

### *The Problem of the Color Lines*

**I**N 1903, THE PERSPICACIOUS public intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in the opening of *The Souls of Black Folk*: "Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line."<sup>1</sup>

Forty years later, World War II forced America to confront the problem of the twentieth century. Social scientists took the lead in pointing out the problem of the color line. In *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, published in 1942, Ashley Montagu framed the war as a conflict between the "spirit of the Nazi racist" and the "spirit of democracy." Nazism reflected the wrongheaded and dangerous thinking that "the shape of the nose or the color of skin" had something "to do with human values and culture." A year later, in *The Races of Mankind*, Ruth Benedict denounced racism as unscientific and urged the United States to "clean its own house" and "stand unashamed before the Nazis and condemn, without confusion, their doctrines of a Master Race."<sup>2</sup>

Policymakers and pundits also depicted the war as a defense of democracy and a campaign against racism. "By making this a 'people's' war for freedom," it was argued, "we can help clear up the alien problem, the negro problem, the anti-Semitic problem." Republican leader Wendell Willkie echoed: "Today it is becoming increasingly apparent to thoughtful Americans that we cannot fight the forces of imperialism abroad and maintain a form of imperialism at home.... Our very proclamations of what we are fighting for have rendered our own inequities self-evident. When we talk of freedom of opportunity for all nations, the mocking paradoxes in our own society become so clear that they can no longer be ignored." "We are behind the times I admit," Frank

Dixon, a former governor of Alabama, confessed to a friend. "The Huns have wrecked the theories of the master race with which we were so contented so long." The *New York Times* editorialized in May 1941: "A nation making an all-out effort cannot neglect any element in its population. If it is engaged on the side of democracy it must leave open the doors of opportunity to all, regardless of race."<sup>3</sup>

During the war, the most eloquent call for American society to confront its own racism appeared in Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. In fighting this "ideological war," he argued, Americans must apply the principle of democracy more explicitly to race. "Fascism and nazism are based on a racial superiority dogma—not unlike the old hackneyed American caste theory—and they came to power by means of racial persecution and oppression." Therefore, Americans must stand before the whole world in support of racial tolerance and equality. "When in this crucial time the international leadership passes to America," Myrdal observed, "the great reason for hope is that this country has a national experience of uniting racial and cultural diversities and a national theory, if not a consistent practice, of freedom and equality for all. . . . The main trend in [this country's] history is the gradual realization of the American Creed."<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, during World War II, Hitler's Nazism with its ideology of Aryan racial supremacy forced Americans to look critically at the color lines within their own society. For different racial and ethnic minorities, the contradictions between the reality of prejudice and the principle of equality became American dilemmas.

# 14



## WORLD WAR II

### *American Dilemmas*

AS WORLD WAR II raged in Europe and Asia, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued a warning to the American people. In a speech to Congress delivered on January 6, 1941, he declared: "This nation has placed its destiny in the hands and heads and hearts of its millions of free men and women, and its faith in freedom under the guidance of God. Freedom means the supremacy of *human rights* everywhere. Our support goes to those who struggle to gain those rights and keep them. Our strength is our unity of purpose. To that high concept there can be no end save victory."<sup>1</sup>

Eleven months later, on the Sunday morning of December 7, 1941, Japanese planes shattered the quiet sky and swooped down from the clouds to drop bombs on the ships anchored in the U.S. naval base of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The surprise attack was devastating. Altogether, 21 ships were sunk or damaged, 164 planes destroyed, 1,178 soldiers and sailors wounded, and 2,388 killed. Before Congress the next day, President Roosevelt gravely announced: "Yesterday . . . a date which will live in infamy—the United States was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan. . . . I ask that Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack . . . a state of war has existed."<sup>2</sup>

Suddenly, President Roosevelt became the leader of a democracy at war, and "American dilemmas" would besiege his presidency.

