

Introduction

III. RACE AND WORLD WAR I

THE UNITED STATES in April of 1917 was a nation divided by race. Calls for unconditional loyalty and “One Hundred Percent Americanism” by the federal government and civilian groups alike stemmed from deep anxieties about the racial composition of the country’s population. The imperatives of forging a unified war mobilization effort clashed with deeply ingrained ideas about race that informed how Americans viewed both the German enemy and each other. At home and abroad, Americans fought a war within the war that had race as its defining characteristic.

African Americans experienced this tension more profoundly than any other group. Wartime economic opportunities sparked the Great Migration of thousands of black southerners to the urban North. However, as racial oppression remained unrelenting, African Americans approached America’s entry into the war and Woodrow Wilson’s call to make the world “safe for democracy” with understandable skepticism. Black Socialists like A. Philip Randolph openly opposed the war, while large numbers of African Americans, especially in the South, found ways to avoid the draft. However, the vast majority of black people, encouraged by the black press and leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois, came to support the war effort and were determined to do their part, as both soldiers and civilians, to aid their country in its time of need.

Racial violence and institutionalized discrimination tested black people’s patriotic resolve. On July 2, 1917, a racial pogrom erupted in East St. Louis, Illinois, that left entire neighborhoods in ashes and at least thirty-nine—and possibly three times as many—African Americans dead. The following month, on the night of August 23, a contingent of black soldiers of the 24th Infantry, frustrated and angered by weeks of racist abuse and fearing attack by a lynch mob, shot and killed sixteen white residents and police officers in Houston, Texas. As it worked to raise an army virtually from scratch, the United

States government remained committed to preserving the color-line. "There is no intention on the part of the War Department to undertake at this time to settle the so-called race question," Secretary of War Newton Baker declared in a November 30, 1917, memo. Official Jim Crow policies, from the administration of the draft to the final demobilization process, shaped the experience of African American servicemen through the entire course of America's participation in the war.

In spite of tremendous obstacles, African Americans made an important contribution to the Allied victory. Some 380,000 black men ultimately served in the United States army, with over 200,000 sent to France. Although the army relegated the vast majority of African American troops to labor duties, two black divisions did see action on the Western Front. The 92nd Division, composed of draftees and black junior officers and sergeants like Charles Isum, suffered from systemic racism and poor leadership from its white commanders, many of whom despised the very idea of black men serving in combat. By contrast, the 93rd Division, made up largely of black National Guard regiments and assigned to the French army, established a distinguished fighting record, highlighted by the exploits of the 369th Infantry Regiment, which became known as the "Harlem Hellfighters."

Based on their sacrifice and loyalty, African Americans greeted the end of the war with hope that the country would reward them with greater democratic rights and opportunity. Instead, race relations across the country worsened. Racial violence erupted throughout the nation in 1919, demonstrating that the end of the war had brought anything but peace, or democracy. Race riots broke out in several cities, most notably Washington, D.C., and Chicago. Fearing an uprising by black sharecroppers, whites in Phillips County, Arkansas, aided by U.S. troops, massacred more than one hundred, and possibly more than two hundred, African Americans. The number of lynchings leapt to eighty-three, including at least eleven returned black servicemen.

Many African Americans, both emboldened and disillusioned by their war experience and its aftermath, determined to fight even harder for their civil and human rights. The war created a "New Negro," characterized by a spirit of resistance

that W. E. B. Du Bois powerfully captured in his *Crisis* editorial “Returning Soldiers.” In the ensuing postwar years, African Americans would take the lessons learned from their war experiences and apply them to renewed struggle against racism and white supremacy.

Chad Williams
*Professor of African and Afro-American Studies,
Brandeis University*

“THE CRISIS OF THE WORLD”:
NEW YORK, JULY 1918

W.E.B. Du Bois: “Close Ranks”

The first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was the most prominent black intellectual in America. Teacher, sociologist, historian, writer, and political activist, he was a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the editor of its monthly magazine, *The Crisis*. Since the spring of 1917, Du Bois had pronounced support for the war while continuing to denounce racial discrimination and violence. In June 1918 he met with his friend Joel Spingarn, a wealthy literary critic, educator, and the chairman of the NAACP board. Spingarn, then serving as a major in military intelligence, offered Du Bois a commission as an army captain and an assignment to a special intelligence bureau investigating racial problems. While considering the offer, Du Bois wrote this editorial, invoking black Americans to “forget our special grievances” for the duration of the war. His change of position and willingness to serve in the army drew intense criticism within the NAACP, and the offer of a military commission was withdrawn in late July.

