that of Judge William H. Hastie to civilian aide to the secretary of war. Hastie understood the expectation of him was to advise the department on racial matters.⁷

As of September 1941, the U.S. Army was actually accepting more blacks than the anticipated 9 to 10 per cent of total recruits required by the Selective Service Act. Following Pearl Harbor, the Army had to postpone the induction of black draftees until separate barracks and other facilities could be built—one consequence of its stubborn commitment to segregation. The military as a whole never met the act's goal of black enlistment proportionate to blacks in the civilian population, at least not during the war itself; by 1943 African Americans constituted only 7.4 percent of enlisted men. Such might have been expected from the Army and War Department, described by black leaders of the time as the most discriminatory of all federal agencies. The Army followed the decades-old practice

of assigning southern white officers to command black troops, on the assumption that they understood the black psyche.⁸ Some of this prejudice entered a 1942 report titled “The Colored Troops Problem,” which maintained that while individual black soldiers could be satisfactory, as a group they were race-conscious, oversensitive, and in need of more training to perform the same tasks as whites. In his position as aide to Secretary Henry L. Stimson, Hastie argued that the Army could utilize many more black recruits and in a greater variety of service if black combat units could be formed as components of larger white regi-



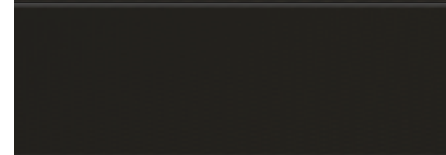
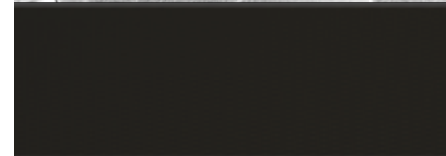
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GOAL OF THE WARASA STRUGGLE TO END RACISM

inevitability of a second global conflict caused African American leaders like Walter White and A. Philip Randolph to demand full integration into the armed services and civilian workforce. More specifically, Randolph’s threat of a March on Washington—akin to the one later implemented by



Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963—led to Roosevelt's



John J. McCloy

William H. Hastie

Truman K. Gibson

ments. Hastie's plan essentially called for a type of experimental integration, which, if successful, could inspire a general plan of integration across all branches of the armed forces. Since some in the Army saw this as needless sociological experimenting, Hastie's idea set him at odds with his boss, Stimson, and, more importantly, with Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall.⁹

In fact, Hastie's superiors were somewhat correct in seeing his plan as a recipe for social equality. Hastie had worked closely with the NAACP, known for its harsh criticism of military policies. Hastie's outspokenness caused him to become marginalized within the War Department. When in August 1942 the new Advisory Committee on Negro Troop Policies was created, to be chaired by Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy, Hastie was neither included nor even informed. Announcing that his office had not been allowed to accomplish anything of importance during its two-year existence, Hastie tendered his resignation in September. His departure having launched a furor in black newspapers, the McCloy Committee—in an attempt to quell the angry voices—invited African American lawyer Truman K. Gibson to succeed

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PERCENT OF WHITE TROOPS FAVORED SEPARATE OUTFITS

Hastie as civilian aide and to attend the advisory committee's meetings. More accommodating than Hastie, Gibson seemed less concerned with overturning segregation policy than with making incremental adjustments to it.¹⁰

The approach of Gibson and McCloy, more conservative than that of Hastie, characterized the committee's work for the duration of the war, producing reforms that one historian has described as more symbolic than substantive. Such reforms included or

