

Disparities in the Medal of Honor Why African American Soldiers' Awards were Delayed, and Japanese American Awards were Immediate

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Abstract: The 442nd Infantry Regiment Combat Team, composed mostly of Japanese American soldiers, is the most decorated division in U.S. military history. As a minority combat team motivated by accusations of disloyalty following Pearl Harbor, they sought to demonstrate their patriotism through excellence in battle. President Harry Truman formally recognized the valuable contribution of the 442nd Infantry Team to the Allied victory and assigned a medal of honor to one of the Japanese American soldiers, Private First-Class Sadao S. Munemori, immediately after the war. African American soldiers similarly demonstrated great loyalty and skill in the 332nd Fighter Group, called the Tuskegee Airmen, and the 761st Tank Battalion, also known as the Black Panthers. However, although both units fought with distinction, the granting of medals of honor for African American World War II service was delayed until 1997. Based on memoirs, interviews, and an Army Report Investigation conducted by the Department of Defense, this paper analyzes the reasons for the decades-long discrepancy in the timeline for the acquisition of medals of honor between Japanese American and African American soldiers. The differing experiences and interpretations of discrimination and segregation, both during and after the war, account for the immense positive attention paid to Japanese American efforts compared to the total lack of national honor assigned to African American soldiers. Through their service, Japanese Americans resoundingly exposed the errors of the federal government's decision to intern families of Japanese descent and helped promote a narrative of wrongdoing that the federal government has since acknowledged. In contrast, African American victories, no less impressive than those of Japanese American and white soldiers, were overshadowed by the racial discourse of Jim Crow-era politics. Specifically, African American soldiers continued to face systemic discrimination at home and in the armed forces despite their military accomplishments. It delayed the formal acknowledgement of the significance of African American service.

Keywords: US Military, World War II, Japanese American, African American, Medal of Honor.

1. Introduction

In 1997, President Bill Clinton addressed the nation to rectify one of the longest standing errors in America's military history: the denial of medals of honor to African American soldiers for their service in World War II. Thanking the researchers who diligently documented the discrimination that

took place in the armed forces, Clinton declared, “Without [your research], we would not be able to meet our obligation as a people to an extraordinary group of soldiers to whom we owe the greatest debt. Because of the hard work you have done, history has been made whole today, and our Nation is bestowing honor on those who have long deserved it.” Then, Clinton recounted the cases for each of the seven soldiers who were finally acknowledged that day: Vernon Baker, Edward Carter, Jr., John Fox, Willy F. James, Jr., Ruben Rivers, Charles Thomas, and George Watson. Clinton ended his speech by adding “Today, America is profoundly thankful for the patriotism and the nobility of these men and for the example they set, which helped us to find the way to become a more just, more free nation. They helped America to become more worthy of them and true to its ideals” [1]. With those final words, Clinton framed exactly what had been at issue in 1946, when 28 American soldiers, one of them of Japanese descent, received the nation’s highest military honor.

During WWII, Japanese American and African American soldiers made outstanding achievements in the US military, segregated as it was. Through their service, both groups hoped to earn more recognition in the mainstream American society. However, despite their similar aims and service records, the U.S. government saw their contributions differently in the political climate of post-war society. While a Japanese American soldier was awarded a medal of honor by President Truman one year after Allies defeated the Axis Powers, African American World War II servicemen were not granted the medal of honor until 1997 after six of the seven recipients had died [2]. Although African Americans, and Japanese Americans, both confronted racial bias and discrimination, Japanese Americans received greater praise and significantly more medals of honor (21 in total) compared to their African American counterparts (7 in total) due to entrenched prejudicial practices in the U.S. military [3]. Those practices enabled Japanese American soldiers to receive recognition more quickly for their ability to distinguish themselves in battle, propelling them toward becoming highly decorated. Meanwhile, the institutional refusal to acknowledge or question racist treatment of African Americans, who were routinely denied combat positions, resulted in the minimization of their service and accomplishments.

