Executive Order 9981 and the Racial Desegregation of the American Armed Services

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Picture courtesy of http://picasaweb.google.com/lh/photo/nkXKmaMSH6fN-FrG14QNEA)
**Purpose for the Unit and When to Teach It**

The period immediately following the Second World War to approximately 1955 are often times briskly skimmed over, or outright ignored, in classroom curriculums. This crucial period of time includes the Korean War (appropriately now nicknamed the Forgotten War), the rise of the Cold War, and, importantly for our purposes, the integration of the Armed Services during the infancy of the modern Civil Rights Movement. The desegregation of the Armed Services sparked off the civil rights events of the 1950’s and 1960’s—sit-ins, Freedom Rides, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and more—which finally lead to a breakdown of segregation in larger society, resulting in the integration of schools, transportation, restaurants, lodging, and all aspects of American life. This unit is intended to be taught during the instructor’s section that deals with the Civil Rights Movement. Ideally, this unit should be used prior to discussion of the Civil Rights events that took place in the 1950’s and 1960’s.

*Please note that this unit only includes a general overview of Executive Order 9981 and the integration of the Armed Services. The implementation processes of integration and the controversies on part of the Navy, Air Force, and Army in conducting desegregation are lessons in their own right that encompass information that, due to their sheer scope, are not included in this overview.

**Instructor’s Overview**

Most historians concur that the one hugely motivating factor behind President Truman’s order to desegregate the Armed Services was that of political pressure: Truman needed to carry the black vote in order to win the 1948 presidential election. President Truman had assumed the Presidency after the death of Democratic President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and was not considered to be popular among voters. Truman’s
Republican opponent for the 1948 Presidential Election, Thomas E. Dewey, already had expressed his opposition to military segregation. Additionally, the at the time Progressive Party’s platform, which operated on the far left of the political spectrum, called for the end of discrimination and segregation not only in the military but also in federal employment (Buckley 339). Within his own Democratic Party, Truman was facing pressure from another civil rights supporter, Mayor Hubert Humphrey. Humphrey, like the Republican candidate Dewey, stood on a strong civil rights platform, even causing a scandal within his own party due to his staunch views on civil rights (Powell 13).

Additionally, President Truman was facing pressure to take action on civil rights from the black community as well. A. Philip Randolph, founder of the first black labor union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and a greatly instrumental civil rights leader, was a pivotal force in advocating for reform in the Armed Services (Dornfeld 16-17). Hence, with political pressure mounting from so many sides, President Truman was facing the very real potential of losing the black vote if he did not concede to supporting some measure of civil rights legislation. Interestingly, however, after Truman made his announcement to desegregate the Armed Services, a 1948 Gallup poll listed 82% of those interviewed as opposing his civil rights policies (Yon and Lansford 114).

President Harry Truman.
Picture courtesy of www.businessweek.com/managing/economic_recovery/blog/archives/2009/07/silver_lining_1.html
While certainly in need of the black vote in order to carry the 1948 Presidential Election, political savvy was not the only reason for Truman’s support of civil rights. President Truman was also horrified at the extent that racism and discrimination had grown since the close of World War Two. In particular, it has been argued that the treatment black veterans received after returning home from the war also motivated President Truman’s action on civil rights. Upon returning from the Second World War, many black veterans, particularly in the South, faced increased racism and hostility, as opposed to the open armed welcome received by white veterans. After fighting a war based on the notion of freedom, black veterans returned to the States with the demand for equality. Sadly, when they attempted to claim their rightful benefits as returning veterans, particularly from the G.I. Bill, they were closed out of opportunities. In the Deep South, the fear that blacks were “forgetting their place” in society resulted in a blood bath of beatings and murders as Ku Klux Klan men ran wild. This was evidenced in the murder of Macio Snipes. Snipes, a World War Two veteran, who was the only man from his district to vote in the Georgia primary, was shot and killed outside his house in retaliation for daring to vote. Less than one week later, two black veterans and their wives were shot to death in the same state (Foner 178-179). The atmosphere directly following the end of World War Two is best described by General Colin Powell who wrote in his Gauer Lecture, “…in 1948 the reality of life was that, 80 years after the Civil War had ended slavery, America had designed and implemented a system of apartheid almost as evil as slavery and far more duplicitous” (Powell 11-12).

