

Continuity or Change: African Americans in World War II

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Grade Level: 9-11

Duration of Lesson: two 90-minute periods

Overview:

Many historians have posed the question: Was World War II a watershed event in the African-American Civil Rights Movement? During the war, the “Double V” campaign of the black press called for victory over fascism abroad and racism at home. In this lesson, students will investigate primary-source materials to develop an understanding of the experience of African Americans in the war overseas and on the home front. In doing so, they will consider whether the contradictory gains made in the areas of civil rights, housing, work and military service represented a break with the past or a continuation of the status quo.

Related National History Standards:

Content Standard:

Era 8: The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945)

Standard 3: The causes and course of World War II, the character of the war at home and abroad, and its reshaping of the U.S. role in world affairs

Historical Thinking Standards:

1. Standard 3 – Historical Analysis and Interpretation:
 - A. Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative.
 - D. Consider multiple perspectives.
 2. Standard 4 – Historical Research Capabilities:
 - A. Formulate historical questions.
 - B. Obtain historical data.
 - C. Interrogate historical data.
- Construct an historical interpretation

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will examine the experience of African Americans during World War II by analyzing primary sources and formulating historical questions.
- Students will evaluate if the African American experience during World War II represents continuity or change by writing letters to the editor.

Topic Background:

Historians studying the experience of African Americans in World War II consistently ask one central question: “Was World War II a watershed event for African Americans?” In other words, does World War II represent a continuation of policies of segregation and discrimination both on the home front and in the military, or does it represent the beginning of a break with the past that informed the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s? Historians of the 1960s focused on the war experience as a “watershed” leading to the civil rights upheavals of the 1960s. Although African Americans had lost much of the wartime years’ social and economic progress by the early 1950s, the gains in the military, job training and political organization served as a catalyst for the protests of the 1950s that in turn helped fuel later civil rights actions. The fact that outstanding contributions to the war effort did not result in tangible long-term gains inflamed African Americans and encouraged activism. More recently, historians have tempered the notion of the 1940s as “watershed” or “revolution” in the Black experience, but still emphasize its significance in presaging the modern Civil Rights Movement.¹

African Americans had suffered profoundly in the Great Depression. Already at the bottom of the economic ladder when it began, the Depression reinforced the poverty of Black America. Black unemployment was two times greater than white unemployment, Black families earned 1/3 the income of white families and 2/3 of Blacks held unskilled jobs in comparison with 1/5 of whites. Most African Americans lived in the segregated South and 1/10 had little formal education.² The collapse of the agricultural economy coupled with subsidies for landowners that encouraged them to displace sharecropping families left many African Americans without a means of support or a place to live. Competition over the few jobs that remained in the midst of the economic depression increased racially motivated violence during the 1930s. The New Deal offered some help, but overall did too little to ameliorate the special circumstances faced by African Americans and, in addition, perpetuated inequalities based on race.³

World War II presented some new opportunities for African Americans to participate in the war effort and thereby earn an equal place in American society and politics. From the outset the African American press urged fighting a campaign for a “Double V”: victory against fascism abroad and victory over racism at home.

¹ Andrew Kersten, “African Americans and World War II,” *OAH Magazine of History* (Spring 2002): 13.

² John Jeffries, *Wartime America: The World War II Home Front* (Chicago: American Way Series, 1996), 107.

³ Ronald Takaki, *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2000), 39.

