How President Truman Helped Spearhead the Civil Rights Movement by Desegregating the Military After World War II

By: Robby Smith

After the conclusion of World War II, the United States underwent a period of cultural change. Economic, political, and social issues that were improving as a result of the United States' victory in the war. Chief among them, was attempting to remedy the United

States' own racial issues. Many areas in the United States remained segregated. The irony of the U.S. fighting a war because a foreign country was committing genocide on certain minorities while black children could not even attend school with their white peers is obvious. One of the many key contributors to this change was President Harry Truman. As President, he set up committees dedicated to working towards racial equality, made Executive Orders in favor of desegregation, and supported legislation that would advance the Civil Rights Movements. Truman took over

after his predecessor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, died in April of 1945, and Truman guided the United States to victory in the war.

After the war ended, Truman would go on to sign Executive Order 9981, which ended segregation in the U.S. military. This was a crucial and foundational step toward the desegregation of the rest of the U.S.. Truman was instrumental in ending segregation in the armed forces because he recognized the efforts of black soldiers in World War II, saw this as an opportunity to contribute to the ongoing Civil Rights movement, and learned that this was a more severe issue than he realized by listening to letters that were written to him.

To examine why Truman felt desegregation of the military was necessary, it is important to examine the roles of nonwhites in the military. Dating back to the origins of white settlers in North America, the Native Americans sided with and against the white settlers. It would remain this way up until The War of 1812. At that point, Native Americans began to be replaced with black soldiers, and they were forced to serve in separate, segregated units. Throughout the Civil War, and both World Wars, African

Americans were able to serve, but were not considered good enough to serve in units with white people. In many cases, African Americans faced discriminatory practices during World War II. Neil Wynn, a Professor of twentieth-century American history at the University of Gloucestershire, describes the way they were impacted, specifically by the draft process. He claims:

> "African Americans sat on only 250 of the 6,442 draft boards…. The discriminatory patterns in the draft were fairly clear. For example, in 1940, 51.6 percent of African American draftees were designated Class I, available for immediate service, whereas the proportion of whites was 32.5 percent."[1]

Not only were they drafted in disproportionately high numbers, once they were in the military, they experienced inadequate programs. This caused their units to be less educated, leading to errors in some cases. These errors perpetuated the cycle, and reinforced the horrific belief that African Americans were inferior and segregation was necessary to prevent them from sabotaging the white units. Contrary to these beliefs, some all black units were very successful, and instrumental in winning the war. A memo drafted for the president

---

[1] Wynn, Neil. 2010. *The African American Experience during World War II.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 44.

entitled, "*Negroes in the Armed Forces"* shows some specific examples of this. It illustrates,

> "[S]howing utter contempt for 'master race' divisions facing them, American Negro artillerymen, firing 155 m. howitzers, are contributing to victory in France as the first colored combat artillery team in that sector. This outfit is the howitzer member of a four-unit artillery group that includes a battalion of 105's and two of 155 mm. 'Long Toms.'"[2]

The African American units were having success against the Nazis. The emphasis on the black units fighting against the "master race divisions" illustrates the irony of the situation; the black soldiers were fighting against a prejudicial group that viewed them as inferior, just as some of the men they were fighting under viewed them similarly. Their success in France, and everywhere else, was very evident, and the memo goes on to show how they were able to make an impact in other areas as well. Additionally:

> "There are two U. S, Navy anti-submarine vessels manned predominantly by Negro crews. The Marine Corps includes 16,000 Negroes who, in the Saipan engagement, for example, were described by war correspondents as the 'workingest men in the South Pacific, performing prodigious feats of labor both

[2] Memo to the President. 1945. "Negroes in Armed Forces." Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, 2.

> while under fire and after beachheads were well secured. Some unloaded boats for three days with little or no sleep, working in water up to waist deep’”[3]

This describes how blacks were successful members of the military even when they were not fighting. The memo also states, “Negro Marines did heroic work, too, at Guadalcanal. The Seabees also record the feats of the Negro construction workers in erecting structures under gunfire in the South Pacific.”[4] Blacks in the South Pacific unloaded boats and erected defense structures incessantly despite assuredly being exhausted, all the while they were under fire from enemies.This dedication would be crucial towards ending the war. After the conclusion of the war, Truman, and many others, recognized that segregation among the military was having adverse effects on the morale of the troops. Truman, as the

Commander in Chief, headed the War Department, along with his cabinet member (and Secretary of War) Robert Patterson. In *Circular No. 124-- "Utilization of Negro Manpower in the Postwar Army Policy", April 27, 1946,* it states, “The failures of Negro units

---

[3] Memo to the President. 1945. “Negroes in Armed Forces.” Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, 4.

