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FYS: On Letter Writing

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Letters for Change: Fighting Against Racial Discrimination in the Military

In every war since the founding of the United States, black Americans have played a key role, but have never received fair or equal treatment. Changes to military policy gave black Americans hope that things would be different in World War II, but that was not the reality. Black soldiers during World War II wrote letters to black newspapers to expose their mistreatment. The rhetoric used in this letter writing was crucial to rally black communities at home to fight for justice in the military.

Before the United States entered World War II, the War Department put the "1937 Plan" in place to make better use of black troops. The Plan lifted the ban prohibiting black volunteers and aimed to raise black personnel in the army to equal the proportion of black people in the population. It also reserved a certain number of positions in black units for black officers, though it limited black people filling officer positions to those reserved spots. (McGuire, xxii) These changes indicated to black Americans that black soldiers would receive more humane and equal treatment than they had in past wars. They inspired motivation to serve and hope for continued improvement.

Despite these changes, black soldiers found their treatment in this war no better than before. Starting in the late 1930s, the black population, led by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, started pushing to end racial discrimination in and fully integrate the army. In 1940, the Selective Service Act made all men ages eighteen to thirty-six eligible to volunteer and barred racial discrimination as a basis for selecting men. However, the Act also gave the War Department the final say in who to train, which could render the Act less effective. (McGuire xxiv) Black soldiers entered World War II expecting change. They were outraged when faced with the reality, and many of them wrote letters to expose their condition to the larger black community at home. Through these letters, black soldiers hoped to gain community support, and to persuade the community to fight to end the discrimination they endured.

Many of the letters collected in “Taps for a Jim Crow Army” are addressed to black newspapers. Soldiers wrote about their experiences with horrific detail in hopes that newspapers would publish their letters and reveal the treatment they were receiving. In a letter addressed to The Pittsburgh Courier, the authors describe an event where a soldier who needed medical attention was accused of going off post without permission. The writer details how the white commander chained him to a tree for so long his arm swelled, and how he was only fed bread and water twice a day. They also sent films for the newspaper to develop. The soldiers writing were from Pittsburgh and wanted their community to “know of the sacrifices we local soldiers are making here and overseas” to “inspire them to work and fight harder for victory on the homefront.” (Williams et. al. 110)

Another letter written by soldier Edward N. Lyles is addressed to The Call and Post, a black newspaper in Ohio. He tells about a group of black soldiers who visited Biloxi, Mississippi, for a break from military life. Armed white military police drove into the city and scolded them for minor things, rounded them up and took them back to headquarters. The lieutenant took their passes and told the military police to use their clubs, and if that didn’t work, “they would know what to do.” Lyles writes that the military police hit them brutally with clubs, straps, and fists. (Lyles 111) He wrote with as much detail as possible, stating his intention of giving readers information about the conditions black soldiers faced. He wanted to paint the picture for readers in order to motivate them to fight for equality, because as another letter says, “Democracy must, must be won at home - not on battlefields but through your bringing pressure to bear on congress.” (87)

Some letters also use comparative language to aid in the reader’s visual imagination of the events being described. In the letter to The Pittsburgh Courier, the authors say white authorities “misuse soldiers, treat us as if we were in a forced labor camp or chain gang.” (Williams et. al. 109) They compare treatment of black soldiers to a chain gang, a method used for convicted felons during Reconstruction that was hardly better than enslavement. Black soldiers were not convicted felons, they were brave souls risking their lives to fight for their country; but their country was treating them as criminals deserving of harsh punishment.

Another letter written to The Baltimore Afro-American states that in order for black soldiers to go off post, their officer “must be with us to snap his whip as which time we are to scatter like a pool of animals fearing their master.” (113) This soldier employed vivid imagery from American slavery to evoke certain emotions in the newspaper’s readers. Not just emotions of anger and injustice, but of urgency. Using similes and metaphors to compare their treatment to that of criminals, slaves, and animals when they were actually doing a service to their country made readers feel the extremity of the situation and realize that they had to unite and fight for equal

treatment. The letter also stresses the power of the majority - an individual will never win, so they won't reach their goals until they "learn to pull together in every way." (113)

The rhetoric used in these letters was, evidently, effective. The black press played a key role during World War II in rallying black Americans to fight for true citizenship and democracy. It was through the soldiers' letters that newspapers got content and intel about military happenings. It was out of a letter to the Pittsburgh Courier that the "Double V campaign" was born. The first V was for the Allies' victory, the second V for victory over "our enemies from within." The government was not a fan of the campaign. They were of the perspective that the black press was "making too much of segregation, riling up readers when the nation needed unconditional loyalty." (Goldberg) Using the black press as a catalyst, soldiers encouraged black Americans to fight for victory on the homefront while they were abroad.

Letters from black soldiers to black newspapers had the intended effect of exposing their conditions and bringing urgency to the black population to fight for civil rights and military equality. Black soldiers wanted to fight for America, but they also wanted to bring victory to a country that would treat them as true citizens, and that fight had to happen at home. Letters were vital in this movement to provide information and truth about the treatment of black soldiers. This medium provided a more personal lens and made readers feel more connected to the people they were reading about and fighting for. Words strike a different chord when they are written with emotion and intention. All of these letters are examples of how effective letter writing can be to bring about change. People still write letters today to organizations and government officials to gain support and create the change they want to see.

Works Cited

McGuire, Phillip. *Letters from Black Soldiers in World War II*. Lexington, Ky., University Press of Kentucky, 1993.

Goldberg, Dan C. "During World War II, the Black Press Campaigned for a Double Victory - Over Tyranny Abroad and Segregation at Home." *Andscape,* 25 May 2020.