*Japanese Americans: "A Tremendous Hole" in the Constitution*

Shortly after inspecting the still smoking ruins at Pearl Harbor, Navy Secretary Frank Knox issued a statement to the press: "I think the most effective fifth column work of the entire war was done in Hawaii, with the possible exception of Norway." At a cabinet meeting on December 19, Knox recommended the internment of all Japanese aliens on an outer island.<sup>3</sup>

However, in a radio address aired two days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, General Delos Emmons as military governor of Hawaii declared: "There is no intention or desire on the part of the federal authorities to operate mass concentration camps. No person, be he citizen or alien, need worry, provided he is not connected with subversive elements... While we have been subjected to a serious attack by a ruthless and treacherous enemy, we must remember that this is America and we must do things the American Way. We must distinguish between loyalty and disloyalty among our people." For General Emmons, the "American way" required him to respect and enforce the U.S. Constitution.<sup>4</sup>

On March 13, 1942, President Roosevelt, acting on the advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, approved a recommendation for the evacuation of 20,000 "dangerous" Japanese from Hawaii to the mainland. Two weeks later, General Emmons reduced the number to 1,550 Japanese who constituted a potential threat. Irritated by Emmons, the president wrote to Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson on November 2: "I think that General Emmons should be told that the only consideration is that of the safety of the Islands and that the labor situation is not only a secondary matter but should not be given any consideration whatsoever."<sup>5</sup>

General Emmons countered that such a removal of Japanese would severely disrupt both the economy and the defense of Hawaii. The Japanese, he explained, represented over 90 percent of the carpenters, nearly all of the transportation workers, and a significant proportion of the agricultural laborers. Japanese were "absolutely essential" for rebuilding Pearl Harbor. Commenting on the charges of Japanese-American fifth-column activities, General Emmons declared: "There have been no known acts of sabotage

committed in Hawaii." In the end, he ordered the internment of only 1,444 Japanese.<sup>6</sup>

And so, the 158,000 Japanese Americans living in Hawaii did not become victims of mass internment, even though military action between the United States and Japan had in fact occurred in the islands and even though there were more of them living there than on the mainland.

But what happened to the 120,000 Japanese Americans living on the West Coast turned out to be a different story.

Three days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover informed Washington that "practically all" suspected individuals were in custody: 1,291 Japanese (367 in Hawaii, 924 on the mainland), 857 Germans, and 147 Italians. In a report to the attorney general submitted in early February, Hoover concluded that a mass internment of the Japanese could not be justified for security reasons.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these intelligence findings, Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, head of the Western Defense Command, behaved very differently from his counterpart, General Emmons in Hawaii. DeWitt wanted to exclude Japanese aliens as well as U.S.-born Americans of Japanese ancestry from certain areas. On January 4, 1942, at a meeting of federal and state officials, DeWitt argued that military necessity justified exclusion: "We are at war and this area—eight states—has been designated as a theater of operations." He declared that he had no confidence in the loyalty of the Japanese living on the West Coast: "A Jap is a Jap is a Jap." On February 5, after he had received DeWitt's assessment of the need to remove all Japanese, aliens as well as citizens, Provost Marshal General Allen Gullion drafted a War Department proposal for the exclusion of "all persons, whether aliens or citizens... deemed dangerous as potential saboteurs" from designated "military areas."<sup>8</sup>

But a decision on evacuation still had not been made in Washington. During lunch with President Roosevelt on February 7, Attorney General Francis Biddle declared that "there were no reasons for mass evacuation." In his diary on February 10, Secretary of War Stimson wrote: "The second generation Japanese can only be evacuated either as part of a total evacuation... or by frankly trying to put them out on the ground that their racial characteristics are such that we cannot understand or trust even the citizen Japanese. This latter is the fact but I am afraid it will make a tremendous hole in our constitutional system to apply it."<sup>9</sup>

On February 14, 1942, General DeWitt sent Stimson his formal

recommendation for removal, buttressing it with a racial justification: "In the war in which we are now engaged racial affinities are not severed by migration. The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed of United States citizenship, have become 'Americanized,' the racial strains are undiluted.... It, therefore, follows that along the vital Pacific Coast over 112,000 potential enemies, of Japanese extraction, are at large today." On February 19, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which directed the secretary of war to prescribe military areas "with respect to which, the right of any person to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary of War or the appropriate Military Commander may impose in his discretion." The order did not specify the Japanese as the group to be excluded, but they were the target. A few months later, when President Roosevelt learned about discussions in the War Department to apply the order to Germans and Italians on the East Coast, he wrote to inform Stimson that he considered enemy alien control to be "primarily a civilian matter except in the case of the Japanese mass evacuation on the Pacific Coast." Unlike the Germans and Italians, the Japanese had been singled out.<sup>10</sup>