The integration of the Armed Services came during the infancy of the Civil Rights Movement. As mentioned above, prior to Executive Order 9981, America had been embroiled in the Second World War. While the motivations for entering the war, not to
mention the decisions and actions taken on part of the United States, are still open to hot
debate, what cannot be disputed is the belief system so many everyday black and white
Americans stood for, fought for, and died for during those years: democracy. A
democracy our nation was spreading and implementing to other nations. During World
War Two, soldiers had been fighting for what came to be termed the “Four Freedoms”.
Those consisted of freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and
freedom from fear. President Roosevelt had used the notion of the Four Freedoms as a
motivational rallying cry to troops. How, then, could our constitution, and our technical
democratic definition of democracy, purport one idea—that all men are created equal—if
we did not in actuality practice what we preached (to use a well worn idiom)? Hence, the
desegregation of the Armed Services was a necessary step to be taken if the United States
was going to stand as a beacon of freedom to the world after the chaos and complete
devastation wrought to millions during the Second World War.

In 1946 President Truman had established the Committee on Civil Rights to
investigate the issue of civil rights and propose measures on how to further the civil
debate. Following that, October of 1947 saw the publication of the Committee’s
rights agenda. Following that, October of 1947 saw the publication of the Committee’s
report to the task set before them by Truman. The report, titled To Secure These Rights,
detailed legislation and enactments that would need to be taken to end racial
discrimination. The military was a key issue in this report, and an institution the
Committee wished to immediately begin desegregating (Mershon and Schlossman 163).
Directly after the publication of To Secure these Rights, A. Philip Randolph became one
of the founding leaders to set up the Committee Against Jim Crow in Military Service
and Training (Foner 179). Randolph worked through this Committee to appeal to
President Truman for the abolition of military discrimination and segregation. As a
response, on February 2, 1948, President Truman sent the first Civil Rights Message to Congress. The Message included a request calling for the end of military segregation and discrimination (Buckley 338-339). It was a precursor to the Executive Order Truman would issue five months later.

Executive Order 9981 was issued by Truman on July 26, 1948. As Gail Buckley writes in *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the Military from the Revolution to Desert Storm*, this order “established precedence for future presidents seeking to bypass a hostile Congress” (Buckley 339). An executive order from the President of the United States was necessary in 1948 as the Congress at the time would never have passed such civil rights legislation into law.

*Included below is a snapshot of Executive Order 9981. For the full text, please see the website section in the bibliography of this paper and follow the link titled Executive Order 9981.*

**Executive Order 9981 Against Discrimination in the Armed Forces**

*(Green 237)*

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 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:
1. It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed forces without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin. This policy shall be put into effect as rapidly as possible without impairing efficiency or morale.

Initially, A. Philip Randolph believed the language of Executive Order 9981 was too ambiguous and did not effectively or specifically deal with direct issues of how military integration would come about. Nor did the Executive Order state when integration would begin (Foner 184). However, the establishment of the Fahy Committee, which would prove to enforce the Executive Order, reassured Randolph that President Truman indeed intended to take immediate action on the issue of military desegregation. The President’s Committee in Equality on Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services, also known as the Fahy Committee, was formed alongside Executive Order 9981. The Fahy Committee was responsible for ensuring that desegregation of the Armed Services took effect (Mershon and Schlossman 187).

Members of the Committee in Equality on Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services (Fahy Committee)

(Dalfiume 176) (Mershon and Schlossman 189)

*Chairman Charles Fahy—Former Solicitor General of the United States and former general counsel of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB)
*Dwight R.G. Palmer—President of General Cable Corporation and National Urban League activist
*William E. Stevenson—President of Oberlin College
*Lester Granger—African-American head of the Urban League
*John H. Sengstacke—African-American publisher of the Chicago Defender