Related dissertations and contributions about discrimination in the U.S. Army have been published in recent years. For example, “Prelude to a Revolution: African-American World War II Veterans, Double Consciousness, and Civil Rights 1940-1955” by Sarah Ayako Barksdale examines the experiences of African American soldiers in World War II using the theoretical framework of double consciousness, a concept originating from W.E.B. Du Bois that focuses on the split identity of African Americans between two cultural traditions. As African American soldiers encountered European societies where racial discrimination was not as intense compared to the U.S, they brought those experiences back to the home-front after the war and were inspired to lead desegregation efforts. The experience of fighting in World War II gave African Americans a stronger political consciousness and more unity and militancy as a community that helped to inspire the later civil rights struggle. It is corroborated in oral histories from African American soldiers as well as contemporaneous literature that examines the changing consciousness of African Americans during World War II. Barksdale’s paper focuses primarily on the specific experiences of African American veterans, and the role that service in World War II played in furthering the civil rights struggle. Barksdale does not focus on comparisons to other groups of ethnic minorities, such as Japanese American soldiers [4]. Another recent dissertation that covers a similar topic is “Crossing the ‘Color Bar’: African American Soldiers in Britain and Australia during the Second World War” by Joseph Alexander Dickinson. Dickinson’s essay argues that while African Americans were in Britain and Australia during the Second World War, they encountered white societies where racial discrimination was not as intense as it was in the United States. White American soldiers saw this greater equality as a threat to the racial hierarchy and attempted to impose segregation within the army board. However, this attempt to create racial inequality was resisted by both white Australian and British soldiers as well as African American

soldiers. Like Barksdale's argument in "Prelude to a Revolution," Dickinson argues that the experience of encountering other societies during the Second World War gave African American veterans more motivation to challenge racial discrimination in American society after the war. Also, as "Prelude to a Revolution," Dickinson's paper focuses on the African American experience, and the impact on the later civil rights movement and fails to consider how the experience of African American soldiers compares with the treatment of Japanese Americans and other minority groups during the Second World War and the post-war period [5].

Although these studies examine relevant research topics that complement the content of this paper, there are no readily available dissertations that directly compare the divergent treatment of African American and Japanese American soldiers during and immediately after World War II. Hence, the research topic of this paper does not overlap with the existing body of research and offers new insights into the racial environment in which medals of honor were or were not assigned. The aim of this paper is to identify and then assess the rationale used to justify why Japanese American soldiers were praised as the most decorated military unit in American history while African American soldiers confronted more evident bias. It was not until 1992 that the Department of Defense began re-investigating whether some African American soldiers deserved to receive medals of honor for service in WWII. This delayed recognition is indicative of the long-lasting, detrimental effects of systemic racism in America, a notable and relevant insight given contemporaneous conversations on racial justice. The following analysis is based on information gathered from available recorded interviews and memoirs by World War II veterans, and residents of Japanese Internment Camps. The primary sources were supplemented by secondary sources and documentaries that were used to assess patterns of treatment of minority soldiers, in particular, the significant differences in the treatment of Japanese Americans and African Americans before, during, and after the war. A survey of leading historical events in 19th and 20th century American history helped to establish a basis for racially motivated military politics. Lastly, an analysis of a Department of Defense study was used to clarify the nature of racial disparity in the military and the rules for eligibility for military honors.

The structure of the article is as follows: Section 2 provides background information; Section 3 examines the motivations for recruit placements, and the various sets of responsibilities for enlisted minority soldiers; Section 4 suggests possible explanations for the unequal treatment of Japanese and African American soldiers; and Section 5 discusses political considerations for accolades and awards bestowed by the United States government. In a democracy, vast distinctions in the treatment of one community, constituency, or people over another breed inequalities that can undermine the entire social and political system. During World War II, military honors were not distributed equitably because it was believed that military honors would empower African American civil rights activism at the very moment when white supremacists were most devoted to the maintenance of a status quo rooted in Jim Crow de jure segregation. That historical reality can be understood through a comparative project like this one. This paper undertakes a unique approach to the study of racial inequity by focusing on the contrast between the post-war treatment of Japanese American soldiers, whose social status was bolstered by the medals they received for military valor, and African American veterans, who were denied the same type of social empowerment. Given the importance of ongoing conversations about racial injustice in contemporary America, this paper provides yet another example of entrenched institutional racism that serves as a reminder that enduring racist and discriminatory policies can be expressed in various ways.

