

The Double V: How Wars, Protest, and Harry Truman Desegregated America's Military

Though African-Americans have long been called upon to fight the nation's wars, they were often assigned menial jobs and largely confined to segregated units until after World War II. During that war, the Army's only black general, Benjamin Davis, was barred from the War Department's whites-only dining room.

Our guest, Rawn James, **has written an account of segregation and the battle for integration in the armed forces**, which dates back to the Revolutionary War. James is an attorney whose father and grandfather served in the military. He currently works in the Office of General Counsel for the U.S. Navy, though he stresses that his writing is his own and not the Navy's.

James is a graduate of Yale and the Duke University Law School, and he wrote an earlier book about the efforts of Thurgood Marshall and attorney Charles Hamilton Houston to fight Jim Crow laws. He spoke to FRESH AIR contributor Dave Davies about his new book, called "The Double V: How Wars, Protest and Harry Truman Desegregated America's Military."

DAVE DAVIES, HOST:

Well, Rawn James, welcome to FRESH AIR. You know, your book takes us back to the **early days of the republic**, and there was a long-held tension between the need for soldiers, in for example the Continental Army, and resistance among some white to taking black recruits. *Why, for example, when, you know, the founders were raising an army to fight the British wouldn't they want to take advantage of black manpower for the Army?*

RAWN JAMES: Well, Dave, first I want to thank you for having me. I'm a longtime listener of FRESH AIR, so it's really a thrill to be here today. In **October of 1775, the Continental Congress voted overwhelmingly to exclude African-Americans - slave or free - from serving in the military.** And **the concern was that training African-Americans in armed warfare would lead to a slave insurrection.**

There were a great number of African-Americans in these Southern colonies, and **George Washington**, in general, was very sympathetic; as a slave owner himself, was very sympathetic to **the idea that this would lead to trouble down the road.** And this would become **a recurring theme** over the next century and a half of the American military experience, where Southern politicians would express concern about what would happen to their communities if African-American men were trained in warfare and then returned home to these oppressive environments. And later, as we see, in **World War I, their fears proved well-founded.**

DAVIES: Right, you don't want to give your subjugated class weapons and teach them how to use them. But some blacks did serve in the Revolutionary War, didn't they?

JAMES: Yes, they did, and this happened after January **1776**. As the war raged on, **opposition** to African-American fighting in the Army began to **lessen because they needed bodies.** And this again would end up being a **recurring theme** throughout the American military experience.

What is interesting during the Revolutionary War is nearly all African-Americans served in integrated units, and by the war's end, more than 5,000 African-Americans had fought for America.

DAVIES: Now you write that African-Americans got into naval service much more easily and readily and earlier than in army service. Why?

JAMES: Naval service at the time was wind-powered. We were a sail-powered Navy, and the work was terribly difficult, and the life was quite arduous. The food rations were at subsistence level. Disease and malnutrition were constant threats. And therefore, it was a job that many white Americans were not interested in having.

And in fact, **Crispus Attucks**, the escaped slave who of course became famous as the first to die, he was a - in the Revolutionary War, he was a sailor. And this would go on for some time. The Navy had many African-Americans, thousands of African-American, in it **until the Navy became a steam-powered Navy**, and **suddenly when the work became less arduous and less dangerous.** But until then, as far as the seafaring force went, there were men who showed up at the docks professing no history at all, and some of them were escaped slaves, and others were born free men, but they were welcomed aboard.

DAVIES: Right, and quarters were tight among ships of that day. Did - was there racial tension on ships?

JAMES: There was tension in the tension that they had on any ship, as you said, in which the quarters were tight, and the food was bad, and men were taking advances of grog in exchange for their pay. But there was not the - **the crews were integrated** because there was no practical way to segregate them and no effort that I found to segregate them aboard these ships.

DAVIES: Now you said that African-Americans who served in the Revolutionary War served in integrated units. Black soldiers of course fought in the Civil War. Were they in segregated units? What kind of conditions did they encounter?

