



0. JACKIE ROBINSON - WORLD WAR II - Story Preface

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President Harry Truman addresses the NAACP on June 29, 1947. He made good on his promise to end the federal government's policy of racial segregation and discrimination in the U.S. military. Photo online, courtesy the Truman Library.

Why did the U.S military employ an officially racist policy during World War II? Why were Jackie Robinson - and other African-American soldiers, sailors and airmen - treated as second-class citizens even though they were risking, and sacrificing, lives for their country?

The source of the trouble stemmed from a study concluding that black people were inferior to whites when it came to military combat and command. It was entitled "Memorandum for the Chief of Staff regarding Employment of Negro Man Power in War, November 10, 1925."

Reading [the confidential report](#) with modern eyes, one gets the sense that preexisting prejudice had clouded the vision of military investigators and writers responsible for this document. Many examples support the various findings, but it is fair to wonder about their factual basis.

Although not marked "Secret," the report was treated as such. Today it is maintained by the National Archives at the [FDR Presidential Library and Museum](#). It contains a policy of racial [discrimination](#) against (and resulting morale problems among) [African-Americans in the military](#).

The words are very upsetting. They must be read, however, in order to understand the "legal" source of prejudice against African-Americans in the U.S. military. From the report's beginning "Notes," we read:

Compared to the white man he [a black man] is admittedly of inferior mentality. He is inherently weak in character. ("Notes on proposed plan," point 2.)

The negro, particularly the officer, failed in the World War. (Notes, point 4.)

The Mobilization Plan [to be implemented if future hostilities arise] provides for approximately 140,000 negroes for non-combatant duty. This would leave approximately 30,000 for the experiment of combat duty. (Notes, point 7.)

The majority of negroes [left at home](#) will be in the southern states where they will be [needed for labor](#) and where they can best be handled by competent whites. (Notes, point 8.)

In the body of the report, we see sweeping opinions attributed to War-College members:

In the process of evolution the American negro has not progressed as far as the other sub-species of the human family. As a race he has not developed leadership qualities. His mental inferiority and the inherent weaknesses of his character are factors that must be considered with great care in the preparation of any plan for [his employment in war](#). (Point 1)

Negro soldiers as individuals should not be assigned to white units. (Point 8)

Negro officers should not be placed over white officers, non-commissioned officers or soldiers.
(Point 13)

Negro officer candidates ... should be sheltered, messed and instructed separately from white candidates. (Point 14)

...If the negro makes good the way is left open for him to go into combat eventually with all-negro units. (Point 16)

...The plan is believed to be eminently fair to both the negro and the white man. Political or racial pressure should not be allowed to alter it. (Point 17)

Additional support for the report, from commanders in the field, are set forth in the "References" section. Two examples underscore the extent of the problem:

The Negro as an officer is a failure ...

I wish to go on record as expressing my opinion that colored officers as a class, are unfit to command troops in present-day warfare.

Believing in his own dignity, and that of his fellow man, Lt. Jack R. Robinson - a cavalry officer - did what he could to help more African-Americans become officers. Among other things, he focused his efforts on a school where blacks could become officer candidates.

It wasn't enough, though.

In 1944, knowing he was risking a court martial, Robinson took a stand to make a point.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/JACKIE-ROBINSON-WORLD-WAR-II-42-Jackie-Robinson>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/JACKIE-ROBINSON-WORLD-WAR-II-42-Jackie-Robinson>

Questions 2 Ponder

Why Did the U.S. Military Discriminate against African-Americans in WWII?

What is your assessment of the 1925 War-College Report on "Employment of Negro Man Power in War?" What was the reason such a report was prepared?

How could the War-College authors, of this report, reach such sweeping and generalized conclusions about all African-Americans?

The report itself notes: "While the basic communication is not marked 'Secret,' it has been so regarded at the War College." Why would this non-secret document be treated secretly at the War College?

Explain how this report may have had a bearing on the treatment of African-Americans in the U.S. military (and on the jobs to which they were assigned).

Media Stream



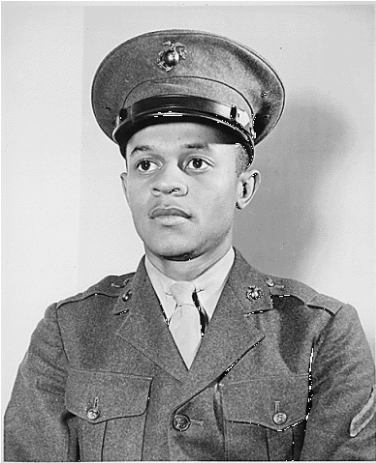
Photo # 80-G-K-15541 Wardroom meal on USS Cero, 1943

Military Prejudice - Blacks Serving Whites

Photo of a scene in 1943, aboard the USS Cero, online courtesy U.S. National Archives.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Military-Prejudice-Blacks-Serving-Whites>



First African-American Marine - 1942

Image from Record Group 208: Records of the Office of War Information, 1926 - 1951.

Online, courtesy U.S. National Archives, ARC Identifier 535870.

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War Effort - Assembling Airplane Flight Decks

Image from Record Group 208: Records of the Office of War Information, 1926 - 1951.

Online, courtesy U.S. National Archives, ARC Identifier 535810.

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Janitors at North American Aviation

Image from Record Group 208: Records of the Office of War Information, 1926 - 1951.

Online, courtesy U.S. National Archives, ARC Identifier 535801.

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Black Soldier - Knows 7 Languages

Image from Record Group 208: Records of the Office of War Information, 1926 - 1951. Online, courtesy U.S. National Archives, ARC Identifier 535873.

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Naval Messmen - Additional Duties

Photograph from General Records of the Department of the Navy, online courtesy U.S. National Archives. Image number: ARC Identifier 520597.

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U.S. Navy - "All-Negro Units"

Photo online, courtesy U. S. National Archives - ARC identifier 4700166.

Original photo location: NARA's Northeast Region (Boston) (NRAAB), 380 Trapelo Road, Waltham, MA, 02452-6399.

View this asset at:

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Lt. Jack R. Robinson - Cavalry Officer

Image of Lt. Robinson, online courtesy Robinson Foundation via Earlham College.

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