Under General DeWitt's command, the military posted an order: "Pursuant to the provisions of Civilian Exclusion Order No. 27, this Headquarters, dated April 30, 1942, all persons of Japanese ancestry, both alien and non-alien, will be evacuated from the above area by 12 o' clock noon, P. W. T., Thursday May 7, 1942." Years later, Congressman Robert Matsui, who was a baby in 1942, asked: "How could I as a 6-month-old child born in this country be declared by my own Government to be an enemy alien?" The evacuees were instructed to bring their bedding, toilet articles, extra clothing, and utensils. In silent numbness, Japanese stood before the notices. "Soldiers came around and posted notices on telephone poles," said Takae Washizu. Reading the evacuation notice with disbelief, a Japanese American wrote:

*Notice of evacuation  
One spring night  
The image of my wife  
Holding the hands of my mother.*<sup>11</sup>

Believing the military orders were unconstitutional, Minoru Yasui of Portland refused to obey the curfew order: "It was my

belief that no military authority has the right to subject any United States citizen to any requirement that does not equally apply to all other U.S. citizens. If we believe in America, if we believe in equality and democracy, if we believe in law and justice, then each of us, when we see or believe errors are being made, has an obligation to make every effort to correct them." Meanwhile, Fred Korematsu in California and Gordon Hirabayashi in Washington refused to report to the evacuation center. "As an American citizen," Hirabayashi explained, "I wanted to uphold the principles of the Constitution, and the curfew and evacuation orders which singled out a group on the basis of ethnicity violated them. It was not acceptable to me to be less than a full citizen in a white man's country." The three men were arrested and convicted; sent to prison, they took their cases to the Supreme Court, which upheld their convictions, saying the government's policies were based on military necessity. Most Japanese, however, felt they had no choice but to comply with the evacuation orders.<sup>12</sup>

Instructed that they would be allowed to take only what they could carry, they were forced to sell most of their possessions—their refrigerators, cars, furniture, radios, pianos, and houses. At the control centers, the men, women, and children were registered and each family was given a number, and they found themselves surrounded by soldiers with rifles and bayonets. In poetry, one of the evacuees captured the humiliation:

*Like a dog  
I am commanded  
At a bayonet point.  
My heart is inflamed  
With burning anguish.*

From there they were taken to the assembly centers. "I looked at Santa Clara's streets from the train over the subway," wrote Norman Mineta's father in a letter to friends in San Jose. "I thought this might be the last look at my loved home city. My heart almost broke, and suddenly hot tears just came pouring out." They knew that more than their homes and possessions had been taken from them. "On May 16, 1942, my mother, two sisters, niece, nephew, and I left... by train," said Teru Watanabe. "Father joined us later. Brother left earlier by bus. We took whatever we could carry. So much we left behind, but the most valuable thing I lost was my freedom."<sup>13</sup>

After a brief stay in assembly centers, the evacuees were herded

into 171 special trains, 500 in each train. One of the passengers distilled his distress in poetry:

*Snow in mountain pass  
Unable to sleep  
The prison train.*

They had no idea where they were going. The trains took them to ten internment camps: Topaz in Utah, Poston and Gila River in Arizona, Amache in Colorado, Jerome and Rohwer in Arkansas, Minidoka in Idaho, Manzanar and Tule Lake in California, and Heart Mountain in Wyoming.<sup>14</sup>

Most of the camps were located in remote desert areas. "We did not know where we were," remembered an internee. "No houses were in sight, no trees or anything green—only scrubby sagebrush and an occasional low cactus, and mostly dry, baked earth." They looked around them and saw hundreds of miles of wasteland, "beyond the end of the horizon and again over the mountain—again, more wasteland." They were surrounded by dust and sand.<sup>15</sup>

In the camps, the internees were assigned to barracks, each about 20 by 120 feet, divided into four or six rooms. Usually a family was housed in one room, 20 by 20 feet. The room had "a pot bellied stove, a single electric light hanging from the ceiling, an Army cot for each person and a blanket for the bed." An internee painfully conveyed the confinement's unbearableness:

*Birds,  
Living in a cage,  
The human spirit.*

The barracks were lined in orderly rows; barbed-wire fences with guard towers defined space for the internees.<sup>16</sup>