2. Background

2.1. Background for Japanese American Discrimination

Japanese Americans began to arrive in the United States during the 19th century California Gold Rush and eventually fell victim to nativist sentiments. By the end of the century, they suffered from racial discrimination and anti-immigration policies. Although they were not victims of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, anti-Asian sentiment continued to rise in the decades following that act, leading San Francisco to advance a proposal to segregate their public schools so that white and Japanese Americans would attend different schools. This proposition so vexed the Japanese government that it approached then-President Theodore Roosevelt to discuss how segregated schools could be prevented. The resulting “Gentleman’s Agreement” saw the Japanese government agree to restrict the outflow of Japanese migrants to the United States in exchange for an end to the San Francisco school system segregationist policies. That outcome, however, did not end anti-Asian discrimination. Asian Americans continued to be seen as “immigrants” or “foreigners” and were systematically denied U.S. citizenship. Their status was formalized through the *Ozawa v. United States* (1922) court case. The plaintiff, Takao Ozawa, had been living in San Francisco for more than 20 years and applied to be a naturalized citizen. However, it was determined that since Ozawa was not “white” and was not born in the United States, he was ineligible to become a U.S. citizen under the Naturalization Act of 1906, which only allowed “free white persons” and people of African descent to naturalize. The following year, another Supreme Court case, *Thind v. the United States* (1923), used the category of “white” to deny the citizenship to Asian immigrants. Thind was an Indian Sikh immigrant who categorized himself as Aryan based on the racial science of the time. Hence, he argued that he should be considered “white” and be eligible for US citizenship. However, the Supreme Court concluded that the “white” race in America was not based on racial science but followed a certain set of “Caucasian” characteristics, culture, and a common speech. Thus, the United States government applied standards that prevented Asians from receiving U.S. citizenship, which shaped a general perception of Asians as aliens who were ineligible to become U.S. citizens, even though their children, born in the United States, would acquire birthright citizenship under the 14th Amendment.

An anti-Japanese pro-war propaganda campaign that followed in the aftermath of Japan’s bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 intensified xenophobic hatred for Japanese Americans. In response to fears that a Japanese fifth column might form in the United States, President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9902 on February 19, 1942, relocating 120,000 Japanese Americans living in American mainland, largely on the West Coast into internment camps where their civil rights and liberties were daily curtailed and denied. When Roosevelt’s order was challenged in the Supreme Court by 23-year-old Japanese American Fred Korematsu in 1944, the court affirmed that the policy of Japanese American internment camps was constitutional, stating that the camps were for “military necessity,” and not based on race. The concept of “military necessity” however, was rooted in the belief that Japanese Americans, even second and third generations Japanese Americans, were intrinsically more loyal to Japan than they were to the United States. This popular but erroneous perception prompted 33,000 Japanese Americans to enlist in the defense of America. They hoped that service in the military would demonstrate their loyalty to the U.S. loudly and proudly.

2.2. Background for African American Discrimination

Although African Americans fought for American Independence alongside George Washington, defended the republic from Britain in the War of 1812, fought in the Mexican American War, fought to maintain the Union and end slavery during the Civil War, and served in the 1898 Spanish-American War, Jim Crow segregation limited the positions and honor African Americans could win in their

military service, while exposing them to the violence of white supremacy. After the “separate but equal” doctrine was formalized through the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) court case, legal segregation at the state and federal level pervaded American society, including the military. While World War I enabled African American soldiers like the Harlem Hell fighters to fight to make the world “safe for democracy,” it did not trigger greater democratization at home. Despite the military contribution of African Americans, Black families who moved out of the South to gain “more equal” opportunities still confronted strong discriminatory environments, especially in America’s cities. Moreover, conscripted and volunteer African American soldiers were not permitted to serve alongside white counterparts until the 1950-53 Korean War, after then-president Harry Truman issued an executive order to desegregate the Army.

