

Jim Crow on the National Level: The Right to Flight

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Overview

When hearing the name Jim Crow, more frequently than not, one associates it with racism in the South. This lesson plan leads students to understand that segregation and discrimination existed on the national level, as well. The extended example is the segregation of African Americans in the United States Armed Forces until July 1948, at which time President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981, which called for the integration of the military. The focus is on a group of African Americans that served in World War II (WWII) and helped to break down the walls of racial separation through their performance of combat duties.

Taking their name from the Tuskegee Institute, the Tuskegee Airmen, also known as the Black Birdmen and the Red Tails, were the first African-American pilots in the United States military. Preceded by other African-American pioneers in flight, they helped to "lift the veil of ignorance" from mainstream society.

Curriculum Standards

For a list of standards that this unit addresses, [click here](#).

Time Required

This unit will take approximately five class hours to complete.

Materials Needed

1. Web sites:
 - [Jimcrowhistory.org](http://www.jimcrowhistory.org) History Section
 - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/flygirls/peopleevents/pandeAMEX02.html>
 - <http://www.wpafb.af.mil/museum>
 - <http://www.wpafb.af.mil/museum/history/prewwii/ta.htm>
 - <http://www.wpafb.af.mil/museum/afp/afp0298.htm>
 - <http://www.wpafb.af.mil/museum/history/postwwii/afi.htm>
 - <http://www.wpafb.af.mil/museum/pa/aaht.htm> (links to 86 sites)
 - <http://www.tulane.edu/~amistad>
 - http://www.coax.net/people/lwf/tus_air.htm
2. Books and essays:
 - Du Bois, W.E.B. "An Essay Toward a History of the Black Man in the Great War," in Du Bois: Writings. Ed. Nathan Huggins. New York: The Library of America, 879-922.
 - Francis, Charles E. *The Men Who Changed a Nation: The Tuskegee Airmen*. Boston: Branden Pub. Co., 1988.
 - McKissack, Frederick and Pat McKissack. *Red-Tail Angel: The Story of the Tuskegee*
 - *Airmen of World War II*. New York: Walker and Co., 1995.
 - Sandler, Stanley. *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons of World War II*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.

The Lesson

Anticipatory Set

1. Initial Motivation. Ask the students to write their name and the type of career to which they aspire on a piece of paper and collect them. Choose five responses from students sharing similar physical characteristics, such as blonde hair, blue eyes, brown eyes, tall, short, etc. Read the responses aloud, saying after each, "Sorry, you cannot pursue this career, for a study has concluded that [state the shared physical characteristic] people have undesirable qualities because they are inferior humans with small brains. The same study has concluded that the lack of necessary physical, moral, and mental qualities make [shared physical attribute] people unfit to associate with people who do not have [shared physical trait] and definitely unqualified to pursue the career they have chosen."
2. Discussion Questions. Then, ask students:
 - How does exclusion based on a physical trait make you feel?
 - What if you were removed from this class because of this trait?
 - What type of information is missing from "a study has concluded?"
3. Background Information. Explain that African Americans served in World War I (WWI), but they were segregated and mostly served as kitchen helpers, road builders, stevedores (people who load or unload ships), and grave registrars. Some African Americans did receive officer's training but only to lead African American units.
4. Tell students, that in 1925, the Army Central Staff College (now the United States War College) studied the combat records of black servicemen to determine the most efficient ways to use blacks in the armed forces. They concluded that black men were cowards, poor technicians and fighters, and that they are inferior humans with small brains. The study also concluded that blacks' lack of necessary physical, moral, and mental qualities made them unfit to associate with whites. For this reason, the study concluded that blacks should be segregated from whites. Then, discuss the aspects of racism and ethnocentrism that were used to justify segregation in the above study, as well as the fear factor that may have biased the study.
5. People also testified before Congress in the 1920s that immigrants from Italy, Russia, and Eastern Europe had smaller brains and no morals as compared to white Protestants. Discuss how this is related to the segregation of the races in the military? You should also discuss the name, the Tuskegee Experiment, given to the 99th Fighter Squadron by the War Department with students, as these men had a responsibility to perform, yet they were set up for failure.

Procedures

1. **Setting the Stage.** Have students become familiar with Eugene Bullard, Bessie Coleman, William J. Powell, and James Banning, so they can identify these early African-American pilots' contributions. Then, instruct them to study conditions for African Americans in the military from WWI-WWII. For example, Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., a 1936 graduate of West Point, was "silenced," which means he was not spoken to by his classmates for the four years he spent there; yet, he managed to rise above the isolation to become the leader of the 99th Pursuit Squadron and the commander of the 332nd Fighter Group, and to retire as a Lt. General in an integrated U.S. Air Force. Next, ask students this question: How did the pioneer pilots and military men adapt to a hostile environment?
2. **The Door Opens, A Crack.** Have students examine various studies and laws that follow concerning African Americans in the military and the effects these studies and laws had on the individual and on the group:
 - the follow-up War College study;
 - Public Law 18;
 - The Civil Aeronautics Authority authorization of Civilian Pilot Training Programs;
 - the amendment to the Selective Services Act that called for the induction, selection, and training of African Americans in all military organizations; and
 - the War Department's response to the amendment.

Students will also study Eleanor Roosevelt's involvement with civil rights in the military and the importance of the November 1940, Hampton Institute Conference responding to the Air Corps' (the Air Force, as we know it, was not created until 1947) failure to train African American pilots. In 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt nominated Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., for the position of Brigadier General, which many people believed to be a political move to secure African American votes, as the nomination came close to the election.

Then, have the students explain how the studies and laws represent the core values of people who control the institutions. They should then explain how the conference at Hampton Institute represents an effort to induce institutional change and relate it to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, approach.

3. **The Tuskegee Experiment.** In this unit, you will help students understand the pressure to succeed that was placed on the 99th Fighter Squadron and the reason for the nicknames, the Black Birdmen and the Red Tails. Have them follow the Tuskegee Airmen from training --which includes the ever-present Jim Crow as evidenced by the treatment they received in the town of Tuskegee, long delays in combat assignments--to combat and treatment they received from the military machine.

Then, allow students time to discuss the effect of this unit's recognition and the irony in their combat record when compared to the studies used by not only the War Department but also by members of Congress to discredit African Americans in the military. Have the students explain how the Tuskegee Experiment supports Booker T. Washington's separate but equal approach to attaining civil rights. Then, have them explain the reasons W.E.B. Du Bois was opposed. (Students can find many photos available, both on-line and in books of the Tuskegee Airmen.)

4. **Useful Statistics.** Here are statistics that students may find helpful:

- Nine hundred, ninety-two pilots graduated at Tuskegee.
 - Four hundred and fifty of them were sent overseas.
 - They flew 1578 missions and 15,533 sorties.
 - They won the following awards:
 - Soldier Medal: 2
 - Purple Heart: 8
 - Distinguished Flying Cross: 150 total, 95 awarded during the War
 - Air Medal and Cluster: 744.
5. Set-Backs. Have student learn about the depth of racism by studying the Colonel Selway's command of the 477th Bombardment Group at Selfridge Field near Detroit. They students will understand how laws and rules, such as Army Regulation 210-10 specifically stating that all officers' clubs would be open to all officers, were ignored by commanding officers. Explain how the actions taken by African American officers at Selfridge Field, Godman Field, Walterboro Field, and Freeman Field compare to the methods of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement.
6. A Step Forward: 1948-Executive Order 9981. Here, have students discuss the impact of integrating the armed forces. They also will discuss and provide supporting examples of the assertion that a federal law or Army regulation may not immediately correct a social injustice.

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