They found themselves in a world of military-like routine. Every morning at seven, the internees were awakened by a siren blast. After breakfast in a cafeteria, the children went to school, where they began the day by saluting the flag of the United States and then singing "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty." Looking beyond the flagpole, they saw the barbed wire, the watch-towers, and the armed guards. "I was too young to understand," stated George Takei years later, "but I remember soldiers carrying rifles, and I remember being afraid."<sup>17</sup>

Camp life was oppressive and regimented, each day boring and tedious. Forced to abandon the values of self-reliance and activity, shopkeepers and farmers suddenly found themselves working for the government for wages. Young married couples worried about having children born in the camps. "When I was pregnant with my second child, that's when I flipped," said a Nisei woman. "I guess that's when the reality really hit me. I thought to myself, gosh, what am I doing getting pregnant. I told my husband, 'This is crazy. You realize there's no future for us and what are we having kids for?'"<sup>18</sup>

In September 1942, the Selective Service classified all young Japanese men as IV-C, enemy aliens. A month later, however, the director of the Office of War Information urged President Roosevelt to authorize the enlistment of American-born Japanese: "Loyal American citizens of Japanese descent should be permitted, after an individual test, to enlist in the Army and Navy. This matter is of great interest to OWI. Japanese propaganda to the Philippines, Burma, and elsewhere insists that this is a racial war. We can combat this effectively with counter propaganda only if our deeds permit us to tell the truth." President Roosevelt understood the need to neutralize "Japanese propaganda." In December the army developed a plan for forming an all-Japanese-American combat team. On February 1, 1943, hypocritically ignoring the evacuation order he had signed a year earlier, Roosevelt wrote to Secretary of War Stimson: "No loyal citizen of the United States should be denied the democratic right to exercise the responsibilities of his citizenship, regardless of his ancestry. . . . Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race or ancestry. Every loyal American citizen should be given the opportunity to serve this country . . . in the ranks of our armed forces."<sup>19</sup>

Five days later, the government required all internees to answer loyalty questionnaires. The questionnaires had two purposes: to enable camp authorities to process individual internees for work furloughs as well as for resettlement outside the restricted zones, and to register young men for the draft. Question 27 asked draft-age males: "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?" Question 28 asked all internees: "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power or organization?"

Forced to fill out and sign the loyalty questionnaire, internees stared at the form. One of them agonized:

*Loyalty, disloyalty,  
If asked,  
What should I answer?*

Some 4,600, or 22 percent, of the 21,000 males eligible to register for the draft, answered with a “no,” a qualified answer, or no response. Many of them said they were not expressing disloyalty but were protesting against the internment. In January 1944, the Selective Service began reclassifying to I-A men who had answered “yes” to the two questions and serving draft registration notices. Thirty-three thousand Japanese Americans enlisted in the United States Armed Forces. They believed participation in the defense of their country was the best way to express their loyalty and to fulfill their obligation as citizens.<sup>20</sup>

Several thousand of them were members of the Military Intelligence Service (MIS), functioning as interpreters and translators on the Pacific front. Armed with Japanese-language skills, the soldiers of the MIS provided an invaluable service: they translated captured Japanese documents, including battle plans, lists of Imperial Navy ships, and Japanese secret codes. One of their officers described their heroic work: “During battles they crawled up close enough to be able to hear Jap officers’ commands and to make verbal translations to our soldiers. They tapped lines, listened in on radios, translated documents and papers, made spot translations of messages and field orders.” General Charles Willoughby, chief of intelligence in the Pacific, estimated that the contributions of the Japanese Americans of the MIS shortened the Pacific war by two years.<sup>21</sup>

Japanese-American soldiers also helped to win the war in Europe. In 1942, General Emmons in Hawaii formed a battalion of Japanese Americans—the 100th Battalion. In response to Emmons’s call for Japanese Americans to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces, 9,507 American-born Japanese volunteered. “I wanted to show something, to contribute to America,” explained Minoru Hinahara. “My parents could not become citizens but they told me, ‘You fight for your country.’” After military training, 1,400 men of this battalion were sent to North Africa and then to Italy in September 1943. They participated in the Italian campaign until the following March: 300 of them were killed and 650 wounded.