[4] Ibid.

have in almost every case been attributed to the lack of leadership qualities of Junior officers and non-commissioned officers."[5] This was issued by the War Department and shows that the blame for failures of African American units lies with those that trained them, not in some inherent incompetency of the soldiers themselves. The War Department continues, stating, "Leadership, therefore, must be stressed, and the development of all attributes which contribute to this, and must be the prime objective of those responsible for the training of the postwar Army."[6] The War Department concluded that, for the most part, mistakes that were made by black units occurred because they did not have the proper training that was needed. This could not be sustained, especially with the outbreak of the Cold War imminent. Thus, the War Department, and Truman himself, started to look for solutions.

Pattersondetails changes he is looking to see implemented as of March 1947. In *Correspondence between Brien McMahon and Robert Patterson, March 7, 1947,* Patterson states:

> "Negro manpower in the post war Army will be utilized on a broader professional scale than has obtained heretofore. The

[5] War Department. 1946. Circular No. 124: *Utilization of Negro Manpower in the Postwar Army Policy.* April 27, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum. 7

[6] Ibid.

> development of leaders and specialists based on individual merit and ability to meet effectively the requirements of an expanded war Army will be accomplished through the medium of installations and organizations. Groupings of Negro units with white units in composite organization will be accepted policy"[7]

Patterson illustrates the way that they intended to combine black and white soldiers after the war. Combining these documents, it can be inferred that the US military leaders, including the Secretary of War and the President (who were major pieces of the War Department), were attempting to analyze the successes and failures of their units during the war, and they found that the racial stereotypes they allowed to sway their procedures were outright harmful to brave men that dedicated their lives towards supporting their country.

One of the primary reasons for Truman to advocate so vehemently against segregation is the impact of the Civil Rights movement at the time. While it was not as widespread and outspoken as it would become in the 1960s, the support for civil change was burgeoning quickly. Truman fits into the conversation directly because of his upbringing. Richard Dalfiume, who was a history professor at the University of Wisconsin, states, "What were the beliefs on civil rights

---

[7] Patterson, Robert. 1947. Correspondence between Brien McMahon and Robert Patterson, March 7, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum. 1

from this man from Missouri with a Southern heritage? Truman recalled later, 'I was raised amidst some violently prejudiced Southerners myself'; perhaps he reflected his own transformation on this matter when he stated his belief that 'the vast majority of good southerners understand that the blind prejudices of the past generations cannot continue in a free republic.'"[8] This emphasizes that Truman himself came from highly prejudicial beginnings. However, contrary to his adversaries on the topic of desegregation, he recognizes that he must adapt to the changes being presented by the Civil Rights movement. From the very beginning of his political career, this was apparently evident to him. Dalfiume continues, describing Truman's time in the Senate, "Truman consistently supported antilynching bills, signed petitions for cloture, and voted for amendments to the Selective Service Act of 1940 designed to prevent desegregation."[9] Truman was very serious about civil rights advancements from the very beginning of his career as a politician. When one factors in his background and the circumstances in which he grew up, it is clear that the bigotry he

---

[8] Dialfiume, Richard. 1969. *Desegregation of the United States Armed Forces*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.

[9] Dialfiume, Richard. 1969. *Desegregation of the United States Armed Forces*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press. 135

experienced was a key influence towards his choices later on. Additionally, in his correspondence with an NAACP leader and secretary, Walter White, Truman states, "This country and its people have one great goal in the conduct of our national affairs - the development of a moral order based on freedom and equality. That is the only way in which lasting peace can be brought to the world. That is the only way to fulfill our hopes for a more perfect democracy in our own country."[10] From this example, it is clear that Truman believed the actions of the NAACP and other such organizations that championed civil rights for minorities were essential to not just the advancement of the United States, but to the world as a whole.

