

A WAR ON TWO FRONTS

World War II had a dramatic impact on intergroup relations in the United States. Mexican Americans, Native Americans, Japanese Americans, African Americans and other groups who faced discrimination joined the war effort in large numbers. But unlike White enlistees, members of racial and ethnic minorities believed they were fighting two "wars" - one overseas and one at home.

The rallying cry for African Americans during the war became "Double V" - victory abroad over fascism and in the U.S. over racial inequality. A million African Americans served during the conflict, mostly in segregated units. The Black press, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and other civil rights advocates pointed out the hypocrisy of separating troops by race while fighting against Hitler's doctrine of racial supremacy.

As Black columnist George Schuyler noted, "Our war is not against Hitler in Europe, but against Hitler in America. Our war is not to defend democracy, but to get a democracy we have never had."

Nearly half a million Mexican Americans served in World War II. Like African Americans, Chicanos fought a war on two fronts. Celebrated for their bravery overseas, Mexican American soldiers found they often couldn't even get a cup of coffee in cafes back home.

Some Mexican American soldiers questioned why they were laying down their lives for a country that treated them like second-class citizens. One Chicano soldier heading for the European frontlines reflected, "I remembered about us, the Mexican Americans ... how the Anglo had pushed and held back our people in the Southwest. ... Why fight for America when you have not been treated as an American?" Because it was his home, the soldier decided. "All we wanted was a chance to prove how loyal and American we were." During the war, many Chicanos adopted the slogan "Americans All" to symbolize both their commitment to their country and their hope for a more inclusive society.

For many Japanese Americans, putting on a military uniform was also a way of proving their loyalty to America - a country that had deemed them enemy aliens and incarcerated them in prison camps when the war broke out. Some 33,000 men and women of Japanese descent served during World War II. Despite - and perhaps because of - their own history of genocide and cultural annihilation in the United States, Native Americans joined the war effort at a higher rate than the general population did, with 25,000 enlisting to serve. Like other members of racial and ethnic minorities, they hoped fighting abroad would gain them respect at home. Both during and after the war, the beginnings of tremendous social change were evident in the United States. Responding to pressure from Black civil rights activists, President Franklin Roosevelt issued an executive order in 1941 banning racial discrimination in defense industries; seven years later, President Harry Truman called for full integration of the military.

One year after the war ended, Truman appointed an interracial civil rights committee, which recommended that Congress pass antilynching laws, protect Black voting rights and outlaw racial discrimination in all employment. In addition, some of the

discriminatory laws barring immigration by Asians and denying them naturalization were finally repealed. The Supreme Court also became more willing to hear civil rights cases in the postwar years.

But perhaps the greatest change had occurred internally, in minority service men and women returning from the war. They had just risked their lives fighting for freedom from oppression abroad. They would accept no less at home. These men and women were now more determined than ever to make America live up to its creed of equality and justice for all. Their experiences during World War II helped pave the way for a civil rights revolution that would transform American society in the second half of the 20th century.