The 100th was called the “Purple Heart Battalion.” In June, the 100th Battalion merged with the newly arrived 442nd Regimental Combat Team, composed of Japanese Americans from Hawaii as well as from the internment camps on the mainland. These soldiers experienced bloody fighting at Luciana, Livorno, and the Arno River, where casualties totaled 1,272 men—more than one-fourth of the regiment. After the battle at the Arno River, they were sent to France, where they took the town of Bruyeres from the German troops in heavy house-to-house fighting.<sup>22</sup>

Then in April 1945, the Japanese-American soldiers assaulted German troops on Mount Nebbione. “Come on, you guys, go for broke!” they shouted as they charged directly into the fire of enemy machine guns. One of them, Captain Daniel Inouye, crawled to the flank of an emplacement and pulled the pin on his grenade. “As I drew my arm back, all in a flash of light and dark I saw him, that faceless German,” he remembered. “And even as I cocked my arm to throw, he fired and his rifle grenade smashed into my right elbow and exploded and all but tore my arm off. I looked at it, stunned and unbelieving. It dangled there by a few bloody shreds of tissue, my grenade still clenched in a fist that suddenly didn’t belong to me any more . . . I swung around to pry the grenade out of that dead fist with my left hand. Then I had it free and I turned to throw and the German was reloading his rifle. But this time I beat him. My grenade blew up in his face and I stumbled to my feet, closing on the bunker, firing my tommy gun left-handed, the useless right arm slapping red and wet against my side.”<sup>23</sup>

Inouye had given one of his limbs in defense of his country. By the end of the war in Europe, the soldiers of the 442nd had suffered 9,486 casualties, including 600 killed. The 442nd, military observers agreed, was “probably the most decorated unit in United States military history.” They had earned 18,143 individual decorations—including 1 Congressional Medal of Honor, 47 Distinguished Service Crosses, 350 Silver Stars, 810 Bronze Stars, and more than 3,600 Purple Hearts. They had given their lives and limbs to prove their loyalty.<sup>24</sup>

After the war, on July 15, 1946, on the lawn of the White House, President Harry Truman welcomed home the Nisei soldiers of the 442nd: “You fought for the free nations of the world . . . you fought not only the enemy, you fought prejudice—and you won.” As they stood on the land of their birth, however, they could not be certain they had defeated prejudice in America. Captain Inouye discovered they had not won the war at home. He was on his way back

to Hawaii in 1945 when he tried to get a haircut in San Francisco. Entering the barbershop with his empty right sleeve pinned to his army jacket covered with ribbons and medals for his military heroism, Captain Inouye was told: "We don't serve Japs here."<sup>25</sup>

Even before the end of the war, the government had begun to close the internment camps. "My parents did not know what to do or where to go after they had been let out of camp," said Aiko Mifune. Her mother, Fusayo Fukuda Kaya, had come to America as a picture bride in 1919; she and her husband, Yokichi, had been tenant farmers in California before they were interned in Poston, Arizona. "But everything they had worked for was gone; they seemed listless and they stayed in Arizona and tried to grow potatoes there." Most of the internees wanted to go home to the West Coast, and they boarded trains bound for Los Angeles, Seattle, and San Francisco. At many train stations, the returning internees were met with hostile signs: "No Japs allowed, no Japs welcome." Many found their houses damaged and their fields ruined. Some of them were never able to return home: too old, too ill, or too broken in spirit, they died in the internment camps. Tragically, they had come all the way to America only to be buried in forlorn and windswept cemeteries of desert camps. Seeking solace in poetry, a camp survivor wrote:

*When the war is over  
And after we are gone  
Who will visit  
This lonely grave in the wild  
Where my friend lies buried?*<sup>26</sup>

#### *African Americans: "Bomb the Color Line"*

Altogether, some nine hundred thousand African Americans enlisted in the U.S. Armed Forces during World War II. But they served in a Jim Crow, or segregated, military. Four years before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Charles H. Houston of the NAACP demanded that Franklin D. Roosevelt issue an executive order banning all racial discrimination in the armed forces. But in 1940, the president signed the Selective Service Act, which included a provision that prohibited intermingling between "colored and white" army personnel in the same regiments.<sup>27</sup>

Roosevelt's refusal to integrate the armed forces provoked disbelief and anger across black America. In a telegram to the

