**How WWI Changed America**

**Podcast Series**

**Dr. John Morrow – African Americans** (21m 18s)

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**3 speakers** (Speaker 1, Libby O'Connell, John Morrow)

**[0:00:11]**

**Speaker 1**: Welcome to the How World War I Changed America podcast series, sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, with host Dr. Libby O'Connell.

**[0:00:26]**

**Libby O'Connell**: My name is Libby O'Connell. Today, our topic is African Americans in World War I. Our guest expert today is Dr. John Morrow, Franklin Professor of History at the University of Georgia. It's really an honor to have you here, John. Welcome.

**[0:00:43]**

**John Morrow**: Thank you, Libby. It's a pleasure to be with you today.

**[0:00:46]**

**Libby O'Connell**: You really are one of our nation's experts on the topic, so I'm going to start by asking you just to briefly discuss African American civil rights at the start of World War I.

**[0:00:57]**

**John Morrow**: African American civil rights at the start of World War I hinged a lot on where you lived. Because 90% of the 10 million African Americans lived in the South, it meant that they had no civil rights. Although the laws had been passed during Reconstruction that gave black men the right to vote, and blacks had become citizens, the South in which white Southerners considered the United States a white nation, despite their history of slavery and having used black slaves to develop their economy and society, it meant that African Americans had no rights which white people had to respect. The way they kept this that way was through a reign of terror, things like lynching, and then later on race riots. So for the overwhelming majority of African Americans in the United States, they had no civil rights. Now, for those who moved north and often to the West, there certainly was the problem of segregation, but in many areas, especially in the cities in the urban north, black children could go to school with white children, black men and women did not have to go to the back of public conveyances to have a seat, and they could feel that they had a reasonably equal chance at being able to live a decent life, if a segregated life, in the Northeast.

**[0:02:35]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So 90% of Americans, black population, were living in a extremely oppressed society.

**[0:02:42]**

**John Morrow**: That's absolutely correct. My parents moved south when I was born in 45. It was still segregation, but my mother had come from the South, and the stories that people brought with them, who moved north ... Because in 1915, with the opening of jobs in the war economy, some half million black people migrated from the South to the North and to the West for the prospect of getting decent jobs, and escaping the terror and the oppression under which they lived in the South. So the First World War actually is going to play an initial role in getting substantial numbers of blacks out of the South, because before that, between about 1880 and 1914, only some 200,000 African Americans had moved, most of them to the West. So the First World War is going to change things a great deal as far as the life of African Americans are concerned, although they will still be subject to that oppression in the South.

**[0:03:48]**

**Libby O'Connell**: The president at the time, Woodrow Wilson, speaks in ways, he uses rhetoric in 1917 and 1918, when America goes to war, suggesting that this global conflict is going to bring about change for all people. He talks about the rights to democracy and liberty for all. Is this a deciding factor for African Americans in terms of their willingness to participate in the war effort?

**[0:04:12]**

**John Morrow**: Wilson does promise to make the world safe for democracy. Unfortunately, Wilson was thinking only white Europeans and white people lived in the British dominions. He was not thinking of peoples of color around the globe. It's interesting to note that some African Americans choose to rally around the flag. W. E. B. Du Bois, who's one of the leading black intellectuals at the time, decides that it does make sense to, as he calls it, close ranks with their white peers and go to war, in order to demonstrate that African Americans should have equal rights and justice in the country. But at the same time, if you read, say, a paper like the Baltimore Afro-American, which was a very popular black newspaper of the time, the editor of the Baltimore Afro-American basically says he thinks it would be a wonderful idea if Woodrow Wilson would start and introduce democracy at home in the United States for African Americans before he goes crusading abroad. If you read the Messenger, which is the newspaper that A. Philip Randolph publishes in New York, and he's a socialist, and he basically says, "Before we go crusading abroad, I would like to make Georgia safe for the American Negro." So there's a good bit of doubt in the minds of African Americans that this president, who has already proven he's a racist by segregating the federal bureaucracy and locking African Americans out of jobs, they're a little bit doubtful about his rhetoric. But there is enough of a movement in the sense that since African Americans have fought in every war that the United States and even the colonies fought, the tendency was to rally around the flag, and join when you were conscripted, or actually join the National Guard units, the few black National Guard units that did exist in places like New York and Chicago and Tennessee and so on, Washington, and as well to try to get jobs in war industry. African Americans actually raised some $250 million in war bonds, which if you think about the fundamental lack of wealth in the black community, that's a pretty substantial amount [crosstalk]

**[0:06:47]**

**Libby O'Connell**: That's very substantial. At the end of World War I in 1918, it's apparent that white American society expects the African Americans who fought in uniform to return to their old place in white society, especially in the South. How has the war influenced African Americans? How did it change how they felt about their status? How did it impact their willingness or their unwillingness to return to the status quo?