Emphatically they declared, unlike World War I, that there would be no “closed ranks,” or lessening of racial activism, in order to present a united front to America’s enemies. Many African Americans felt that the earlier implementation of this conciliatory policy had resulted in no real progress for Blacks in the 1920s. Despite the literary and artistic achievements of the Harlem Renaissance, no economic or political gains resulted from the distinguished service of African Americans at home and abroad during the First World War. During World War II, then, most African Americans participated willingly, but reserved their right to protest against treatment stateside that they found intolerable.⁴

On the home front A. Philip Randolph’s 1941 threat to force a March on Washington to advocate for civil rights in wartime employment represented this new attitude. When government defense contracting first began in 1940 and 1941, the federal government acceded to the demands of many businesses that stipulated whites-only hiring. For example, of 100,000 aircraft workers in 1940, only 240 of them were African American and most of those served in unskilled positions as janitors.⁵ In order to protest this discrimination, Randolph, head of the powerful Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, threatened a march on the nation’s capital of 100,000 African Americans. Attempting to avert this embarrassingly large protest, Roosevelt sent his wife and the Mayor of New York to negotiate with Randolph and offered to call business leaders to request they hire Blacks. This gesture, however, did not fulfill Randolph’s demands and he refused to back down. Three days before the averted march was to take place, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 that banned discrimination in government hiring exactly as Randolph had requested. In addition, 8802 established the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) to address reports of non-compliance.⁶ The under-funded and under-staffed FEPC had no enforcement power, its public hearings and ability to cancel government contracts applied pressure to businesses and unions to create a climate of equity.⁷ Overall, the African American press viewed the pressure applied by Randolph and the FEPC as a “guarded victory.”⁸

Although EO 8802 resulted in more jobs being opened to African Americans and established federal support for integration and equity, discrimination continued to exist. For example, the Maremont Automobile Company in Chicago refused to hire fifteen African American women because, according to the manager of the plant, white women refused to share toilet facilities with them.⁹ In addition, the resistance of whites to work with Blacks motivated some companies to defy 8802 because they feared losing their white employees. Lester Detterbeck, VP of the George A. Detterbeck Company, violated the executive order because of his certainty that at least fifteen

⁴ Perry, “It’s Time to Force A Change: The African American Press’ Campaign for a True Democracy During World War II” *Journalism History* 28:2 (Summer 2002), 89.

⁵ Jeffries, *Home Front*, 107.

⁶ Perry, “Force Change,” 88.

⁷ Takaki, *Double V*, 47.

⁸ Perry, “Force Change,” 88.

⁹ Lionel Kimble, Jr., “I Too Serve America: African American Women War Workers in Chicago, 1940-1945,” *Journal of Illinois State Historical Society* 93: 4 (Winter 2000-2001), 424.

employees would leave if he employed African Americans.¹⁰ In 1943, 20,000 white employees of the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilders Company protested the promotion of African American welders so vehemently federal troops had to be called in to settle the disturbance and the FEPC had to drop its claim of discrimination.¹¹

By 1943 African American employment in defense industries had improved somewhat, reaching almost 8% of total defense jobs by 1945. This can more accurately be credited to the increased demand for labor as the war advanced than to any change of policy by business or the administration. Other improvements included more African Americans working at positions of higher skill and earning a higher pay rate. The gap between white and Black workers had narrowed slightly by the end of the war.¹² Thus, despite the lack of social and political opportunities that resulted from WWII, there were some true economic gains that African Americans realized, even if they were disproportionately smaller than their white counterparts.

As the war progressed 700,000 African American families migrated North and West to take advantage of defense jobs, increasing racial tensions in key cities.¹³ By the middle of the war continued discrimination combined with frustration about overcrowded and unsanitary living conditions and exploded into a series of race riots. In 1943, according to the Social Science Institute at Fisk University, these tensions resulted in 242 conflicts in 47 cities throughout the country.¹⁴ A riot in Detroit resulted in \$2 million in lost property, hundreds of injuries and thirty-four deaths, mostly Blacks.¹⁵ Five weeks later the Harlem riot resulted in \$5 million in damage, 550 arrested, 500 injured and six people killed.¹⁶ In each of the riots the police, trying to maintain control, reportedly arrested and injured African Americans at a much higher rate than white rioters. The potential of these inflammatory riots spreading caused many of the Black newspapers to refuse to publish photographs so as not to incite further violence.¹⁷ Though warned about the threat to key cities, Roosevelt did nothing to ameliorate the conditions that helped spark the riots.¹⁸ Contrary to the fears of many leaders in the Black community who worried that a frightened public would resist increased equality, the riots served as evidence of Black frustration and willingness to act, slightly increasing support for a more comprehensive civil rights movement, especially among Northern whites. Following the riots, several cities established interracial commissions to prevent similar incidents and with these began to address the root causes of the conflicts.¹⁹