White House, A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters declared: "We are inexpressibly shocked that a President of the United States at a time of national peril should surrender so completely to enemies of democracy who would destroy national unity by advocating segregation. Official approval by the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of such discrimination and segregation is a stab in the back of democracy." On October 9, 1940, the *Crisis* carried the headline: "WHITE HOUSE BLESSES JIM CROW."<sup>28</sup>

Roosevelt's segregationist policy quickly became a symbol of America's hypocrisy. "Democracy must wage a two-fold battle—a battle on far flung foreign fields against Hitler, and a battle on the home front against Hitlerism," insisted Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., a New York City councilman. African-American columnist George Schuyler also castigated the Jim Crow army: "Our war is not against Hitler in Europe, but against Hitler in America. Our war is not to defend democracy, but to get a democracy we have never had." In his protest against segregation in the U.S. Armed Forces, the editor of the *Chicago Defender* urged America to "bomb the color line."<sup>29</sup>

"Prove to us," African Americans challenged Roosevelt and other policymakers, "that you are not hypocrites when you say this is a war for freedom." The war for freedom had to be fought in the country's backyard. "The Army jim-crows us," complained a student. "The Navy lets us serve only as messmen. . . . Employers and labor unions shut us out. Lynchings continue. We are disfranchised . . . spat upon. What more can Hitler do than that." In a letter to the NAACP, a soldier wrote: "I am a Negro soldier 22 years old. I won't fight or die in vain. If I fight, suffer or die it will be for the freedom of every black man to live equally with other races." Scheduled to be drafted into the army, a black youth declared: "Just carve on my tombstone, 'Here lies a black man killed fighting a yellow man for the protection of a white man.'<sup>30</sup>

The army training camps were segregated. In a letter to Truman K. Gibson, the black civilian aide to the secretary of war, private Bert Babero described the toilets at Camp Barkeley, Texas. He noticed a sign in the latrine, designating a section for "Negro soldiers" and another section for "white soldiers." The German prisoners of war held at this army base were allowed to use the white facility. "Seeing this was honestly disheartening," Babero wrote. "It made me feel, here, the tyrant is actually placed over the liberator." In a letter to the *Baltimore Afro-American*, a

soldier described the extensiveness of segregation in the training facility. "We cannot go to the church services on the camp. We have to be told when we can go and worship God." Entering the service clubs for sandwiches, they were told: "We don't serve colored."<sup>31</sup>

After training, African Americans were often given degrading work assignments. Writing to the *Richmond Afro-American*, blacks in the 328th Aviation Squadron based in Pampa, Texas, protested against job discrimination within the army: "We are a group of permanent K.P.'s [kitchen police]. We are allowed no other advancement whatsoever. It is true that K.P. pushers (Head K.P.) are made Cpl. and Sgt. but the K.P.'s themselves are a miserable group that will be worked like slaves. We are confined to this job not because we are not fit for anything else but because we are dark. We are referred to on this post as 'that nigger squadron at the end of the field.'"<sup>32</sup>

African Americans wanted equal opportunity to fight in combat, but most of them found themselves assigned to service and support duties. In Europe, blacks composed half of the Transportation Corps. On the beaches of Normandy during the D-Day invasion, they unloaded supplies from ships and transported them to the fighting troops. "We were really stevedores," recalled Timuel Black. "I went into Normandy with combat troops. We serviced them." Their work was especially dangerous. "The Germans aimed at our supplies," explained Black. "We were direct targets. I'd been on six-by-six trucks many nights when the Luftwaffe was strafing us, dropping those small bombs and firing those machine guns at us." Their biggest task was feeding an enormous army in movement. "We were in Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge," Black boasted. "We were at one time feeding three million soldiers: the First, the Third, the Ninth, and the British Seventh." No food, no fighting, the African American soldiers knew. Without their vital support, the Allies would have been beaten back to the beaches by this fierce Nazi counterattack.<sup>33</sup>

When given the chance, African Americans seized opportunities to be in combat as skilled fighters. Initially, the commander of the U.S. Air Service, General H. H. "Hap" Arnold, had refused to allow African Americans to serve as pilots. In his view, they should be laborers and waiters. "Black pilots could not be used," he said, "since this would result in having Negro officers serving over white enlisted men. This would create an impossible social problem." "They didn't want blacks to fly," recalled Fred

Smith of Chicago. "They said blacks were not smart enough to be pilots."<sup>34</sup>