**[0:07:18]**

**John Morrow**: The war changes things in the sense that, for white Southerners, and some of the better known racist white Southerners like Senator James Vardaman of Mississippi ... Vardaman actually doesn't want the United States even to fight in the war. He certainly doesn't want black soldiers to fight because, as he puts it, "If they shed blood for their country, they will rightfully conclude that they are owed equal justice and rights. That is not going to happen in the United States." In fact, Vardaman had earlier threatened to lynch every black man in Mississippi, if anybody decided they thought they wanted to vote. What you can see is this awareness, on the part of white Southerners in particular, that, by God, you don't want these men coming back who have been trained to fight, and have been killing Germans, because they may upset the system of segregation. He actually urges white Southerners to do something about this and lynch them. In point of fact, some 12 dozen, in other words, of African American soldiers who happened to return south in their uniforms, are taken off the trains and lynched on the spot. This is a definite effort to keep black people in their place, to terrorize them. It's also in 1919, the summer, what's called the Red Summer, in which there are basically race riots. I think we have to be careful the use of term riot, they're actually racial massacres-

**[0:08:58]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Yeah, they're massacres.

**[0:09:00]**

**John Morrow**: ... In which white men, mobs, often supported by the police and National Guards, actually invade black neighborhood, shooting them up, trying to terrorize the people. In the case of Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921, they burnt the entire black business district, which was quite prosperous, to the ground. In other words, this way, you won't have any economic wellbeing. They murdered some 200 or 300 citizens. We still don't know these numbers. There's a powerful pressure that white people are exerting against black people to maintain them in their place. But what starts to happen is that, as these race riots continue, returning black soldiers decide that they have had enough. One of the articles in The Crisis, the journal of the NAACP, the lead article that Du Bois writes is We Return Fighting. In other words, we're going to fight this. Even African American poets urge their citizens to stand up and fight, so that they will not just be slaughtered like animals. This is what begins to happen around the country. There's a certain amount of black resistance, although the soldiers were not enough to turn the tide. But what we see is that African Americans, in general, especially if they live in these urban areas where there were enough of them in large neighborhoods, are not prepared to return to the status quo, because they feel they have earned this right. Even in places like Elaine, Arkansas, where there was this riot massacre where black farmers tried to unionize, and they were gunned down, one of the men who was gunned down was a returning soldier of the 369th Regiment, which was the African American Harlem Hellfighters regiment, which had fought with distinction in France. So you see, and in other ways there are African Americans, African American women who are going to continue and increase the campaign against lynching and mob violence. So African Americans may be forced back into their place, but they're not accepting it now the way they had before the war.

**[0:11:28]**

**Libby O'Connell**: How is this affecting membership in organizations like the NAACP, or the growth of black newspapers? Is there a national feeling, or is this more on a local level?

**[0:11:39]**

**John Morrow**: Libby, I would say it's a national feeling, because what you watch in the First World War, it's actually during the war, is that the NAACP membership, and the numbers of people reading The Crisis magazine, skyrocket. The same goes for the black press during the war. They're smuggling it to the South. In fact, the black press would often carry notices of jobs. There would actually be white people who were sort of couriers, who would bring the papers to the South and spread it in the African American community, so they could see where the jobs were, and encourage them to leave and go north. So becomes really very much of a national movement. One of the things that I firmly believe is that the First World War creates a black reading public. They were certainly there before, but the huge numbers that move into the tens and then the hundreds of thousand subscribers to The Crisis and these major black newspapers, the Pittsburgh Courier [inaudible 00:12:44], but the Baltimore Afro-American, the Chicago Defender, this creates a black reading public that is very alert to what's going on. I think that this black reading public is essential to what we call, in the postwar period, the rise of the New Negro, or the Harlem Renaissance, specifically located in New York, because they are now alert, aware. They know that the soldiers have fought. The soldiers who come back have now been abroad. They have seen other places. They've been in France, where they're treated as equals, even as saviors when their units, especially for the four regiments, the 369th, which is the 5th New York National Guard, and then the 370th, which is the Illinois National Guard, and then the 371st, which are conscripts from South Carolina, the 372nd, which are the black National Guard units from Ohio and Washington and Tennessee, they returned with an awareness of their contribution to liberty for France and to victory. They've also met people of other colors. They've met African soldiers, Senegalese Tirailleurs, the famous Senegalese infantry, Moroccans. Some of them, usually though they're not allowed to, but some of them actually will return to France to experience Paris. So the rise of the New Negro also is the rise of what we call [inaudible] or Black Paris, so that you have an awareness now among African Americans of the African diaspora, something that someone like W. E. B. Du Bois was certainly aware of as early as 1900, but now there's much broader awareness, this interconnectedness of these black people who live all the globe and in Africa. So I think the First World War really marks a tremendous change in black attitudes and self awareness and self pride.