JAMES: In the Civil War, they were in segregated units, and **the Emancipation Proclamation had a greater effect on the Union Army than it had on the slaves of the Southern states** because the Southern - the Confederacy viewed it as, you know, edict issued by a foreign government. But the Emancipation Proclamation, in it the - President Lincoln invited all individuals who could serve, including African-Americans, to come and serve in the Union Army, and what that meant was that **escaped slaves flooded the Union Army**. They were very excited and eager to fight for the Union such - and the War Department was so flooded with African-Americans that just five months after the Emancipation Proclamation, the War Department had to establish what it called the Bureau of Colored Troops, and that was to manage the paperwork and what it called all matters relating to the organization of colored troops.

DAVIES: So if **we move forward to World War I**, the draft was activated. Were blacks originally included in the draft?

JAMES: **The draft was race-neutral**, and this was to the consternation of many of the Southern senators, but the fact was that the United States was going to need as many men in uniform as it could muster. But segregation would be strictly enforced during World War I. What is interesting about World War I is leading up to it, a group of students at Howard University [Black College] saw that they had an opportunity, perhaps, to become officers if they were able to mobilize politically. And this movement was led by Joel Spingarn, who was the founder of the NAACP. And what he - what they wanted was a colored officers training camp; be a training camp for African-American officers. And this was very controversial in the beginning because Spingarn had devoted his life to integration, to eliminating racial barriers. But he realized, and the others, the students, realized that this was going to be an incremental process toward equality. And so to begin that process, they realized that they needed to show leadership, and they wanted to show that they had the ability to lead men into battle. And so they lobbied Congress, and Congress did approve it. The War Department approved it, as well, establishing a **training camp for African-American officer candidates at Fort Des Moines, Iowa**, and **this proved to be a turning point in African-Americans' military experience** because 639 officers were commissioned after weeks of, you know, trial and tribulation that officer candidates go through even to this day. And the African-American newspapers at the time wrote grandiose editorials saying that race is on trial, and we will show that we can lead our own men. And the fact that for the first time they had been afforded the chance to do so was a grand opportunity for many of these young men.

DAVIES: So this is World War I, when American doughboys are going over in Europe, where of course the French and the British and the Germans had been fighting - and the Russians - for years. So African-American units, segregated units, went over to Europe, and now they actually had trained officers because of this officers' school that was established to commission black officers. What kind of action did they see? How were they treated?

JAMES: The Army put itself in a bit of a quandary with having African-American officers. Even if these officers were going to be restricted to commanding African-American enlisted men, the officers learned even before they arrived in Europe, on the ships over, they were not going to be treated - the Army had no intention of treating them as officers. **White enlisted men repeatedly refused to salute the African-American officers. And the officers, when they arrived, many of them were told that they would not see combat, they would be assigned to labor units, stevedore units they were called. And the many thousands and thousands of African-American enlisted men, nearly all of them served in labor battalions. They were not permitted to fight. They dug nearly every single grave for Americans in Europe in World War I. So the treatment that those officers received came as a bit of a shock, and in fact many of them were embittered by the experience that they had during World War I, and they came back to the United States determined to do something about their predicament in the civilian world.**

DAVIES: So we did have thousands of African-American soldiers and hundreds of black officers serving in World War I primarily confined to labor duties, but there were the *exceptions*. **Some were assigned to French units**, right?

JAMES: Yes, and these were Les Enfants Perdus, or **The Lost Children**. Their white commanding officers went to the leadership, General Pershing back then, and said our men have trained - and these were, these groups were largely Northern African-Americans, African-Americans from the Northern states, and they were commanded by white senior officers. And these officers went to the highest - they went directly actually to General Pershing, and that we have trained for combat, and we are here doing stevedore duty, we're digging ditches. And **General Pershing's staff said, well, if you want to fight, you can go fight with the French because they need people**. And these soldiers went over to fight with the French. They learned French. They learned how to use the French grenades, the French guns. And because these soldiers had seemingly been abandoned by their own army, the French soldiers called them Les Enfants Perdus, and these soldiers fought very bravely during World War I.

DAVIES: You know, there's another fascinating story about the **mobilization for World War I, which I don't remember hearing, and it was of a black infantry unit that was being trained in or near Houston, Texas**, and, you know, we spoke earlier that in the early days of the republic, you know, Southern whites had been very reluctant to put weapons in the hands of blacks. And there was a lot of harsh treatment of blacks in Southern areas, where these training camps occurred. And there's this story of an incident involving this black infantry unit. Do you want to tell us first of all what triggered that incident?

