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Freedom Themes: Comparison of African-Americans and Japanese-Americans Homefront
Experience during WWII

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In *Constrained Communities: Black Cleveland's Experience with World War II Public Housing*, Todd Michney argues that “the World War II urban housing crisis that was particularly severe for African Americans,”¹¹ rejected the notion that housing and living conditions had improved much beyond the de facto circumstances that dominated during the times of legal slavery. The populace is the active support system for their military during these trying times. Therefore, the military will depend on their home front for services such as factories manufacturing material that the military will utilize to build their front that they will use in the battle. Although the World War II led to extreme suffering and loss of freedom of many races, it was the one thing that fueled the fight for freedom for these ethnic minority groups. The fact is that African-Americans had given noble efforts to strenuously participate in the World War II endeavor, having fought bravely, yet returned to a homefront of pernicious attitudes, instigated by legalized segregation Jim Crow laws which persisted. Embracing hopefulness, earmarked upon having given blood sacrifices in the military, the essence of the black struggle at that time hinged upon receipt of appreciation to be paid in dividends shown in equal treatment. But equal treatment was not forthcoming. The African-American experience *throughout* United States and world history has been a tenuous one,

11. Michney Todd M., “CONSTRAINED COMMUNITIES BLACK CLEVELAND’S EXPERIENCE WITH WORLD WARII PUBLIC HOUSING,” *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 4 (2007): 939-941.

riddled with hypocrisy and inconsistencies. Although some strides and advances were made, in terms of voting rights and Supreme Court decisions in the desegregation of public schools, nevertheless despite Japanese-Americans' treatment of having been placed in internment camps could not reasonably compare with the mistreatment the former group suffered in substandard housing alone. This essay investigates the validity of this comparison by additionally acknowledging that black people in the United States are – and always *have been* – the exceptional people.

World War II arrived at a time when they were still struggling for basic civil rights in North America. Segregation in the United States military had already officially taken root, although ended in de jure terms in 1948. It was the war that made ready the platform upon which the military finally integrated in 1941. Following the commencement of integration in the armed forces, numbers of African Americans in the military steadily rose from about four thousand to about 1.2 million. It was with suspicion and dismay to the African American men that they were perhaps not deemed fit to battle, thus being relegated to being posted into non-combat units working in supply, transportation and maintenance capacities. Whites failed to understand that black participation of duties behind the front lines of battle bore equal significance to the war effort². The pro-active and classic chattel slavery free-labor system, which made the United States an internationally leading economic power, did little to stimulate any remorse that would posit any recourse in the tangible form of reparations, although the Japanese-Americans *did* receive such³. Not only did Japanese-Americans receive a formal apology from then-President Reagan later in 1988, an official legislation

2. Ibid, 939-941.

3. Bilal Qureshi. "From Wrong to Right: A U.S. Apology for Japanese Internment."

Npr.org. <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/08/09/210138278/japanese-internment-redress> (accessed November 4, 2015).

“the Civil Liberties Act”⁴ allowed compensation to “more than 100,000 people of Japanese descent who were incarcerated in internment camps during World War II⁵,” while African-American descendants of slavery who essentially build the country on their bloody backs received nothing until this day. Imagine that.

While inaccuracies of history would declare that African-Americans had suffered greatly under slave merchants, who sold them off as unhuman animals, segregation was not much better. Michney states that one letter-writer to the Roosevelts told “The place I have now is not fit for dogs to live in,⁶” and from the primary sources of photographs of the Japanese-American internment camps, those so detained had excellent housing compared to those blacks who served the country in military service. Even though they were able to earn a meager livelihood, it was not without great fervor and sweat, as the capitalists system of white-supremacy exploited them unapologetically to enrich themselves.