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dering commanders to avoid abusive language that undermined morale and replacing offensive signs like "white" and "colored" with supposedly neutral ones like "No. 1" and "No. 2." Even these small steps, however, marked quite a change in military tradition, demonstrating some heightened sensitivity to African Americans' concerns. In the spring of 1943, the Adjutant General's Office directed all camp authorities to enforce equal access to recreational facilities, even though whites and blacks might still be required to use those facilities at separate times. McCloy's committee explained these policies not as examples of racial segregation but of organizational separation, a subtle difference endorsed by none other than General Davis. Military literature carefully omitted any principles—implicit or explicit—about racial superiority or inferiority, instead justifying continued separation on the basis of avoiding trouble between soldiers of different races. One 1943 survey indicated that nearly 90 percent of white troops favored separate outfits compared to 38 percent of black troops. Even that lower number seems surprising given the unpopularity of segregation among African Americans, but policymakers interpreted the findings as recognition of

the practical problems associated with integration. Maintaining that the Army was only part of a larger social body, one manual writer declared that “the odds are very much in favor of less interracial friction if colored and white enlisted men continue to be organized in separate military units.”¹¹

Black manpower generally ran low during the war due to higher rejection rates, often for health reasons like venereal disease or failure to meet minimum educational requirements. The Army General Classification Test (AGCT) classified recruits according to their learning capacity. AGCT categories ran from 1, the highest, to 5, the lowest. Soldiers who scored 1 to 3 were expected to be leadership material or at the least technical specialists, while those scoring 4 or 5 usually became manual laborers. Eighty percent of African Americans scored in the 4 to 5 range, as compared to thirty percent for whites. Some called the AGCT an intelligence exam, but it was not; the test was clearly designed to reflect educational opportunities, and how those opportunities were understood

and applied. AGCT scores showed that blacks and whites who originated from similar backgrounds in the South—a region known for poor schools and a dearth of newspapers and radios—performed about the same. Early in the war, policymakers acknowledged the educational deficiencies of black men to be environmental. Still, the time

required to elevate black recruits to the equivalent standards of most whites was a risky investment, outweighed by the more pressing task of preparing a large, efficient fighting force.¹²

These issues became paramount in the wake of a wave of racial violence that rocked the country in the summer of 1943. Beginning with the “zoot suit” riots in Los Angeles that involved mostly Mexican Americans, cities like Detroit and New York expe-



CELEBRITIES



SUCH AS

JOE LOUIS AND LENA HORNE TOURED THE CAMPS TO BOOST RACIAL PRIDE

rienced mob violence between blacks and whites that left dozens of persons dead or injured. At training camps across the South, multiple reports surfaced of African American troops responding with violence to military and civilian discrimination. Just as the United States was attempting to present a unified front against fascism, these disturbances awakened paranoid fears about rampant disloyalty and internal sabotage. Studies done in the immediate aftermath of the riots blamed Communist and Japanese infiltration of the NAACP, fostering a feeling of “implied racial affinity between the Japanese, the ‘American’ negro and other colored peoples.” One War Department report particularly faulted the black press for “promoting discontent and an inferiority complex among the [black] troops by magnifying imaginary injustices or by false statements.” Once calmer heads prevailed, the McCloy Committee recommended improved training of black military police and convinced Army Chief of Staff Marshall to resist suggestions to censor the black press. A more sober analysis of the Detroit

riot emphasized the city's history of interracial job competition and housing shortages and also revealed a fact that seemed to refute everything policymakers thought they knew about segregation: namely, that those blacks and whites who worked with each other in integrated factories did not participate in the rioting.¹³

Resigned to the fact that they had no control over attitudes of white civilians, military officials did believe that the attitudes of black civilians and servicemen might be improved—and racial violence diminished—through better relations with the African American media. In 1942, a year before the riots in Los Angeles and elsewhere, the Army's Bureau of Public Relations launched a liaison office for black journalists and assisted with two propaganda films, *The Negro Soldier* and *Teamwork*, to honor the efforts of black soldiers. Celebrities such as Joe Louis and Lena Horne toured the camps to boost racial pride, while in the summer of 1942, at Camp Lockett, California, Bettie Davis, Hattie McDaniel, Dinah Shore, and Mantan Moreland gave performances honoring the black cavalry regiments that served in the Indian Wars and Philippine Insurrection. The disturbances of 1943