JAMES: Well, this is - you're referring to the **Houston Mutiny**. And the initial cause of it was the fact that the officer's training camp at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, had been established so that many of the noncommissioned officers, which are - these are senior enlisted soldiers, these senior enlisted soldiers transferred out of the unit that was in Houston, Texas, and went to Fort Des Moines, Iowa, to train to become officers. This left younger soldiers in charge, and these - importantly, **many of these soldiers were from Northern states, and they had no experience with the brutal segregation that existed in Houston, Texas** during the World War I era. And their - the way the townspeople treated them when they walked around the town, the way the bus drivers treated them when they rode on the bus. It wasn't simply a matter of sit in the back of the bus, it was the entire experience was revelatory to them. And they **mutinied**. And W.E.B. Du Bois famously wrote that it was difficult for a colored man to write of Houston, and it is quite terrible what those men did. They were pushed to the breaking point. And of course it does not excuse what happened.

DAVIES: Right, well, and there was real violence. I mean, *they were responding to an attack by some local whites on an African-American woman. One of the soldiers stepped in to defend her and was brutally beaten*. And then when the mutiny occurred, what did these black soldiers do?

JAMES: Yes, the soldier who stepped in to protect that young woman, there became a rumor that he had been - that he had been attacked and shot and killed. And then the **rumor spread**. By the time it got to the camp, the **rumor** had become that white men were on their way to the camp. So the soldiers at - the African-American soldiers at the camp organized under Sergeant Henry Vida, and they gathered all of their arms, and they **left the camp, and they attacked the city of Houston. And they indiscriminately shot any white person that they came across**. They stopped a man, a man was driving his car, they told him to stop the car. They told him get out of the car. The man refused. They riddled him with more than 50 bullets. And as they were **marching down the street in perfectly orderly fashion**, all the townspeople who witnessed it said these soldiers were **so orderly and so disciplined**, and they were shouting out stick by your race, it seemed that they had **taken the military training that they had learned, and they were putting it to use against the white civilians. It was exactly what the Southern politicians had feared would happen.**

DAVIES: More than a dozen whites were killed, right, as I recall? Yeah. And so what was the reaction? I mean, this was exactly the fear of Southern whites, who said - you know, who didn't want to put weapons in the hands of blacks. What was the reaction of the military and of others in the country?

JAMES: **The political reaction was immediate and swift**, and they said - the congressmen and senators said **we cannot have any African-American troops in the South**. We cannot have them training in the South. It simply does not work. And even many of the New York papers and Northern congressmen and senators agreed that it was a quandary of what to do *if you take an individual, a young, 20-year-old black man who was born and raised in Harlem, and you send him to North Carolina to train, that the experience that he's going to have very well may present a dangerous situation for all concerned*.

DAVIES: But it didn't put an end to black training or black units, right? I mean, it was after that that these black units went over to Europe, right?

JAMES: Yes, absolutely. It did not put an end because they were not going to integrate the training anyway, and the soldiers were training in the Southern states, all the soldiers were training in the Southern states, because the weather was more hospitable in the Southern states. So it truly was a quandary, and that is why - see, the reason I believe, my **thesis of the entire book, is that if an individual wants to understand the remarkable story and the impossible trajectory of African-Americans' singular life in our country, then he or she would do very well to examine black people's role in the United States military; the roles that we have played, the experiences that African-Americans have had. And this is because the military has continually been forced to confront what it means to segregate two individuals, to separate two individuals according to their race.**

DAVIES: After World War I, what was the experience of black soldiers returning?

JAMES: Soldiers preparing for World War I, they closed ranks - African-American civilians as well - they closed ranks. They stood - the phrase was **standing shoulder to shoulder**, and De Bois wrote, **with our eyes lifted to the hills**. They wanted to, as **President Wilson exhorted all Americans, to make the world safe for democracy**. And **they believed that by making the world safe for democracy abroad that they would prove their mettle at long last and come back in as, they said, democracy here at home**. They returned in 1919 to what became known as the Red Summer. There were so many race riots up in the Northern states, and the brutal terrible **lynchings** that occurred in the South. And the **lynchings** became endemic, so much so that they **began to almost become a separate judicial system in the Southern states**. So what these soldiers returned to really was a situation that was even worse than when they had left. **Soldiers were lynched and burned while wearing their military uniforms**.