While the Navy and Air Force were willing to integrate and were mostly compliant with the Fahy Committee on ending not just discrimination in their units, but segregation altogether, the Army was a different story. The Army maintained that it could function as a non-discriminatory unit while maintaining segregation. The Army choose to cite the excuse of “military efficiency” as logic to hide behind their aversion to military integration. However, this was a professional term used to cover up basic issues of
racism. This is clear when reading the reaction the civilian head of the Army, Secretary Kenneth Royall, had to Executive Order 9981. Royall stated, “‘Effective comradeship in battle…calls for a warm and close personal relationship within a unit.’ Forcing blacks and whites into close association, which many whites found ‘distasteful’, would prevent such relationships from forming.” (Mershon and Schlossman 207). The resistance put forth by the army to military integration can be traced back to the prejudices inherent in many of the commanding officers. Mershon and Schlossman write in *Foxholes & Color Lines: Desegregating the U.S. Armed Forces*, “…the politics and social relationships of diverse local communities made the Army a particularly sensitive barometer of racial sentiments in the country at large. The traditional southern caste of the Army’s officer corps and noncommissioned officers meant that regional differences in racial attitudes figured prominently in internal Army thinking” (page 205). Royall, in defending the Army’s anti-integration stance, also put forth the excuse that segregation was an advantage to black soldiers. Segregated units, he argued, were beneficial to black troops because such units did not force blacks to compete with their white counterparts (Dalfiume 182). Furthermore, Congress, in a despicable move, assisted the Army in delaying the work of the Fahy Committee in implementing Executive Order 9981. Southern and anti-integration senators and state representatives worked to coach the Army in providing misleading information to the Fahy Committee that would seek to slow the Committee’s efforts.

The arrival of the Korean War, also termed the Forgotten War, spurned the efforts to integrate the Armed Services and the resistance from the Army began to deteriorate. Simply put, the Army desperately needed assistance from black troops on the ground in areas where all black units were not currently stationed. In order to do that, integration
needed to occur. Combat units in Korea, as well as training units in the United States, all desegregated during the three years of the Korean War. By 1954 the last of the all-white units in the Army had been integrated by black soldiers (Foner 189).

In conclusion, Executive Order 9981 was instrumental in the infancy of the Civil Rights Movement in its integration of the Armed Services, which paved the way for later legislation that would help to desegregate the rest of society. The issuance of Executive Order 9981 by President Truman was the result of not only political motivations but also increasingly worsened racial tensions. In order to ensure the Executive Order was followed, President Truman created the Fahy Committee to oversee the integration of the Navy, Air Force, and Army. The Army proved to be hostile to the Executive Order and went out of its way, with the assistance of an anti-integration Congress, to stall the efforts of the Fahy Committee. However, pressure from the Korean War finally saw the integration of all Army units.

**Activities**

1. **Interview with a Veteran**
   - The instructor will partner with the local Veterans of Foreign Wars office to locate veterans from the Korean War, and current Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, who are willing to discuss their experiences with high school age students.
   - After completing the course unit prepared by the instructor, and therefore armed with a background understanding of the desegregation of the military, students will prepare a list of questions to be used in interviewing an African American veteran from both the Korean War and Iraq, or
Afghanistan War. The instructor must review the question lists from all students prior to the interviews to ensure the use of appropriate questions.

- After completing both interviews, students will write a ten page report (five pages for each veteran) comparing the experiences of both veterans in regard to issues of discrimination. Some guiding questions the instructor might include to help the students in writing their paper include:

  How were the experiences of the two African American veterans similar?

  How do the experiences differ? Based on what you have learned in class, are you surprised by any of your findings? If so, what findings surprised you and why?

2. **YouTube Project**

- With the explosion in usage of online social networking sites such as YouTube and Facebook, the class will take advantage of this technology to create a tool that will aid in teaching others about Executive Order 9981 and the racial Desegregation of the American Armed Services. This project will also assist the students of the class in furthering their own knowledge of this time period.

- Students will be broken into groups of five. The amount of groups will vary on the size of the class. Each group will be responsible for creating a YouTube video that presents an overview of the events leading up to Executive Order 9981, the response to the Executive Order, and an explanation of why the desegregation of the Armed Services was a crucial step in the birth of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Students may want to consider including segments of their veteran interviews.
The YouTube videos will be between five to seven minutes in length. While each group will be graded on their own merit, to provide an extra incentive to students, the YouTube videos will be judged with awards presented for first, second and third place. Awards may include extra bonus points for the assignment or other incentives to be decided at the discretion of the teacher.