**[0:15:06]**

**Libby O'Connell**: How will the African American community use the example of World War I over the next decades, several decades, to gradually bring about more change for their community? Was there a sense among black leaders later in the 1950s that they owed something to the World War I generation? Did they carry that history with them of their African American experience in World War I?

**[0:15:33]**

**John Morrow**: That's a very good question, Libby. The answer has to be yes. First of all, what you find in World War I, and let me give you a very specific example, it's the example of Charles Hamilton Houston. Houston was a brilliant young student in the Washington school system. He actually graduated from Amherst College with top honors at the age of 19. After he finishes college, he decides to join the Army, and he becomes part of what's called the Des Moines black officers training camps, and trainings as an artillery officer, and goes to France as an artillery lieutenant. The experience he has is so disgusting and insulting and demeaning that he returns to the United States determined to do something about it. He goes on to Harvard Law, where he once again proves to be a brilliant student, but then returns to ultimately become the Dean of Howard University's law school. Charles Hamilton Houston is the man who trains the generation of civil rights lawyers led by and including Thurgood Marshall, who will fight the case Brown versus the Board of Education through the Supreme Court. That's one of the best and most specific examples we have of the impact of World War I on African Americans. What you see in a broader realm, my father was born in 1910. The people he grew up admiring, and I was told about them when I was a young person, were the men of the 15th New York National Guard, the Harlem Hellfighters, the 369th Regiment; lieutenant Colonel Charles Young, who was retired from the army, but should have become a brigadier general in World War I, except they didn't want black men commanding white soldiers. Those images stuck in people's minds and encouraged that generation that was born in that era or born right afterwards, they began to fight for integration in the northeast. They also began, in the NAACP, to travel south to organize branches of the NAACP in the interwar period. The NAACP is very much aware of its national visibility, so every time a black person was lynched in the South, they would fly a white flag over their headquarters in New York saying, "Another Negro lynched." They would have parades of women dressed in white in New York City. But these black newspapers would carry that news everywhere. So I think the First World War, certainly there were black people and white people who were interested in civil rights before World War I, but the First World War really galvanizes African Americans not to accept their conditions. Although white America doesn't recognize their contribution, they know what they've done, they know what their soldiers have done. They know what they've done [inaudible] industry in a very interesting fashion in Baltimore, in the Baltimore shipyards in 1918, something I wasn't aware of until I was doing my research. There was an African American team of riveters that work in teams of three, and they actually beat the British in rivet driving and shipbuilding in 1918. The British had always won. So you see this in all walks of life, that African Americans are demonstrating a patriotism and participation in this. There's a very clear sense of the leaders in the 1950s, and you can see that direct lineage with Charles Hamilton Houston and Thurgood Marshall, that they owe a great deal to that World War I generation. Beyond that with World War II, when we go into World War II, the Pittsburgh Courier starts the Double V Campaign, victory over fascism abroad and racism at home. So the black press, from the very beginning, is saying, "Some things have got to change," and it's because of what didn't happen in World War I.

**[0:20:05]**

**Libby O'Connell**: John, you have just done a masterful job of summing this all up. I can't thank you enough for joining us on this podcast. I'm so excited that we're going to be able to offer this to everyone.

**[0:20:16]**

**John Morrow**: Well, Libby, thank you very much. Been a pleasure to talk with you, in fact, today.

**[0:20:19]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Well, it's been my pleasure. I've been fascinated and just thank you so much. I look forward to talking to you again.

**[0:20:26]**

**John Morrow**: Thank you. You're welcome as well. You take care.

**[0:20:29]**

**Libby O'Connell**: This is Dr. Libby O'Connell signing off for the United States World War I Centennial Commission's podcast series. This was African Americans in World War I, featuring our expert guest, Dr. John Morrow from the University of Georgia. Goodbye, everyone. Thank you for joining us.

**[0:20:51]**

**Speaker 1**: Thank you for listening to this episode of How World War I Changed America. The podcast series is made possible by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the collaboration of the US World War I Centennial Commission, The Doughboy Foundation, the National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, National History Day, and the Gilder Lehrman Institute for American History.

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