DAVIES: Well, as World War II approached, it was clear civil rights leaders in the United States wanted the military integrated. Why was it such a priority among civil rights leaders of the time? I mean there are a lot of things to be concerned with - you know, economic advancement, unionization, voting rights. Why was integration of the military such an important goal?

JAMES: **Desegregating the Armed Forces of the United States was the priority of the NAACP, of the National Urban League, and of African-American community leaders across the country as we move into 1940**. Many Americans understood that war was coming and these tens of thousands of Great War veterans remembered what they had come home to. They remembered the experiences that they had over in Europe and they were determined not to let that happen again. And indeed **what became known as the civil rights movement, I contend, began during the interwar period, and particularly during the final months leading up to America's involvement in World War II**; this is when the mobilization, when African-Americans collectively mobilized and began to fight for a single goal, in this case the goal, the first hurdle they saw was we must desegregate the Armed Forces. And in January of 1941, in fact, is when A. Philip Randolph, who is just a great leader, he told President Roosevelt that because President Roosevelt had not moved on desegregating the military, he's going to organize a march on Washington. And A. Philip Randolph said I'm going with 10,000 Negroes to march to Washington and **we are going to demand equality in the Armed Services and equality in the defense contracting industry**.

DAVIES: Right. And there was quite a response. It was clear that march was going to be a big deal. So Roosevelt was under some real pressure here. How did he respond?

JAMES: He responded by holding a meeting and inviting A. Philip Randolph and other leaders to the White House, and he opened by telling them **I can't do anything until you call off this march of yours**, Phil. And Mr. Randolph assured him that the march was not going to be called off without action on the president's part. They had their meeting. President Roosevelt met with his advisers and then he **issued an executive order that did desegregate the defense industry and said that defense contractors, if they wanted to have contracts with the United States government, they could not discriminate on the basis of race**. Based on this, A. Philip Randolph postponed the march on Washington. He refused to call it canceled, but he said we will postpone it.

DAVIES: And **prohibiting discrimination among defense contractors, of course, was critical because that represented the employment to millions of people**. But they still refused to integrate the military. And it's interesting as I read this account. I mean we're now in the 1940s. You have a president who's, you know, an educated liberal from the Northeast. Why were his people, Henry Stimson, the secretary of War, and the Army chief of staff, George Marshall - these are educated people. Why were they so opposed to integration of the military?

JAMES: The **first** reason why they opposed desegregating the military is - and this was kind of the over arching umbrella reason, was that the military is not a place - is not a social laboratory. And it is not a place where we are going to do experiments for how America should operate. **Secondly**, as a corollary to that, they said the military certainly should not be a social laboratory during a time of war. It would prove too disruptive. **Thirdly**, many of them believed that African-Americans were simply inferior. They were not fit to fight.

DAVIES: In World War I there were black units, but when I got to Europe they found commanders did not want to use them in combat. In World War II you had black army units. You had some in the Army Air Corps, the **Tuskegee Airmen**; you had some in the Navy. Generally, what was their experience? Were they employed as fully active servicemen?

JAMES: Yes. Many more African-American soldiers were able to fight in World War II than were able to fight in World War I. And you mentioned the Tuskegee Airmen, and that's really quite an interesting story, because in recent years the Tuskegee Airmen have at last been given their overdue recognition. But at the time it was established - that the school was established - the **Tuskegee Airmen were a controversial unit**. And here's why. The Air Force had

not yet been established. That happened after World War II as a separate defense unit. The Air Force existed within the Army, so the Army Air Corps was the newest part of the U.S. Army. It did not have a 130 year history of segregation or of dealing with African-Americans. So African-Americans strongly hoped that as the Air Corps grew dramatically during World War II, that it would be the experiment with integration. And the War Department did announce that it would train African-American pilots; however, it would trained them in a separate training school, and this training school was located less than 50 miles from the state-of-the-art Army Air Corps training facility that the white Air corpsmen used. This would be at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. And many leaders saw the establishment of Tuskegee and the recruitment of the Tuskegee Airmen as a step backwards. But **it was their performance in battle and their stellar record that turned that**, what was seen by many as a step backward, turned it **into a great step forward**, such that when integration finally did come about a few years later, the Air Force was leading the charge.