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boosted these activities, starting with a meeting between OWI representatives and leading black newspapermen later that year. African American journalists protested the government's depiction of them as rabble-rousers and indicated a wish to cooperate with the Bureau of Public Relations to identify black individuals from the hero and casualty lists so as to better publicize their war contributions. In a new spirit of collaboration between the black press and OWI, the mainstream media would henceforth be pressured to run more stories about African Americans' courage rather than the usual stories about their supposed criminal and immoral behavior. And, of course, as more stories about black loyalty and patriotism appeared, hope increased that black enlistment would rise and the efforts of possible Communist or Japanese propagandists would be subverted.¹⁴

A series of OWI bulletins and Army training manuals codified this new emphasis on media management. A research division report titled "The Negro and the War" declared that "The role of the Negro in the armed services must be publicized more than it is. . . . The increasing removal of discrimination against the Negroes in war industries and civilian defense should be publicized. . . . The war must be interpreted in such a way that the Negro feels he is fighting for something, too—a strengthening of democracy at home and abroad, greater rights under the law, a greater opportunity to improve his conditions." With such rhetoric now a part of official government policy, it was no wonder many defenders of Jim Crow feared the postwar future. Regarding the prevention of interracial trouble on military bases, a handbook for officers of black troops warned that "colored soldiers have been angered

into mob action by stories of mis treatment. White soldiers have been similarly goaded by distorted and utterly false tales about Negro behavior. The antidote for such inflammatory rumors is to be found . . . squarely with the truth so stated that it cannot be misunderstood, ignored, or doubted. This should be done as quickly as possible, just as soon as the responsible officer learns that dangerous tales are circulating."¹⁵ Through messages like these, the federal government in es

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sence shifted from a publicity style that for decades had ignored or demeaned blacks' military accomplishments to one that now elevated those achievements into the public spotlight.

No less revolutionary was a similar, if less successful, attempt to eliminate prejudice in the Army itself. At the recommendation of the McCloy Committee, a host of new manuals was produced to help officers better understand the black troops whom they commanded. These manuals drew on research generated by a branch of the Information and Education Division chaired by a civilian technical director named Samuel A. Stouffer. A sociologist at the University of Chicago, Professor Stouffer had assisted Myrdal with *An American Dilemma*, and, with the help of fellow sociologist Donald Young who had introduced the term *minority group* into colloquial vocabulary, Stouffer wrote a pamphlet titled *Command of Negro Troops*. Distributed to white officers in 1944, the pamphlet summarized the scientific view of race by rejecting all claims of inherent superiority or inferiority based on skin color. *Command of Negro Troops* also explained and condemned those attitudes and behaviors most likely to create resentment in black servicemen. For instance, officers were warned to avoid jokes that relied on whites' traditional view of blacks and to refrain from using terms that could be seen as derogatory such as *boy*, *darky*, *uncle*, or *mammy*. Stouffer cast the black soldier in a new and clever light; pointing out that blacks quickly learn whether their officers see them as child-like or backward, they soon take advantage of such officers by malingering and "acting like the dullard his officer believes he is" to keep expectations low. In a similar vein, the Army Service Forces issued a more detailed, textbook-like manual titled *Leadership and the Negro Soldier* that explored African American history and social structure. The official newspaper *Army Talk* even began to run articles condemning discrimination, such as one titled "How Prejudices Develop."¹⁶

The new training manuals illustrated the extent to which not only the ideas but the methods of social science had permeated military leaders' thinking. *Leadership and the Negro Soldier* described the meaning of the term *stereo type*, defined in the psychological sense as a fixed mental picture perpetrated by offensive film and radio depictions. In what today might be called sensitivity training, the manuals' authors stated that most whites routinely encountered blacks in construction and everyday

Most reputable biologists and psychologists hold that:

- a) both biological and cultural traits are inherited
- b) only biological traits are inherited
- c) neither biological nor cultural traits are inherited; or
- d) cultural traits alone are inherited.

The correct answer is *b*.

This was followed by what may have

been the most revolutionary question of all.