The injurious system of sharecropping and peonage did untold damage to African-Americans who otherwise if treated with true equality would have prospered in education, and fruitful full participation in the American political-economy. So, when the plantation farmers started adopting machinery to do the farm work, many lost what pitiful sources of survival they had – one could not right call it ‘income’ due to the servitude-debt nature of it – and were forced to migrate to the cities towards the North where they suffered racial discrimination from the whites. However, industrialization back at home gave the African Americans the opportunity to serve their country actively in the war. By 1945, the American

4. Ibid, Qureshi.

5. Ibid, Qureshi.

6. Michney Todd M., “CONSTRAINED COMMUNITIES BLACK CLEVELAND’S

EXPERIENCE WITH WORLD WARI PUBLIC HOUSING,” *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 4 (2007): 933.

troops grew less due to the loss of soldiers in the war. Thus, it forced the government to put the African American soldiers on the frontline to fight 1. It fast forwarded the desegregation efforts that enabled the black Americans to secure well-paying jobs after the war. Throughout the war, they had stifled through a life plagued with racial violence and segregation.

So, for the Japanese Americans as any logically minded observer can tell, their plight was a bit different. At this juncture, it is important and supremely imperative to realize that every other non-white ethnic group which came to the shores of the United States during the WWII-season had willingly migrated. African-Americans are the exceptional people, who historically did not seek to migrate (as a whole) but rather were brought in captivity. Experiencing loss of language, torn from families, and having their lands pillaged and stolen impacted the entire worldwide industrial economy. Meanwhile, in 1941, the Japanese made a surprise attack on the naval fleet belonging to the Americans at the Pearl Harbor located in Hawaii in the US. Thus, Japan was drawn into the World War II as both Britain and the US declared war on Japan. As a result, life across the country (Japan) became a struggle for food, clothing and gas became rationed. The citizens were tasked to assemble scrap metal that was utilized to build the front for the war. Even the women got employment as welders, riveters and even electricians in the defense plants that the military built. The plight of the Japanese Americans was great as most of them, if not all, lost their independence during that period⁷.

Following the attack by the Japanese, President Franklin Roosevelt of the United States of America signed an Executive Order, which saw to the incarceration of all Japanese Americans who lived on the West Coast. The order was the accentuation of wartime panic that made the US government weary. Therefore, they believed that anyone that bore Japanese ancestry was capable of great treachery and disloyalty. The result of the order was that about

7. Allan Austin, "Eastward Pioneers: Japanese American Resettlement during World

War II and the Contested Meaning of Exile and Incarceration." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 26, no. 2 (January 2007): 58-84.

120,000 Japanese Americans lost their freedom and were sent off to relocation camps. These Japanese Americans were forced to fight in the war for America to amend for the mistakes of Japan, mistakes they were completely unaware of. Despite all this, young Japanese Americans who were on the frontline fought greatly and bravely in Italy, Germany, and France while flying the American flag and were identified as members of the US's army's 100th Battalion, 442nd Infantry. The end of the war saw this unit as the most decorated in army history despite what the government did to their families.

A common experience shared between the Japanese Americans, and the African Americans is that circumstances forced them to participate in the war. Discrimination of varying degrees marked both experiences, in terms of differences being instituted by policy, and law. The Japanese Americans were arrested and relocated to camps where they lived a life of great suffering – for a short period of time, of which they were compensated. They were forced to participate in the war and those who showed cowardice continued to suffer in the military relocation camps. The black Americans had lived a life of hardship before the war because of continued segregation policies designed to relegate them to positions of a permanent underclass in U.S. society, regardless of the factor that they were active-duty participants in the U.S. at the time. They had no rights in the U.S. as they were seen fit for only farm work and hard jobs. They, however, lost whatever jobs had been secured in the south following the mechanization of farm work that forced them north⁸. After America had joined in the war, they were unwilling to join because they felt that even wearing an army uniform and fighting may not be enough to earn them respect from the people they serve. Despite the mixed feelings about supporting the war, the industries that provided service to the war did provide a good opportunity for livelihood. In the end, a cafeteria worker, James 8. Shane Smith, “The Crisis in the Great War: W. E. B. Du Bois and His Perception of

African-American Participation in World War I.” *Historian* 70, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 239-262.