The experience of African Americans in the military was no less complex than on the home front. Eager to do their part to fight fascism, as many as 30,000 African

¹⁰ Ibid., 425.

¹¹ Takaki, *Double V*, 42.

¹² Jeffries, *Home Front*, 113.

¹³ Ibid., 114.

¹⁴ Takaki, *Double V*, 50.

¹⁵ Ibid., 53

¹⁶ Ibid., 54

¹⁷ Perry, "Force Change," 93.

¹⁸ Takaki, *Double V*, 53.

¹⁹ Jeffries, *Home Front*, 116-117.

Americans tried to enlist in the military, only to be turned away.²⁰ Initially, the Marines and the Army Air Corps accepted no African Americans, the Navy accepted Blacks only as support staff and the Army allowed only segregated units, most of which were non-combat. Moderate progress came in 1940 when Roosevelt set a 10% quota for African Americans in the military (roughly the percentage of Blacks in the general population), African Americans were allowed into the Army Air Corps and they were trained as officers and for combat. In addition, the first African American was promoted to Brigadier General and African Americans advised the Secretary of War and the Selective Service Director.²¹

Many African Americans distinguished themselves with outstanding service in the armed forces. For instance, Navy messman Doris “Dorie” Miller earned a medal of distinction when he commandeered an anti-aircraft gun and shot down two Japanese planes during the attack on Pearl Harbor.²² The Tuskegee Airmen trained at a segregated flight school and were denied the right to fly combat missions. They were finally permitted to prove their acumen in 1943 by flying escorts for B-52 bombers and demonstrated excellence by never losing a plane in combat. In addition, the all-Black 761st tank battalion fought valiantly during the Battle of the Bulge, “never losing an inch of ground,” according to one soldier.²³ Black women also made their contribution to the armed forces, enlisting as WACS and WAVES. For instance, many were assigned to the 6888 Central Postal Directory Battalion where they took pride in delivering the mail to the troops and reported a sense of camaraderie of purpose that reached across racial lines. Anecdotal accounts provide many examples of white soldiers defending the rights of Black soldiers. In one case an African American WAC waited patiently in uniform to be served at a train dining car. When the steward called for all military personnel to be served first, yet still refused to serve the African American WAC, a white officer chastised the steward and forced him to allow the woman to eat.²⁴

For each case of distinguished service or interracial cooperation exists several cases of discrimination and inequality. Soldiers wrote to newspapers and family members repeatedly about poor living conditions, poor working conditions and continued humiliation. One soldier claimed that upon enlisting he’d been sent to a base where for three weeks they did nothing and then were finally assigned duties cleaning white officers’ quarters.²⁵ In one of the more horrific incidents of the war, 202 African Americans died in 1943 unloading ammunition off a Navy ship at Port Chicago, California. Completely untrained for this dangerous occupation, 50 of the African American soldiers who initially survived the blast refused to go back to work two weeks later when shipyard did nothing to create safer working conditions. The soldiers, charged and convicted of mutiny, eventually won release in 1946 due to legal action taken by advocacy groups like the NAACP.²⁶ In addition, African American soldiers

²⁰ Perry, “Force Change,” 90.

²¹ Jeffries, *Home Front*, 108-109.

²² Perry, “Force Change,” 90.

²³ Takaki, *Double V*, 34-35.

²⁴ Ibid., 36.

²⁵ Ibid., 37.