The best way to determine Negroes' attitudes is to:

- a) ask the whites
- b) read the daily press
- c) listen to the radio; or
- d) ask the Negroes.

The correct answer is *d*.

The new policies and literature

concerning African American troops illustrate the extent to which intellectual debates over the meaning of race had influenced the military and highlight the military's sincere desire to secure the support and loyalty of blacks and other minority groups in the war effort. At the heart of these changes lay the crucial need to repudiate doctrines of Aryan supremacy and Japanese invincibility. A section of *Command of Negro Troops* carried the statement that "The Germans have a theory that they are a race of supermen born to conquer all peoples of inferior blood. This is nonsense, the like of which has no place in the Army of the United States—the Army which has become great through the common effort of all peoples." Southern legislators and a handful of War Department officials saw the dangerous potential of these sentiments and did not wait for the end of the war to begin suppressing them. In 1944, the Army printed fifty-five thousand copies of the book *The Races of Mankind* by Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish, an anthropological attack on the concept of race by two leading scientists. The copies were to be distributed to Army personnel to help combat Nazi racial ideology. But following an investigation by the Committee on Military Affairs in the House of

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jobs; yet in the media blacks always appeared as beggars, malingerers, and entertainers. Accepting these portrayals as fact was considered detrimental to the war effort. African Americans' low average AGCT scores were explained as the result of socioeconomic background, not of poor native intelligence. Similar tests during World War I had shown Greeks, Poles, and Italians as scoring equally low. Yet as these recent immigrants remained in the United States and assimilated into the melting pot, their scores advanced, so arguably the same would happen with blacks. Stouffer and Young made very clear the sociological understanding of race, which asserted that "in all the vast number of studies . . . during the past two or three decades, there is not one piece of research which proves that Negroes are, as a group, mentally or emotionally defective by heredity." Officers were advised not to compliment black soldiers for supposedly inborn abilities like music, sports, or dancing, as this offended them and lowered morale. *Leadership and the Negro Soldier* even included a test bank of multiple choice questions to show the unscientific basis of prejudiced views:

Representatives, the book was rejected and the copies destroyed on grounds that Benedict and Weltfish represented the interests of special minority groups and that *The Races of Mankind* contained controversial propaganda.¹⁸

Despite an enlightened tone, the new manuals continued to insist on the need for segregation, explained as a reflection of civilian society and not as a military value. Yet this sentiment became less tenable over time as the Army confronted multiple instances of where segregation undermined the effective training and utilization of black troops. Commanders complained often about the low physical fitness and lack of stamina among African American soldiers, problems which—if sociological theories were correct—should have been alleviated

once they entered military life. Army doctors blamed part of the problem on blacks' high melancholy and lack of will to keep up with training. In some cases, chronic malingerers or complainers were relegated to special "casual units" to prevent them from affecting the better

soldiers. But once such men were grouped together, surgeons maintained, their fancied ills became real and their deterioration as soldiers accelerated. Physicians also studied the exceptionally high rate of venereal disease among black troops, which was seven to ten times higher than that for whites. Doctors attributed the cause to the limited recreational facilities for blacks in civilian areas; unlike white communities, the only stores, restaurants, and theaters available for blacks were often located in prostitution districts. As the reasoning went, if blacks enjoyed the same leisure opportunities—on and off the base—as whites, then their rates of venereal disease should go down. The obvious next step required military intervention in civilian communities.¹⁹

The military's unwillingness to do so may account for why the new approach had limited success. In 1945, the War Department ordered a study on the postwar potential of black troops based on their experiences in World War II. The study revealed that the number of disturbances involving black soldiers had diminished considerably since 1943, but that may have been caused merely by improved use of military police. Most notably, the McCloy Committee had decided that since a greater proportionate participation of minorities in the military was likely to continue, the War Department should move toward a workable policy of integration—exactly the same point argued by Judge Hastie before his resignation three years earlier. All-black units and organizations that worked with blacks submitted individual reports, most affirming the social science view that African Americans' deficiencies were caused by a shared history of deprivation. As consensus gradually emerged that African Americans' military contributions had been substandard and with innate racial differences ruled out as an explanation, many came to regard military segregation itself as the main cause for disparity.²⁰