The fight for equal treatment was tied to World War II when African Americans claimed to be fighting for democracy on two fronts—the physical battlefield abroad, and the symbolic battlefield against inequity at home. The Double V campaign, as it was called, focused on winning both a victory over aggression by Axis Powers in Europe and Asia and victory over tyranny and racism in the United States. African Americans fighting the dual battles considered participation in the war as a critical arm in the fight for improved recognition and civil liberties. However, their wartime contributions were largely ignored. President Franklin D. Roosevelt put little effort toward improving their treatment on the battlefield, and only provided protection from discrimination in wartime industries in response to the threat of a planned march on Washington in 1941 organized by the president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union, A. Philip Randolph. Consistent with his lack of concern for African Americans, Roosevelt did not do enough to provide fair treatment for African American workers in New Deal programs, where African Americans were “last hired, first fired,” nor in his other progressive policies, such as housing relief or the 1944 Servicemen’s Readjustment Bill (“G.I. Bill”). Unlike their White counterparts, African American veterans were undermined by discriminatory federal policies that denied loans and support to “at-risk” communities, overwhelmingly communities of color. Even so, there was a popular perception that FDR was willing to help the African American community, and thus, World War II was seen as an opportunity to demonstrating black loyalty, service, and excellence in the hopes that the federal government would continue to respond in turn. However, their efforts yielded few changes. Even President Truman, who desegregated the military after World War II, passed no civil rights legislation and issued no formal acknowledgement of African American service.

3. Motives and Placements and Different Sets of Responsibilities during their Enlistment

3.1. Motives

Although African American and Japanese American soldiers both intended to prove their commitment to the United States through military service, the purpose of the demonstration of allegiance (particularly in the context of post-war plans) differed. For Japanese Americans, whose loyalty was in question after Pearl Harbor, there was a need to redefine the Japanese community away from being seen as “enemies” to being perceived as “patriots.” For African Americans, wartime participation was one feature of a campaign to win greater civil rights. As the Double V campaign clarified, the fight to make the world safe for democracy would enable the domestic campaign to make America more democratic. The different motives for fighting World War II were expressed in the combat mottoes of African American and Japanese American soldiers. The famous Japanese American (or Nisei) unit, the 100th/442nd Infantry, for instance, adopted the motto “Go for Broke,” which conveyed a strong patriotic message that Japanese Americans were ready to die in the defense of their adopted country. In contrast, the mottoes of the Tuskegee Airmen and the 761st Tank Battalion were “spit fire” and “come out fighting,” both of which conveyed combat zeal without

willingness to die for the country. Coupled with their motives for wartime participation, Japanese Americans aimed to convince White Americans of Japanese American loyalty and to erase their connection with the internment camps, whereas African American soldiers' mottoes clarified willingness to fight (and to keep fighting). The latter troubled government officials, who often supported segregation, as well as white supremacists, who did not want to empower African American activists in their continued efforts to tear down Jim Crow restrictions.

3.2. Different Sets of Responsibilities and Results

Nearly all the Japanese American soldiers in WWII volunteered for service after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, since laws had been passed banning Japanese men from being conscripted. The Japanese Americans, who insisted on fighting on the frontlines, received more dangerous and visible roles. There were two kinds of Japanese American soldiers. The first, those who had already served as national guards in Hawaii, were well-trained and welcomed enlistees. Those from the mainland, however, usually lacked military training and faced greater distrust. Consequently, they were less welcome in the military. Japanese Americans from Hawaii and the mainland composed the 100th/442nd Infantry Regiment Combat Team. Japanese American soldiers may have benefited from a stereotype, then active in American military circles, which associated their performance with the cultural importance of bravery, as exemplified by the American understanding of bushido, or the samurai code. Essentially, despite being classed as "enemies" by the American government, the American military was confident in Japanese American military service [6]. African American soldiers, composed of volunteers and conscripts, received both different placements and responsibilities from the Japanese during their enlistment. Moreover, they were not viewed positively by US military commanders. African American soldiers were deemed unfit for military service by white officers, who routinely denied them combat placements. Although FDR tried to convince white commanders to accept African American soldiers, white officers insisted on racially segregated units that often placed African Americans in support roles. Only when FDR converted "the Tuskegee Airmen Institute from a civilian to a military organization" did the US military finally offer African Americans a combat-specific opportunity [7]. The creation of the 761st Tank Battalion, also known as the Black Panthers because of their insignia, followed in 1942. Both units saw fighting on the frontlines and made significant contributions to the American war effort.