Judging of the YouTube videos will take place by showing the videos to a participating social studies class one grade level below the grade the instructor is teaching. The instructor will partner with a teacher who is willing to use the YouTube videos as supplemental materials in his/her classroom. The students of that class will then judge and determine the winners and runners up by picking those videos that easily and comprehensively sum up the major points originally assigned in the YouTube project by the class instructor. A handout of the criteria, to be determined by the instructor, will be distributed to the judging students to be used as a checklist.

3. **Class Debate/Research Project**

As the unit overview has shown, there were many motives behind President Truman’s decision to issue Executive Order 9981. This will certainly be part of the lesson plan should the instructor choose to implement this unit into the curriculum. To further understand the intricacies of President Truman’s decision, each student will conduct a research report into President Truman’s motives.
• Students must present all sides of the argument for the motives they find in their research. However, they must pick one area that they feel had the strongest impact on President Truman. In their research paper, they will argue why they feel one area outweighs the other.

• Students will be required to utilize resources from their school and public library, particularly any available primary documents they might have access to.

• After picking their side of the argument, students will be broken into groups based on which side they have written their paper for.

• Each group will present a list of questions to the teacher that they wish to ask the opposing side. The instructor will use the list provided by all teams to determine a list of debate questions.

• The class will spend one session conducting a debate between the opposing sides. Questions will come from the instructor’s list. The instructor will also act as moderator.


• It is hard to study history and truly grasp what the occurrences of many years past would have felt like to a person of the times. To garner an appreciation of the importance of Executive Order 9981 and the integration of the Armed Services, students will write a personal essay.

• In this essay, students will detail an area in life that they are passionate about. This may be a club they are involved with, a religious affiliation, or the idea of what they want to be when they grow up.
• With this passion in mind, students will imagine what it would be like if they were barred and excluded from one of these areas based on their skin color. They will relay in their essay how that impacts them, and relate it directly back to what it would have felt like to be African-American and excluded from their passion before integration.

• To wrap-up the essay, students will demonstrate why the integration of the Armed Forces was instrumental in helping to bring about an end to segregation, and in beginning the era of the modern Civil Rights Movement in American society.

5. Textbook curriculum project

• Have your students open their current social studies textbook and search for a chapter or section on Executive Order 9981 and the integration of the Armed Services. It is very doubtful that they will find one.

• Hold a class discussion talking about the cautions to be taken from this example. Ask questions such as, Why is it important to understand that history is written from the white perspective? Why would a textbook leave out, or diminish events such as the issue of Executive Order 9981?

• Further investigate in the textbook to see if any mention is made of the segregation of the Armed Forces.

• Have students meet in groups of five. Their assignment will be to write a section/chapter on the importance the integration of the Armed Forces had on the Civil Rights Movement and the later desegregation of the rest of society.
Chapters from each group will be presented to the class. All students will receive a copy of each group’s chapter and will discuss aspects that are highlights of the section and question other areas/events that might have been omitted from chapters.

6. Film

- The class will watch the film, *A Fighting Force: African-American Military Heroes* (please see the bibliography for complete details). The film may take two-three class periods, depending upon how your school day is divided.

- A class discussion will be held for students to have a chance to reflect on how the film impacted them and also to give students a chance to ask follow-up questions to the instructor. It is important that the film be shown after the materials regarding Executive Order 9981 and the integration of the Armed Forces have already been taught. Additionally, it will be beneficial for this project to occur after any additional research that may have been conducted by the students in relation to their veteran interviews, class debate project, and textbook curriculum project.

- Develop questions that will help lead to discussions for your students such as, *How would you feel to be sent overseas to fight for your country when you weren’t allowed equal rights back home? What important aspects of the Civil Rights Movement arose out of integrating the military?*
Bibliography

Books


Films/Video


  - This may also be found on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJ7sa7x0h6w

Journal Article


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