This relates to the topic of desegregation because the people were not yet free and equal. Desegregating the military would be an important step towards that necessary freedom and equality. At the time, the United States had essentially taken the responsibility for policing the world and pushing for democracy rather than communism. It is clearly stated that Truman understood the necessity of improving the United States' own issues regarding oppression if they expected to do so worldwide. This put a large amount of pressure on him to

---

[10] Truman, Harry S. June 19, 1948. *Harry S. Truman to Walter White, with Related Material*, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, 1.

continue his work advocating for organizations such as the NAACP that were pushing for expanded civil rights. Consequently, these ideals that Truman possessed gained him many opponents as well. In 1950, he received a letter from Dr. R.L. Shirley entitled “Mr. President Take Notice: Why They Call it the Solid South.” This letter states, “Anyway, that’s how it is down in Dixie and when the Civil Rights Menace rears its ugly head in congress again, all good Southerners will fall in line, shoulder the old musket and come out ‘a shootin’. That's why they call it ‘The Solid South.’”[11] Unfortunately, this sentiment was all too common. The idea that southerners would protest the advancement of Civil Rights with military force had historical precedent and would have put significant pressure and alarm on the presidential cabinet. Additionally, there was a bloc of congress present that had that sentiment. The “Solid South" stayed solid when it came to passing legislation. As a southern politician, Truman was ahead of his time in regards to his attitude about the Civil Rights movement. The other southerners were able to prevent lots of legislation from passing, which made it necessary for Truman to rely on Executive Orders to enforce the desegregation policies he needed to pass. In conclusion, Truman’s

[11] Shirley, R. L. December 19, 1951. *Mr. President Take Notice: Why They Call It the Solid South*. Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum.

detractors towards the Civil Rights movement in general surely would also oppose desegregation of the military. Illustrating the seriousness with which his opponents took this shows just how important Truman's work for Civil Rights progress, and specifically the desegregation of the military was at the time.

The executive order that actually desegregated the United States military contains some fascinating insights as well. Executive Order 9981 states:

> "WHEREAS it is essential that there be maintained in the armed services of the United States the highest standards of democracy, with equality of treatment and opportunity for all those who serve in our country's defense: NOW THEREFORE, by virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States, by the Constitution and the statutes of the United States, and as Commander in Chief of the armed services, it is hereby ordered as follows:"[12]

President Truman uncovered an issue regarding the standard of democracy in the military. Otherwise, there would be no reason to make a change. This is proven by the first actual statement of the order, which acknowledges, "1. It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons

---

[12] Truman, Harry S. July 26, 1948. *Executive Order 9981*. Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum.

in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin. This policy shall be put into effect as rapidly as possible, having due regard to the time required to effectuate any necessary changes without impairing efficiency or morale."[13] This forced the armed forces not to discriminate on the basis of race, color, or national origin immediately. It is important to note that a heavy influence of the Executive Order is keeping morale up.

The Executive Order was written specifically in order to be effective right away. The order goes on to state, "3. The Committee is authorized on behalf of the President to examine (into) the rules, procedures and practices of the Armed Services in order to determine in what respect such rules, procedures and practices may be altered or improved with a view to carrying out the policy of this order. The Committee shall confer and advise the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of the Army, the Secretary of the Navy, and the Secretary of the Air Force, and shall make such recommendations to the President and to said Secretaries as in the judgment of the Committee will effectuate the policy hereof."[14] This describes the manner in which they

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

expect to police this change. A committee will review the actions of the Armed Services for the President and unilaterally work with the Armed Services to implement other helpful ideas regarding desegregation. Additionally, the Order ends by stating:

> "4. All executive departments and agencies of the Federal Government are authorized and directed to cooperate with the Committee in its work, and to furnish the Committee such information or the services of such persons as the Committee may require in the performance of its duties.
> 5. When requested by the Committee to do so, persons in the armed services or in any of the executive departments and agencies of the Federal Government shall testify before the Committee and shall make available for use of the Committee such documents and other information as the Committee may require.
> 6. The Committee shall continue to exist until such time as the President shall terminate its existence by Executive order."[15]

These points mean that people will be forced to cooperate with the committee. This is important because if the military could just ignore the committee, nothing would actually change. This proves that the President was working with the eventual committee, and the leaders of the armed forces to ensure that this order would be successful. The official Executive order provides the boundaries that would force the

[15]Ibid.

military to desegregate. It was written with purpose and intention so as not to provide any leeway or loopholes. This forced the military leaders to make real changes happen.

