

This Day in History... July 26, 1948

Executive Order 9981

On July 26, 1948, President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981, calling for the end of racial discrimination in the US armed forces.

Early American laws barred Black people from the military, but in times of war, white leaders recruited both enslaved and free Blacks. The Continental Army had 5,000 Black men, and at least 198,000 served in the Union forces during the Civil War.

In that war, Blacks suffered unequal pay, promotion, supplies, and services. “Jim Crow” discrimination in the military continued for decades after the Civil War.



From the To Form a More Perfect Union sheet

Even so, large numbers of Black Americans still volunteered to fight for their country. One million served in the military during World War II. Many Black servicemen hoped their military service would earn them equal status in US society. When they returned home, they were impatient with continuing anti-Black discrimination and violence.

In 1947, A. Philip Randolph and Grant Reynolds formed the Committee Against Jim Crow in Military Service and Training to protest discrimination in the armed services. This group, later renamed the League for Non-Violent Civil Disobedience Against Military Segregation, as well as other Black leaders, pressed President Truman to end military segregation.

Truman was aware how important the Black vote was to his Democratic Party. He knew that integration would also help America win Cold War allies among “Third World” countries. So on July 26, 1948, Truman signed Executive Order 9981, requiring “...equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin.”

The order also called for the creation of a committee to research and recommend civilian leaders to put the policy into practice. Most of the changes under the order were completed during President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s administration. This included the desegregation of military schools, hospitals, and bases. The last all-Black units were abolished in September 1954.



Randolph was the 12th honoree in the Black Heritage Series.



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