African Americans protested their exclusion from the air force. Insisting that blacks were capable of becoming aviators, the editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier* declared: "How can we excuse refusal to abolish the disuniting COLOR LINE when the life of this nation is threatened?" In response to this criticism, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson authorized the training of black aviation cadets in a segregated unit at Tuskegee Air Force Base. The War Department defended its segregationist policy, claiming that it could not ignore the social relationships between the races that had been established "through custom and habit."<sup>35</sup>

Sent to Europe as members of the segregated 99th Pursuit Squadron and 332nd Fighter Group, the Tuskegee pilots fought the German Luftwaffe in aerial combat. For their heroic service in Sicily and Italy, two of them were awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation, the military's highest commendation. When General Ira C. Aeker, commanding officer of the Mediterranean Air Force, inspected the 99th Pursuit Squadron on April 20, 1944, he declared: "By the magnificent showing your fliers have made since coming into this theatre, and especially in the Anzio beach-head operations, you have not only won the plaudits of the Air Force, but have earned the opportunity to apply your talents to much more advanced work than was at one time planned for you." The chance for "advanced work" came when the pilots of the 99th Pursuit Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group escorted bombers first over France and then over Berlin itself.<sup>36</sup>

As the protectors of white pilots flying bombers en route to enemy targets, the Tuskegee pilots dubbed themselves the "Lonely Eagles." Their nickname signified their segregated status even in the sky. "We flew alone," explained Coleman Young, "because our 332nd was not readily accepted when we were sent overseas and attached to white groups. A group was usually composed of three squadrons; so our one black squadron was attached to three white squadrons. They still kept us segregated." But the skills and sharpness of the Tuskegee pilots earned them respect, and bombing groups began requesting them as escorts. "They all wanted us," said Young, "because we were the only fighter group in the entire air force that did not lose a bomber to enemy action. Oh, we were much in demand."<sup>37</sup>

Trained as tankers, the African Americans of the 761st Battalion were also in demand. "When General Patton sent for us," said



E. G. McConnell, "he asked for the best tank unit in the country. Hot dog it, were we proud, proud! I was in a unit I was damn proud of, and I knew that the things we did would shape the future for my children and grandchildren. We were so proud and dedicated to the cause of progress... going ahead so everyone would be able to live like an American." The black tankers participated in the first offensive after the D-Day invasion; then they found themselves fighting in one of the fiercest battles of World War II.<sup>38</sup>

"They put us on flatcars in France and shipped us to Belgium, where the fighting was," recalled Johnie Stevens. "We got off the flatcars, took our tanks off the flatcars, and went right into combat. But that Battle of the Bulge was something. I'm telling you! We never fell back. We never lost an inch of ground during the whole campaign. You can't find nothing in the record that says the 761st lost any of their ground. One of our tank crews that was knocked out, they got out of their tank and fought with machine guns—a captured German officer said he'd never seen anything like that before. Because we stood our ground up there, we really didn't give it up." On January 10, 1945, Stevens was wounded. "Well, here I am in the hospital again," he wrote in his journal. "I was not hit as bad as I was the first time, but I received my Oak Leaf Cluster today and believe me, I earned it. The whole outfit has earned a citation. They stayed on the line for 96 days without relief which is a damn good record for one tank battalion."<sup>39</sup>

African-American women also served in the military. A student at New York University when she enlisted, Elaine Bennett explained: "I wanted to prove to myself, and maybe the world, that we [African Americans] would give what we had back to the United States as a confirmation that we were full-fledged citizens." They represented 4 percent of the 150,000 members of the Women's Army Corps; 855 of them worked in Europe as members of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion.<sup>40</sup>

"The job of our battalion," Lucia M. Pitts recalled, "was to keep up with the addresses of our fighting men, who were constantly on the move, and see that their mail reached them. An average of 30,000 address changes had to be made every day." Margaret Y. Jackson vividly described the frenzied work of processing the mail. "As we labored at long tables, piled high with mail, we were more than objectively impressed by the stacks of letters which we sought to place in the hands of the individuals to whom they were sent. Many of these letters were from the same loved ones.... After weeks—even months—they finally wound up on the floor of the