On the surface it seems that Truman simply fixed a problem that anyone could have solved. However, at the time there was still staunch opposition for any sort of progressive Civil Rights ideals. The reason an Executive Order was necessary was because there were so many white democrats from the south who were heavily opposed to desegregation in any fashion. There was simply no way that the voting bloc they represented would even consider desegregation. They even proposed legislation that would allow draftees to decide if they wanted to serve in segregated or unsegregated units.

It would seem some scholars take Truman's contributions for granted. In *Freedom to Serve,* Jon Taylor, a history professor at the University of Central Missouri, includes a quote from Michael Gardner, a professor at Georgetown, that states,

> "It is a curious fact that most Americans have failed to take note of President Truman's pioneering civil rights role. The general failure of the public to appreciate his moral leadership in this area may be due in large part to the fact that Truman was a modest man…Moreover, since the public often thinks of the civil rights movement in terms of the violent protests of the late 1950s and 1960s, many scholars fail to realize that the frustrations evident in those protests had their roots in the liberating words and actions taken by President Truman from 1946 through the last days of his presidency…the ample record of the Truman presidency confirms that he was in fact the country's twentieth-century pioneering civil rights president"[16]

This eloquently describes why Truman does not get the credit he deserves and why he should. Furthermore, Taylor goes on to state himself that:

> "Truman's decision to issue EO 9981 was a turning point in American history for the integration of black troops into the nation's military. It was part of Truman's civil rights program; however, the success of his civil rights program has been hotly debated by historians and his decision to integrate the military must be evaluated alongside his other civil rights initiatives and

[16] Taylor, Jon E. 2013. Freedom to Serve: *Truman, Civil Rights, and Executive Order 9981*. New York: Routledge.

> it also must be evaluated within the context of who was not covered by his Executive Order"[17]

Taylor is explaining that the absence of women, and the LGBTQ community, harms the seriousness with which Truman's actions are taken. While he could have obviously done more to advance the civil rights of the military, in the context of society at the time, focusing on racial desegregation was the most important inroad towards widespread tolerance and acceptance of all groups that are still being fought for today. Because of organizations such as the NAACP, other pioneers of black civil rights, and the preceding or simultaneous desegregation of other areas including housing, education, and many others, racial desegregation was being brought to the forefront of society and Truman was able to successfully push that agenda forward.

So it is clear that Truman was instrumental in ending segregation in the armed forces because he recognized the efforts of African Americans in World War II, saw this as an opportunity to contribute to the ongoing Civil Rights movement, and learned that this was a more severe issue than he realized by listening to letters that were written to him. Truman was already a leader in pioneering civil rights as

---

[17] Ibid.

a senator, and then further cemented himself in that discussion after the war ended as president.

Bibliography:

Dialfiume, Richard. *Desegregation of the United States Armed Forces*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1969.

Memo to the President. "Negroes in Armed Forces." Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, 1945. https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/negroes-armed-forces.

Patterson, Robert. Correspondence between Brien McMahon and Robert Patterson, March 7, 1947. Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum. https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/correspondence-between-brien-mcmahon-and-robert-patterson-march-7-1947.

Shirley, R. L. *Mr. President Take Notice: Why They Call It the Solid South*. December 19, 1951. Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum. https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/mr-president-take-notice-why-they-call-it-solid-south.

Taylor, Jon E. Freedom to Serve: *Truman, Civil Rights, and Executive Order 9981*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Truman, Harry S. *Harry S. Truman to Walter White, with Related Material*, June 19, 1948. Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum. https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/harry-s-truman-walter-white-related-material-june-19-1948.

Truman, Harry S. *Executive Order 9981*. July 26, 1948. Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum. https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/executive-orders/9981/executive-order-9981.

War Department. Circular No. 124: *Utilization of Negro Manpower in the Postwar Army Policy.* April 27, 1946. Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum. https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/utilization-negro-manpower-postwar-army-policy.

Wynn, Neil. *The African American Experience during World War II.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010.