4. Other Reasons for Discrepancies in the Granting of Military Honors

4.1. Reasons for the U.S. Government's Widespread Recognition of Japanese Americans

Soldiers of both ethnicities fought with bravery and distinction in some of the most important battles of the war. Although they were involved in the Battle of Monte Cassino, the Rome Arno Campaign, the Battle of Bruyeres, and the Battle of Biffontaine, the 442nd's, most famous achievement was the rescue of the Lost Battalion. Just after a tough battle with the Germans at Biffontaine, when American forces finally liberated the French towns of Buryees and Biffontaine, wounded and bleeding, Nisei soldiers had barely recovered from battle before they were ordered by General Dahlquist to rescue the "lost battalion" of the 141st Infantry Regiment, a large contingent of soldiers surrounded by German Forces. Other regiments, like the 143rd Infantry, had already received the same order, but had not moved to make a rescue. Their commanding officer, Colonel Paul Adams, was not interested in risking his team's lives. According to the combat Journal of the 442nd, even the Nisei's commanding officer, Colonel Pence, wanted to "stay in their safe place" [8]. However, as Senator Daniel Inouye, a member of the 442nd, later recalled, his comrades made no complaints about such a dangerous mission; in fact, some of them proudly said that "this is what we had been waiting for." Although the Nisei soldiers sustained more than 800 casualties to rescue the 211 men of the 141st, in

the eyes of the Nisei “the sacrifice for many of us was worth it because America took notice” [9]. It was this mission, more than any other, that allowed the 442nd to earn the respect of other soldiers by confirming their patriotic spirit.

Even with their combat roles restricted, African Americans comprised two exceptional combat units, the 99th Squadron Tuskegee Airmen and the 761st Tank Battalion. Some of the most accomplished pilots in the U.S. Air Force were enlisted in The Tuskegee Airmen, which had a nearly flawless combat record. In March 1945, the Chicago Defender ran the headline, “332nd Flies Its 200th Mission Without Loss.”[10] Even though Air Force studies have since revealed that “at least 27 Tuskegee bombers were shot down,” and that 84 of the 355 deployed airmen died, the Tuskegee Airmen were highly celebrated for their role in WWII for forcing Italian pilots to surrender and protecting American bombers who flew deep into German territory[11]. The 761st Tank Battalion was renowned for its participation in the Battle of the Bulge. For over 183 consecutive days, they served on the front lines for one or two weeks at a time preventing the Germans from making any meaningful advances. One of the unit’s most remarkable soldiers was Sergeant Ruben River, who was severely wounded when his tank hit a mine on November 16, 1944. Heroically refusing morphine, Rivers maintained command by taking another tank and continuing the advance. On Nov. 19, when Captain David Williams, the white commander of the 761st, ordered a withdrawal, Sergeant River replied that he had observed the German anti-tank positions and said, “I see ‘em, We’ll fight them,” a move that cost River’s life but contributed to America’s victory [2].

Considering these contributions, one would expect rough equivalence in military honors, if not more for African Americans who far outnumbered Japanese men in uniform (more than one million Black soldiers fought in World War II compared to only 20,000 Japanese troops who served on the front lines) to have received more medals. Instead, Japanese American soldiers (100th/442nd Infantry) received one Medal of Honor, 4,000 Purple Hearts, eight Presidential Unit Citations, 559 Silver Stars, and 52 Distinguished Service Crosses. By contrast, African American soldiers received far fewer awards. The Tuskegee Airmen received three Distinguished Unit Citations, one silver star, 96 Distinguished Flying Crosses for 95 Airmen, 14 Bronze Stars, 744 Air Medals and eight Purple Hearts. The 761st received 14 Silver Stars, 77 Bronze Stars and 304 Purple Hearts.