²⁶ Kersten “African Americans,” 16.

also faced significant risk in the small towns that housed bases, especially in the South. In 1942 officers sent Paul Parks of the 183rd Battalion of Combat Engineers and another soldier to town to buy supplies. While inside the store, Parks heard a commotion and went outside in time to witness his comrade being dragged behind a car to his death. Parks survived by hiding under a porch until dark and then returning to base.²⁷ Examples of continued racism and violence against African Americans during World War II call into question the extent to which the era represented “progress.”

World War II for African Americans held many contradictions. Blacks served in the military with distinction yet then suffered from segregation and racial violence because of their service. Blacks used political action to earn defense jobs yet faced limitations in the equality that institutions like the FEPC could help them achieve. Blacks participated enthusiastically in fighting the threat of fascism abroad yet increasingly voiced their displeasure with “Hitlerism” at home. Blacks viewed their service in the war as legitimizing full political and economic equality yet faced losing many wartime gains at the end of the conflict.

Despite these contradictions, the war can cautiously be labeled a “watershed” event for African Americans. They built the infrastructure of political action through the use of the Black press, the enlarging of the NAACP and the beginning of significant civil rights groups like the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE). African Americans in the military gained access to education, training for new jobs and the experience of greater freedom in countries like England and France. African Americans on the home front moved away from an agrarian income, learned new job skills and improved their quality of life by fleeing Jim Crow segregation in the South. In addition, government policy underwent a significant shift during the war and by the war’s conclusion fighting for civil rights was a central part of the liberal agenda.²⁸

Annotated Bibliography:

Jeffries, John. *Wartime America: The World War II Home Front*. Chicago: American Way Series, 1996.

This framework of this book addresses two major questions about changes on the home front during World War II. First, can World War II be considered a watershed for America? Is everything after WWII different than it was before? Second, can WWII be accurately labeled the “good war”? Jeffries concludes, in terms of life for African Americans during the war, that significant changes in public support for civil rights and the boost to Black organization and will to fight discrimination during the war make WWII a time of significant change. Despite this, however, intense segregation and discrimination continue after the war until the upheaval of the 1960s challenges tradition.

Kersten, Andrew. “African Americans and World War II.” *OAH Magazine of History* (Spring 2002): 13-17.

This article provides a brief introduction to the life of African Americans during the war and explores whether or not it represents a time of advancement for

²⁷ Takaki, *Double V*, 29.

²⁸ Jeffries, *Home Front*, 117.

African Americans. Kersten highlights major events such as segregation in the army and discrimination in defense contracting and concludes that only half of the “Double V” campaign, the victory over fascism abroad, could be considered achieved by the end of the war. The other half, victory over discrimination at home, remained elusive, despite clear gains during the war.

[you could add Andrew Kersten’s book on the FEPC]

Kimble, Lionel, Jr., “I Too Serve America: African American Women War Workers in Chicago, 1940-1945.” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* Vol. 93 No. 4(Winter 2000-2001): 415-434.

This poorly written and edited article does provide some interesting anecdotes pertaining to the experience of Black women in Chicago during the war.

Perry, Jr., Ernest. “It’s Time to Force a Change: The African American Press’ Campaign for a True Democracy During World War II.” *Journalism History* 28:2 (Summer 2002): 85-95.

This article attempts to prove that the Black press played a key role in providing an outlet for militant voices in the African American community while at the same time they worked to create change within a government framework.

Although the support he provides remains unconvincing, Perry does provide interesting anecdotes and details about the Black press.

Takaki, Ronald. *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II*. New York: Little Brown and Company, 2000.

Takaki’s book, like most of his work, focuses on the experience of World War II through the eyes of the “other” -- Native Americans, African Americans, recent immigrants, Mexican Americans, Jewish Americans, Japanese Americans -- and the relationship of the war experience for these groups to the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 70s. Takaki’s chapter on African Americans balances between celebrating wartime gains, which he argues were significant, and showing the continuity of discrimination which framed the experience both at home and abroad.