DAVIES: And you do write that of the - I mean the great bulk of African-Americans who served were in the Army and that there was still this **tendency to assign them to labor duty rather than combat**.

JAMES: Yes. They were still assigned to the stevedore units. They were assigned to dig graves, to carry the dead, and often to **bury** and then **rebury** the dead. And this continued throughout World War II, and so that so many of the soldiers who were trained for battle ended up in these labor battalions, and this presented the Army with a blatant **inefficiency**, such that you had two - the Army had two soldiers, had put them both through training and then take one soldier and has him building roads and the other soldier is facing battle and the risk of death and injury on a daily basis. Some of the white soldiers began to complain, and this became widespread enough that it began to get back to the War Department, and the War Department saw that it did have a problem on its hands.

DAVIES: Well, after World War II it was Harry Truman who really ushered in much bigger changes in the military. He became president, of course, when Roosevelt died. Not long after his reelection in 1945 - it was in the spring of 1945 - and Harry Truman was not a kind of guy would think that civil rights leaders would have been exactly excited about. He's a high school educated man from rural Missouri, but clearly he brought a different perspective. Why do you think he brought a different attitude toward race relations to the job?

JAMES: **Harry Truman** was, as he stated in his own words, raised by some violently prejudice Southerners. But Harry Truman, throughout his political career, was, as Roy Wilkins wrote, was politically astute on the race question. As Senator of Missouri, Harry Truman was extremely dependent on African-American voters. In 1940, in the Democratic nomination, he beat Governor Lloyd Stark by 5,000 votes. Governor Stark was an open segregationist. Nearly every single African-American in Missouri who voted, voted for Harry Truman. Harry Truman consistently voted for cloture, for the anti-, federal anti-lynching legislation, and he had a progressive track record when it came to civil rights. This track record contradicted what appeared to be his long-held and deeply seeded personal views about African-Americans and their capabilities. But Truman had stated, as he said in one speech to a group of white voters, he said **I believe in the brotherhood of man before the law**. The last words are the interesting part of it. Harry Truman believed that whatever opinions he might have of African-Americans' capabilities personally did not matter because **the law and the Constitution demanded that they be treated as Americans**.

DAVIES: You also write that Harry Truman was moved by some of the experiences that he'd read about, particularly with African-Americans returning from World War II. There was a **Sergeant Isaac Woodard** who was returning to his home in the South. Tell us that story.

JAMES: Isaac Woodard was returning on a bus in the South, returning to his home town and he was wearing his uniform and it was late at night and he was joking around with the other soldiers on the bus, and interestingly enough, it was an integrated group of soldiers, white soldiers and black soldiers all talking together, which bothered some of the civilians on the bus. And they came to a rest stop, as buses do, and he got up and asked the bus driver a question. Well, the bus driver answered him very rudely and called him boy and Isaac Woodard told the bus driver: **Do not call me boy. He said you will address me as a man because I'm a man**. And the bus driver told him to go sit back down. Woodard goes and sits back down. A few miles down the road they stop and two police officers come aboard. They ask Mr. Woodard to please **come off the bus and they beat him severely**. The sergeant hits Woodard so hard in the eyes that he ruptures his eyeballs and **Woodard was blinded**. He awoke the next day in a jail cell unable to see. When Harry Truman heard this story, told to him by the executive director of the NAACP, Walter White, he exclaimed: I had no idea it was as bad as that. Truman knew from his own experience what it was like to be a returning soldier. The hope, the anxiety, the fear that one experiences, he commiserated with all the returning soldiers. But hearing about the violence that was again being inflicted upon African-American veterans, so many of them still wearing their uniforms, it touched him deeply and he said we've got to get to the root of the problem. And he began to believe that the root of the problem might actually be in the segregation of the military itself.