During the Battle of the Bulge, a number of black infantry units merged into white platoons and were sent to the front lines. Some divisional commanders were delighted with their service but

not all. In February 1945, a task force of the 92d Infantry Division, or "Buffalo Division," had been pulled out of action after three days of straggling and disorganization. Incurring the wrath of the NAACP and the black press, Truman Gibson—the black civilian aide to the secretary of war—publicly acknowledged that the 92d's performance was unacceptable, with numerous instances of panicky retreats, poor discipline, and bad morale. In an action that won him few friends among civil rights leaders, Gibson nonetheless posed a shrewd argument that assisted civil rights in the long run: that the real problem was segregation itself. Gibson pointed out that most black combat forces had been

trained near hostile civilian communities and led by officers who had been dumped into black units after failing to meet proper standards in white ones. He contended successfully to Marshall and others that African Americans' service records could not be compared to those of whites since segregation started them from different playing fields. In 1946, a board chaired by Lt. Gen. Alvan C. Gillem recommended that large all-black units like the 92d be disbanded and that numerous small black units be assigned to larger white ones. No less a convert to integration than John McCloy complained that Gillem's board had ignored the basic problem of separating soldiers by race. Gibson was actually more optimistic, believing that Gillem's recommendation marked a move toward weakening racism in the Army, just as federal courts were undermining it in civilian society.²¹

Complete desegregation of the U.S. armed forces would have to wait until President Harry S. Truman's 1948 executive order. The fight to desegregate and reform the rest of America would continue much longer and perseveres still. But World War II hastened both of those movements,

most notably through an ideological assault on the concept of race that reached fruition in United Nations Resolution 217–A, asserting the universal rights and equality of all humans. As the federal government centralized its authority and power, minority groups gained a temporary opportunity to demand more inclusion in the name of national unity. The U.S. Army lay at the center of that battle, for although questions of racial justice and morality did not strongly resonate with military

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EVEN ADOLF HITLER AND OTHER ADVOCATES OF RACIAL SUPREMACY DID THEIR UNINTENDED PART

when it ruled that being “separate” meant being inherently “unequal.” World War II also gave thousands of returning soldiers a different vision of what the United States could be, white veterans as well as black. Author William Leckie ended his service with the Army Air Forces as an officer overseeing two hundred black airmen returning from the South Pacific, an assignment he regarded at first as onerous. But after the men impressed him with their attitudes and dedication, he returned to civilian life and twenty years later wrote *The Buffalo Soldiers*, the first major study of African Americans in the frontier army—a book that has since become a classic work inspiring dozens of other histories on blacks in the military.²²

Many people played roles in nudging the U.S. Army toward a genuine reassessment of race in World War II. Civil rights activists and black journalists kept the issue of segregation in the headlines. Sociologists and anthropologists wrote well-researched books and essays that demonstrated the

social causes of racial inequality. Even Adolf Hitler and other advocates of racial supremacy did their unintended part by equating racism so strongly with their war aims. But perhaps the real heroes were those whose names we will never know because their actions by definition were unextraordinary. These were the thousands of soldiers, officers, and defense workers of all races who worked in fully or partially integrated settings and managed—if not to actually understand each other—at least to tolerate each other. By their very inaction, they revealed the faulty assumption on which segregation rested, namely, that integration leads to inter racial hostility. Their quiet efforts did not go ignored, and they contributed to an erosion of the foundations of American apartheid, questions of efficiency and image very much did. At each step through the war, military officials had tried unsuccessfully to attack the ideology of racism abroad while simultaneously justifying the continued practice of racial separation at home. As it became clear that segregation weakened morale, stoked black-white tensions, undermined the United States' position among its Allies, drained resources, and in essence created inferior troops and therefore an inferior Army, some policymakers conceded the necessity of the next step—the same step that the Warren court would take in 1954