THIS IS the crisis of the world. For all the long years to come men will point to the year 1918 as the great Day of Decision, the day when the world decided whether it would submit to military despotism and an endless armed peace—if peace it could be called—or whether they would put down the menace of German militarism and inaugurate the United States of the World.

We of the colored race have no ordinary interest in the outcome. That which the German power represents today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and all darker races for equality, freedom and democracy. Let us not hesitate. 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. We make no ordinary sacrifice, but we make it gladly and willingly with our eyes lifted to the hills.

The Crisis, July 1918

RETURNING TO "A SHAMEFUL LAND":
NEW YORK, MAY 1919

W.E.B. Du Bois: "Returning Soldiers"

Du Bois had traveled to France in December 1918 to investigate for the NAACP the treatment of black soldiers. While in Paris he helped organize a pan-African Congress, held in February 1919, which called on the peace conference to protect the rights of Africans living under colonial rule. He returned to the United States in April with material for "An Essay Toward a History of the Black Man in the Great War," published in *The Crisis* in June, and with documentation of the attempts by the U.S. military to prevent black soldiers from fraternizing with French civilians. "Documents of the War" appeared in the May number along with the editorial "Returning Soldiers." Postmaster General Burleson considered withholding mailing privileges from the magazine, but he relented. The May 1919 *Crisis* sold 106,000 copies, its highest circulation ever.

WE ARE returning from war! *The Crisis* and tens of thousands of black men were drafted into a great struggle. For bleeding France and what she means and has meant and will mean to us and humanity and against the threat of German race arrogance, we fought gladly and to the last drop of blood; for America and her highest ideals, we fought in far-off hope; for the dominant southern oligarchy entrenched in Washington, we fought in bitter resignation. For the America that represents and gloats in lynching, disfranchisement, caste, brutality and devilish insult—for this, in the hateful upturning and mixing of things, we were forced by vindictive fate to fight, also.

But today we return! We return from the slavery of uniform which the world's madness demanded us to don to the freedom of civil garb. We stand again to look America squarely in the face and call a spade a spade. We sing: This country of ours, despite all its better souls have done and dreamed, is yet a shameful land.

It *lynches*.

And lynching is barbarism of a degree of contemptible

nastiness unparalleled in human history. Yet for fifty years we have lynched two Negroes a week, and we have kept this up right through the war.

It *disfranchises* its own citizens.

Disfranchisement is the deliberate theft and robbery of the only protection of poor against rich and black against white. The land that disfranchises its citizens and calls itself a democracy lies and knows it lies.

It encourages *ignorance*.

It has never really tried to educate the Negro. A dominant minority does not want Negroes educated. It wants servants, dogs, whores and monkeys. And when this land allows a reactionary group by its stolen political power to force as many black folk into these categories as it possibly can, it cries in contemptible hypocrisy: "They threaten us with degeneracy; they cannot be educated."

It *steals* from us.

It organizes industry to cheat us. It cheats us out of our land; it cheats us out of our labor. It confiscates our savings. It reduces our wages. It raises our rent. It steals our profit. It taxes us without representation. It keeps us consistently and universally poor, and then feeds us on charity and derides our poverty.

It *insults* us.

It has organized a nation-wide and latterly a world-wide propaganda of deliberate and continuous insult and defamation of black blood wherever found. It decrees that it shall not be possible in travel nor residence, work nor play, education nor instruction for a black man to exist without tacit or open acknowledgment of his inferiority to the dirtiest white dog. And it looks upon any attempt to question or even discuss this dogma as arrogance, unwarranted assumption and treason.

This is the country to which we Soldiers of Democracy return. This is the fatherland for which we fought! But it is *our* fatherland. It was right for us to fight. The faults of *our* country are *our* faults. Under similar circumstances, we would fight again. But by the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that that war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land.

We return.

We return from fighting.

We return fighting.

Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.