Primary Source Annotations:

These documents come from four main websites:

http://www.archives.gov/research_room/research_topics/african_americans_during_world_war_ii/african_americans_during_world_war_2.html

This website was the source for most of the photographs contained in this lesson. While the pictures are wonderful, students should be cautioned that they were all taken by government photographers and thus may have an implicit bias.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaohtml/exhibit/aopart8.html>

This link goes directly to an on-line exhibit put together by the Library of Congress on the history of African Americans.

<http://www.history.navy.mil/index.html>

This website contains secondary and primary sources pertaining to the history of the Navy.

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov>

This website provides many links to interesting information as well as the text of 100 important documents in our nation's history.

Source A:

http://www.archives.gov/research_room/research_topics/african_americans_during_wwii/images/african_americans_wwii_044.jpg

"Members of the 99th Fighter Squadron of the Army Air Forces, famous all-Negro outfit, who are rapidly making themselves feared by enemy pilots, pose for a picture at the Anzio beachhead. In the foreground, head bared, is 1st Lt. Andrew Lane." Ca. February 1944. 80-G-54413.

This photograph shows some of the famed "Tuskegee Airmen" standing next to their airplane and demonstrates the level of distinguished service African Americans achieved.

Source B:

http://www.archives.gov/research_room/research_topics/african_americans_during_wwii/images/african_americans_wwii_128.jpg

"Reginald Brandon...recently completed the eight-month course in Radio Operations and Maintenance at Gallup's Island [MA] Radio Training School of the Maritime Commission. He is the first Negro graduate of the school. . . . Upon assignment he will have the rank of ensign." N.d. Roger Smith. 208-NP-5P-1. ([african_americans_wwii_128.jpg](#))

This photograph first demonstrates how young recruits could be. It also indicates the training that it was possible to receive.

Source C:

http://www.archives.gov/research_room/research_topics/african_americans_during_wwii/images/african_americans_wwii_031.jpg

"Soldiers of the 161st Chemical Smoke Generating Company, U.S. Third Army, move a barrel of oil in preparation to refilling an M-2 smoke generator, which spews forth a heavy cloud of white smoke. These men are engaged in laying a smoke screen to cover bridge building activities across the Saar River near Wallerfangen, Germany." December 11, 1944. Rothenberger. 111-SC-197552. ([african_americans_wwii_031.jpg](#))

This photograph represents the support work that many African American troops were assigned in lieu of combat. These support roles, however, were crucial to the success of the army.

Source D:

http://www.archives.gov/research_room/research_topics/african_americans_during_wwii/images/african_americans_wwii_142.jpg

"Surgical ward treatment at the 268th Station Hospital, Base A, Milne Bay, New Guinea. Left to right: Sgt. Lawrence McKreever, patient; 2nd Lt. Prudence Burns, ward nurse; 2nd Lt. Elcena Townscent, chief surgical nurse; and an unidentified nurse." June 22, 1944. Pfc. Michael Pitcairn. 111-SC-28748. ([african_americans_wwii_142.jpg](#))

The photograph shows African American women in service as nurses based in New Guinea.

Source E:

http://www.archives.gov/research_room/research_topics/african_americans_during_wwii/images/african_americans_wwii_150.jpg

"*Members of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion take part in a parade ceremony in honor of Joan d'Arc at the marketplace where she was burned at the stake.*" May 27, 1945. Pfc. Stedman. 111-SC-42644. (*african_americans_wwii_150.jpg*)

This photograph shows African American WACS from the 6888th Postal Battalion parading in France. Not only does it illustrate the variety of jobs that women had in the armed services, it also is an example of the more equal treatment African Americans received from the French public.