The cause of these disparities is not a lack of exceptional service, but rather racial bias among commanding white officers. In 1994, Captain David J. Williams, commander of the 761st Tank Battalion, told Lieutenant Hunt, that Sergeant River deserved a Medal of Honor. However, Hunt did not take this recommendation seriously and further remarked that “he’s already got the Silver Star” [2]. In the end, there was no official Medal of Honor recommendation for Sergeant River. In Hunt’s view, African American soldiers possessed “animal loyalty to [the] hand that feeds,” a quality that he felt precluded them from being awarded high military commendations. Lieutenant Colonel Paul Bates, another white commanding officer of the 761st, “never submitted any Distinguished Service Cross or Medal of Honor recommendations for the 761st.” [2] As these examples illustrate, African American soldiers still confronted a great sense of racial bias either from their commanders or their commanders’ superior officers, who were less willing to honor brave soldiers like Sergeant River. Moreover, as will soon be made clear, military leadership still had a mindset that dehumanized African American soldiers even decades later.

4.2. Different Types and Experiences of Discrimination and Racism

The different racial perspectives towards Japanese American and African American communities resulted in varying types of discrimination and racism, which in turn helped account for different responses from the federal government towards their respective military services. After World War II, President Harry Truman, known as a supporter of civil rights, did not extend recognition to African Americans despite desegregating the military through executive action. He faced resistance when it

came to honoring African American soldiers for their service since Truman's party contained a contingent of pro-segregationist Democrats, the Dixiecrats, who opposed civil rights legislation. To the Dixiecrats, bringing African American soldiers into the White House to provide military awards was going too far when domestic racial violence was so fresh on politicians' minds. Comparatively, the absence of racial violence in Asian communities, in part because Japanese Americans were concentrated in internment camps where civil unrest was impossible and pointless, played a role in general acceptance of giving Nisei soldiers military honors.

During WWII, American citizens were not kind to Japanese Americans. Indeed, American racial animosity created a strong consensus on what should be done to America's issei (Japanese-born) and nisei (American-born) Japanese American population. A poll from the American Institute of Public Opinion in March 1942 reported that "93 percent of Americans were in favor of the removal of Japanese immigrants and 59 percent supported the removal of Japanese American citizens." [12] What motivated this consensus was fear of Japanese espionage that would lead to an attack on the American mainland. Grant Ichikawa, a military intelligence service member of the 442nd, recalled that after the Pearl Harbor bombing, Americans looked upon Japanese Americans as "Third Class Citizens." Moreover, nisei soldiers were processed as 4-C, or "enemy aliens," which meant they were not allowed to serve in defensive positions in the country. Even before the war, Asians were regularly deemed unfit for military service [9]. Young Oak Kim, the former lieutenant of 100th Infantry Battalion, a Korean American graduate from officer candidate school, recalled being told he had "the wrong shaped eyes" and "the wrong skin" by an officer and was forbidden to enlist in 1940[13]. As this example illustrates, anti-Asian sentiment was not limited to the Japanese. Other Asian ethnicities, Chinese and Koreans in particular, were told to always carry their identification papers and not to leave their residential communities, for fear of being mistaken for Japanese. The Alien Registration Act of 1940 later classified Korean immigrants as subjects of Japan, which put them in the same category as Japanese "enemy aliens" [14]. Despite strong anti-Asian sentiment, however, there were no Asian-led race riots during or following the war.

4.3. Race Riots

Beside Asian Americans, the African American community's long-term struggle for recognition of and respect for their civil liberties and rights in the face of persistent white supremacy and legal segregation led government officials, military leaders, and white American citizens to question African American political ambitions before, during, and after the war. Moreover, systemic discrimination, even in the context of America's wartime economic production, led to civil strife. A series of "race riots" in 1943 exposed America's propensity for violence against African Americans, both in terms of civilian-led and state-led violence. During the Detroit Race Riot hundreds of people were injured, and thirty-four people (25 Black and nine White people) were killed [14]. According to the black newspaper, The Detroit Tribune, a white mob gathered and headed to the African American district to "brutally beat African American citizens" [14]. An African American mob formed to counter and resist the white aggressors until the Detroit police arrived carrying tommy guns and tear gas that were "almost always[positioned] in the direction of Negroes" [14]. More than 90% of the people who were arrested for rioting were Black according to the article [14]. During a parallel event, the Harlem race riot, the Crisis magazine, an official publication of the NAACP, reported that "not a single white person was shot by police. Yet all the pictures showed white people chasing, kicking, and beating colored people" [14]. Over the course of five weeks, "the property damage to 1,450 stores exceeded \$5 million; 550 individuals were arrested, 500 injured, and 6 killed" [14]. Such visible racial animosity, even though it originated with white aggression, did little to encourage government officials to take actions that could further empower African American social and political activism.