Thompson developed a phrase 'double victory' that led to the Double V campaign. The first V represented victory at the war front and the second represented victory at home where other blacks were to fight for their civil rights. After that, over 1.2 million blacks joined the war. Another experience that these two minorities share at the home front is that they got the fruits of their labor in the war. The blacks were denied posts in combat troops after the white Americans claimed that they were not qualified for such posts.

Thus, they were given the duties of providing home front services. Working in industries of supportive military positions, namely materials and supplies, it was realized after 1945 that the country had lost so many soldiers, the U.S. *required* the help of blacks. Blacks joined combat troops to fight alongside whites. By 1948, the US military was completely integrated. Japanese Americans, after being captured and forced to leave everything they had, were basically ensconced into the auspices of military camps. Despite that no Japanese Americans were linked to any sabotage schemes, they were accused of being of probable malicious intent. They were relocated because the military commanders felt they will empathize with the enemy (Japan). Subjected to harsh living conditions, camp life forced them to carry arms and fight for America during WWII. Whoever refused, continued living in camp-conditions. However, the Japanese Americans that took up arms ended up becoming the most highly decorated combat unit in the war.

A contrast between the experiences of these two minorities on the homefront was that the black Americans were never locked away during the war. In fact, they had the opportunity to participate in the war by choice. Yet, had little legitimate political will in policy help and enforcement, to make their lives better for themselves and their progeny. The war only presented an opportunity for the black Americans to make a living *for the moment*, moving onward towards a platform of civil rights in the 1960s. Segregation was in all areas of life: Economics, Education, Entertainment, Labor, Law, Politics, Religion, Sex, and War.

However, the Double V campaign opened abilities to fight for their rights back at home and simultaneously fight for victory the war to some small extent. Japanese-Americans experienced their own brand of bad luck. When Japanese attacked a naval fleet belonging to America on American soil, they became the enemy. Being held in contempt by both the government, military and even the media, they lost their freedom and everything that were rightfully theirs. Thus, for them freedom was not a choice they had.

Another contrast is that the Japanese never participated in the provision of home front services to the military. They were locked away during the war after the US joined the war because Japanese had attacked them within their borders. They were considered enemies in the country for mistakes they were unaware of and locked away on military relocation camps. They were forced to fight in the war for America at the front line following the loss of American soldiers. The black Americans, on the other hand, were actively participating in the provision of home front services by directly working in the industries that supplied the army. Some even had the chance to join combat troops to fight the battle⁹.

Conclusively, freedom means different things to different people. Regarding freedom, World War II meant something different for both communities. For black Americans, it meant an opportunity to prove they were loyal, and could get a whole new set of better life conditions. Through the Double V campaign, they were motivated to fight for their civil rights as well win the war. Furthermore, it was a new source of livelihood for them owing to the fact that they had lost their work back at the south. For Japanese Americans, it was a *temporary*, although complete loss of freedom unless they proved that they were incapable of treachery like demonstrated at the hands of their mother country, Japan. They were forced into a war they knew nothing about.

9. Michael Masatsugu, 2008. "Beyond This World of Transiency and Impermanence": Japanese Americans, Dharma Bums, and the Making of American Buddhism during the Early Cold War Years." *Pacific Historical Review* 77, no. 3: 423-451.

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*{the following links are source for primary photographs, for the client to note as he or she wishes}

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/manz/>



Ansel Adams photo in 1943 of Japanese-American interned in camp, reading the newspaper.

<https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/ww2-pictures/>



World War II African-American men of the 82nd Airborne Division, taken from the National Archives.

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/brown/brown-segregation.html>



African-American Schoolhouse in 1938, Summerville, South Carolina.
Conditions notwithstanding, had changed after WWII.