Source F:

http://www.archives.gov/research_room/research_topics/african_americas_during_wwii/images/african_americans_wwii_185.jpg

"*A Negro WAAC [Mrs. Mary K. Adair] takes an examination for Officers' Candidate School, Fort McPherson, Georgia.*" June 20, 1942. 111-SC-25635. (*african_americans_wwii_185.jpg*)

This photograph illustrates that officer positions were open to African American women. It is also interesting that she took this examination in civilian clothes.

Source G:

http://www.archives.gov/research_room/research_topics/african_americans_during_wwii/images/african_americans_wwii_250.jpg

"*Under the direction of Cecil M. Coles, NYA foreman, Miss Juanita E. Gray learns to operate a lathe machine at the Washington, DC, NYA War Production and Training Center. This former domestic worker is one of hundreds of Negro women trained at this center.*" N.d. Roger Smith. 208-NP-2QQQQ-1. (*african_americans_wwii_250.jpg*)

This photograph illustrates the jobs that African Americans took over during the war.

This young woman is being helped by the National Youth Administration to find employment. Please note: welding was considered a semi-skilled, not a skilled, position.

Source H:

http://www.archives.gov/research_room/research_topics/african_americans_during_wwii/images/african_americans_wwii_251.jpg

"*The Negro janitors of the plant maintenance department in North America's Kansas City factory in V-formation as they start out on their daily tasks.*" February 4, 1942. Carl Conley. 208-NP-1KK-1. (*african_americans_wwii_251.jpg*)

This photograph illustrates that African Americans, especially prior to 1943, received mostly unskilled positions in the defense industry.

Source I:

http://www.archives.gov/research_room/research_topics/african_americans_during_wwii/images/african_americans_wwii_252.jpg

"... Welders Alivia Scott, Hattie Carpenter, and Flossie Burtos await an opportunity to weld their first piece of steel on the ship [SS George Washington Carver]." Kaiser Shipyards, Richmond, CA. Ca. 1943. E.F. Joseph. 208-NP-1HHH-5. (*african_americans_wwii_252.jpg*)

This photograph shows women welders working on a ship in California. This illustrates the defense jobs given to women during the war.

Source J:

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/odyssey/archive/08/0815001r.jpg>

Birmingham, Alabama, Block Statistics. Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940. Washington, 1943. Geography and Map Division. (8-15)

This represents two pages of a four-page map illustrating the level of segregation in housing in Birmingham, Alabama in 1940.

Source K:

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/odyssey/archive/08/0819001r.jpg>

Charles White. The Return of the Soldier, 1946. Pen and ink on illustration board. Prints and Photographs Division. Reproduction Number: LC-USZC4-4886 (8-19)

This pen and ink drawing illustrates the level of discrimination African Americans faced during and after the war, often at the hands of police.

Source L:

<http://memory.loc.gov/mss/mssmisc/ody/ody0808/0808001v.jpg>

"Why Should We March?" March on Washington fliers, 1941. A. Philip Randolph Papers, Manuscript Division (8-8) Courtesy of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, Washington, D.C.

This flier for the March on Washington Movement represents the heart of the "Double V" campaign. African Americans were willing to fight against fascism abroad if they fought Jim Crow at home.

Source M:

<http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq80-4a.htm>

Port Chicago Naval Magazine Explosion on 17 July 1944:

Court of Inquiry: Finding of Facts, Opinion and Recommendations

This excerpt from the official Naval Court of Inquiry details what occurred in the explosion.

Source N:

<http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/deseg/exhibit%20a.html>

Statement on the Trial of Negro Sailors at Yerba Buena, September 22, 1944 [By Thurgood Marshall, NAACP]

This statement by Thurgood Marshall justifies the protest by surviving soldiers of the Port Chicago incident who refused to work following the disaster and were charged with mutiny.

Source O:

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=72>

Executive Order 8802 - Prohibition of Discrimination in the Defense Industry, June 25, 1941

This copy of Roosevelt's Executive Order prohibiting hiring discrimination in government contracts for defense products is both a photograph of the original and a text-only copy that is easier to read.