5. Political Considerations of the United States Government

5.1. The Balance of Political Power among Minority Groups

Military awards have the power to shape American perceptions and promote acceptance of minority ethnic groups. It follows, then, that the most decorated of all American combat units, the 442nd, earned the respect of the American people for the Japanese American community. In July 1946, when President Truman honored the Nisei soldiers at the Japanese American Memorial in Washington DC, he said, “You fought not only the enemy; But you fought prejudice, and you won; Keep up that fight; and we will continue to win; To make this great republic stand for; what the constitution says it stands for; the welfare of all of the people; all of the time”[15]. Through these words, the president stated that all soldiers of color would have wanted to hear about their sacrifices and the significance of their accomplishments. However, in uttering these words, Truman said nothing to indicate any intention to end white supremacy and deconstruct America’s racial hierarchies. As the Nisei were from Hawaii, where whites were a minority, they would take their publicly acknowledged loyalty back with them to Hawaii, without undermining the racial status quo on the American mainland. In other words, President Truman could reward the Japanese American community without offending white supremacists in the party or among the American people. Even so, military honors transformed the Nisei’s reputation and recognition in Hawaii and beyond. Empowered and emboldened by their national attention, Nisei soldiers sought to build better relationships with high-ranking people in Hawaii (which was still an American territory until 1959) and within US government institutions. Working with political organizers in Hawaii and the mainland, they spearheaded the Hawaiian Democratic Revolution of 1954, which “seized a majority in Hawaii’s House and Senate” and brought it under Democratic Party domination [16]. By displacing the Republicans, whom Nisei veterans, including Daniel Inouye and Spark Matsunaga, said many saw as symbols of white supremacy, they opened the door for the election of Asian American politicians. As a result, Daniel Inouye became Hawaii’s first American of Japanese ancestry elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in the same year that Hawaii became the United States’ 50th state. Other Nisei soldiers, like Sakae Takahashi, became the first Japanese American veteran to hold public office. He was later elected to be a territorial senator (1954-1959) and state senator (1959-1974).

5.2. Civil Rights Advancements

By ignoring the contributions of African American soldiers, the U.S. government hoped to avoid the empowerment of the African American civil rights movement, which was likely to benefit from the national acknowledgement of African American service in World War II. African Americans not only comprised a much larger proportion of the U.S. population than Japanese Americans, but African Americans were also dispersed throughout the U.S. mainland, not concentrated in a distant territory like Hawaii. Moreover, as white supremacists worried, bestowing military honors on African Americans would strengthen the case for improved recognition of and protection of African American civil rights. After all, even before World War II ended, the U.S. government had been compelled to do something about racial segregation among military contractors when A. Philip Randolph called March on Washington involving 100,000 Black workers to protest discrimination. President Roosevelt’s response, issuing Executive Order 8802, made discrimination among military contractors illegal, but notably the Order did not extend to the entire American economy. President Truman’s executive orders to desegregate the military (9980 and 9981) operated in the same manner. Essentially, while both presidents acknowledged the harmful effects of discrimination, they acted to lessen those effects for the sake of the nation, not for the benefit of the Black community itself, by ensuring that military production would not be hampered by racism and that America could deploy as many soldiers

as possible. When it came to granting concessions to African Americans that directly contested white supremacy and encouraged a change in the American mindset, neither Roosevelt nor Truman took much action. Thus, while WWII began to change the opinions of many white soldiers in their African American comrades-in-arms, little was done to weaken or eliminating white supremacy in the military or America at large. Even with white soldiers reporting that African American soldiers had fought next to them and saved them, higher ranking officers overlooked the need to recognize Black troops. Instead, superior officers continued to support segregated units even after white soldiers increasingly called for segregated units to end.

Outside of the military, discrimination remained as bad as ever. After the war, Issac Woodard, a black soldier, was beaten by a white sheriff, nearly causing him to become blind. Other black soldiers confronted similar experiences. In December 1946, John T. Walker, a Navy veteran, had his home burned down by white supremacist arsonists in Palo Alto, CA. They left the following message, “We burned your house to let you know that your presence is not wanted among white people...Niggers who are veterans are making a mistake in thinking they can live in white residential districts” [17]. Messages such as this one reinforced the fact that Black military service did not matter to white supremacists who deemed skin color more important than patriotism and service. Black soldiers who served with distinction, melting even the stony hearts of segregationists in the military who had witnessed their patriotism and accomplishments, remained victims of the undemocratic principle of “separate but equal” at home, at least partly because their military service was not sufficiently recognized and applauded.

Change came through what the Double Victory campaign had forecast: continued fighting at home. The racial hierarchy to which African American soldiers returned endured for decades. Despite *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Civil Rights Movement did not succeed in winning meaningful legislation until the mid-1960s, when President Johnson had no choice but to recognize African American demands and pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 because the U.S. government could not afford to have its Cold War image as the bulwark of democracy in the free world undermined by the inequities of segregation. Changing sentiments led to revisions in the assignment of military honors to African Americans for service in subsequent wars. African American soldiers were immediately rewarded for their contributions to the Korean War, Vietnam War, and Gulf War. Yet, the first medals of honor for World War II did not come until 1997, when President William Clinton assigned seven medals to African American soldiers. Given Truman’s executive orders, and the acknowledgment of African American military contributions in the 50s, 60s, and 90s, why was no effort made to revisit World War II service records? President George H. W. Bush gave the first medal of honor to an African American serviceman for World War I in 1991. A few years later, the Department of Defense concluded their study of the distribution of medals of honor to Black Americans’ World War II service, noting that commanding officers had reported African American contributions, but superior officers were reluctant to assign awards. The publication of that army report under contract MDA903-93-C-0260, directed by Shaw University, in addition to Clinton’s emphasis on the inclusion of women and minorities, promoted the decision to assign medals of honor in 1997.

6. Discussion

The differing ways in which medals of honor were awarded to Japanese American and African American soldiers reflected America’s willingness and reluctance to address legacies of discrimination that had vastly different implications. America’s readiness to immediately grant military awards to Japanese Americans was mirrored by its formal apology for internment. In the late 1980s, President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 to grant reparations of \$20,000 each to all surviving Japanese Americans or legal immigrants of Japanese ancestry during WWII, with a

formal presidential apology. Although reparations were a fraction of the value of the homes, businesses, and land that Japanese Americans lost, a formal apology for wrongdoing stands in significant contrast with the silence of the federal government on other racially motivated wrongdoings. How can a nation apologize for slavery? For the failures of reconstruction? For decades of Jim Crow? For the extra-judicial murder of countless African Americans, without even investigation into and pursuit of their murderers? Just as white supremacy endured well beyond the end of slavery, racism within the American military did not dissolve with Truman's executive orders; thus, the nation's highest military award went unassigned to seven African American veterans for 52 years, just 6 years short of the 58 years during which "separate but equal" remained a legal doctrine in the United States.

7. Conclusion

The comparison of Japanese American and African American WWII medal of honor timelines reveals that not all experiences and legacies of discrimination are the same. While both Japanese Americans and African Americans experienced segregation and discrimination, Japanese Americans benefited from more positive associations and stereotypes that enabled their placement in combat roles in which they could earn greater distinction. Then, after the war, the association of internment camps with German concentration camps motivated American government officials to pay for that unpleasant parallel with greater attention to the injustices perpetrated against Japanese Americans, while government officials continued to tacitly support the marginalization of African Americans. Thus, despite African American activism and the significantly larger population of African Americans in American society and in the armed forces, African Americans continued to be excluded from the national honors owed to them. It is regrettably consistent with America's historical failure to sufficiently recognize the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow and retains important lessons for those committed to social and economic justice. As this paper focused solely on medals of honor, it did not concern itself with other types of military or civilian honors. It also did not encompass all the minority communities who served in the war. Consequently, the paper does not investigate nor integrate the experiences of other ethnic communities, some of which may offer illuminating parallels. While these limitations did not impact the ability of this paper to arrive at its conclusions, they do suggest areas of future research, as well as a means for this paper to be expanded into a more broadly comparable and longer-term study.

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