Source P:

http://www.archives.gov/research_room/research_topics/african_americans_during_w_wii/images/african_americans_wwii_245.jpg

"This highly experienced Negro draftsman is one of many skilled technical Negro workers employed in speeding war production at a large eastern arsenal." May 1942. Howard Liberman. 208-NP-2HH-1.

(african_americans_wwii_245.jpg)

This photograph illustrates that some African Americans were hired for skilled positions.

Vocabulary:

Segregation: The policy of separating races through legal discrimination. In the United States, African Americans were segregated from whites until the 1960's.

WAC: The Women's Auxiliary Corps, a separate branch of the US Army for women in World War II

WAVE: Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service. A reserve branch of women in the US Navy during World War II

NYA: Not Yet Available

Executive Order: An order issued by the President to government agencies that has the power of a formal law.

NAACP: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, an organization that sought to end segregation and bring about racial equality in the US.

Teaching Procedures:

Motivation:

1. Have students create two T-charts. The first T-chart should list positive aspects and negative aspects of life for African Americans during the Great Depression. The second T-chart should list positive aspects and negative aspects of life for African Americans today. Direct students to think about social, political, economic and cultural factors.
2. Introduce the concept of continuity and change in history and discuss how responses to the above questions might show both continuity and change.

Procedures:

1. **Review Prior Knowledge:** Extend the discussion began in the motivation by reviewing with students more detail about the experience of African Americans during the Great Depression. In addition, review both the long-term and short-term causes of World War II.
2. **Analyze Documents:** Divide students into heterogeneous cooperative groups of at least four to six students. Give each group the entire set of documents and ask them to evaluate each source using the following procedures (**please note:** adjust these steps to fit your class – you can stop and discuss after each step, give the class fewer documents to make it more manageable, jigsaw the documents, or follow exactly what these steps suggest).
 - A. First, ask students to complete the "Assessing the Documents" resource for the documents the teacher has assigned to their group. In this chart

students are asked to assess the validity of each of the documents they have been given.

- B. Next, ask students to complete the “Analyzing the Documents” resource. In this chart students are asked to first examine the positive and negative aspects of WWII for African Americans. Then, they will compare those observations with the observations made in the opener and begin to decide whether or not World War II represented a “watershed” event for African-Americans – was it a continuation of pre-war discrimination and being treated as second-class citizens? Or did it open new doors and help create the civil rights upheavals of the 1960s?
- C. Last, ask students to complete the “Bringing it All Together” resource in order to wrap-up their analysis. Here students are asked to write a letter to an editor assessing whether or not WWII was a “watershed” for African Americans, complete with a well-structured argument and supported by evidence.

Closure: Conduct a general discussion about whether WWII for African Americans represented continuity or change in race relations. Have one person from each side of the argument share their letter to the editor to begin the discussion. Conclude by asking students to discuss what possible impact the experience of African Americans during World War II might have had on the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Share with students that the conversation they’ve been having represents a major historiographical debate among historians. Give them specific examples of how the debate has changed over the years (see content narrative for context).

Assessment: In order to reinforce the importance of following the steps of the analysis, assess students at each stage of the assignment – collect and grade the resources they used to assess, analyze and make conclusions about the documents and assess their final letters to the editor.

Extension Activities:

1. Have students create a timeline that places the experiences of the African Americans as highlighted by the major events in the documents within the context of major events of the war itself. As an additional activity, have students annotate or illustrate their timeline to demonstrate their understanding of those events.
2. Have students draw a six or eight panel storyboard highlighting the experience of African Americans both in the military and on the home front. A storyboard is a series of drawings that show events in sequence, using very little written explanation.
3. Have students interview family and/or community members about their experiences during World War II and/or their perceptions of the impact of World War II. Students could interview people of any race and then compare their findings to the information they discovered from the documents about African Americans.