auditorium in the Central Postal Directory. Many of us were as pleased as the soldiers must have been when stacks of letters were distributed to them at mail call." Working together with white WACs in the auditorium, the busy mail processors took satisfaction in seeing "mountains of mail dwindle to small hills." Wherever the WACs went in Birmingham after work, they were constantly approached by servicemen profusely thanking them for getting their long-awaited letters and packages to them. The WACs took pride in their motto: "No mail, no morale."<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile, at the home front, blacks discovered that the "Arsenal for Democracy" was not democratic: defense-industry jobs were reserved for whites only. Even before its entry into the war, the United States began to increase production of military goods. At a 1941 meeting in Chicago, a black woman called for a mass demonstration in Washington: "We ought to throw 50,000 Negroes around the White House, bring them from all over the country, in jalopies, in trains and any way they can get there, and throw them around the White House and keep them there until we can get some action from the White House." The idea of a march on Washington seized the imagination of A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. "Let the Negro masses speak," he declared. "Negroes have a stake in National Defense.... It involves equal employment opportunities. Let us tear the mask of hypocrisy from America's Democracy!" In his "Call to the March on Washington," Randolph declared: "Negroes, by the mobilization and coordination of their mass power, can cause President Roosevelt to issue an executive order abolishing discrimination in all government departments, army, navy, air corps and national defense jobs."<sup>42</sup>

Randolph's threat of a mass demonstration alarmed Washington officials. The march was scheduled for July 1. At the White House on June 18, Roosevelt met with civil rights leaders, including Randolph. Roosevelt began by entertaining his guests with old political anecdotes. Impatient, Randolph respectfully interrupted: "Mr. President, time is running on. You are quite busy, I know. But what we want to talk with you about is the problem of jobs for Negroes in defense industries. Our people are being turned away at factory gates because they are colored. They can't live with this thing. Now, what are you going to do about it?" Roosevelt asked Randolph how many people would be at the march. "One hundred thousand, Mr. President."<sup>43</sup>

A week later, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802: "There

shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or Government because of race, creed, color, or national origin . . . and it is the duty of employers and of labor organizations . . . to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries, without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin." His order also established the Committee on Fair Employment Practice to investigate complaints of discrimination and take appropriate steps to redress valid grievances. The march was canceled. But Roosevelt's new policy for the defense industry was designed for failure. The committee had no power to penalize companies that violated the non-discrimination order.<sup>44</sup>

Ultimately, the real pressure for the integration of the defense industries came from the sheer need for labor in America's "Arsenal for Democracy." At the beginning of 1942, only 3 percent of defense workers were black; by November 1944, that number had jumped to 8.3 percent. Blacks constituted 25 percent of the labor force in foundries, 12 percent in shipbuilding and steel mills. During the war years, the wages of black families increased from 40 percent to 60 percent of that of white families.<sup>45</sup>

The military's demand for men created labor shortages and opened industrial employment opportunities to women, including black women. Of the one million African Americans employed in the defense industries, 600,000 were women. Between 1940 and 1944, the percentage of black women in industry increased from 6.5 percent to 18 percent of the female workforce. Between 1940 and 1944, their numbers in Detroit's factories rose sharply, from 14,451 to 46,750. In the aircraft plants of Los Angeles, 2,000 black women were employed by North American Aviation alone. In "Negro Women on the Production Front," published in a 1943 issue of *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Mary Anderson wrote: "At the same time that Negro women are contributing to the war effort in essential war and civilian jobs, they are broadening their occupational experience. They are developing skills needed now and after the war. We must use the highest skills and the full strength of all our people, men and women, to win the war and to win the peace."<sup>46</sup>

"When we first got into the war," recalled San Francisco shipworker Lyn Childs, "the country wasn't prepared. And as the manpower in the country was getting pulled into the service, all of the industries were wide open. So they decided, 'Well, we better let some of those blacks come in.' Then after the source of

men dried up, they began to let women come in. The doors were opened." Childs described the excitement black women felt over the opportunity to work in the defense industry. "Do you think that if you did domestic work all of your life, where you'd clean somebody's toilets and did all the cooking for some lazy characters who were sitting on top, and you finally got a chance where you can get a dignified job, you wouldn't fly through the door?"<sup>47</sup>

Between 1940 and 1944, the proportion of black women employed in housecleaning declined from 60 percent to 45 percent. One of these women was Fanny Christina Hill. Moving from Tyler, Texas, to Los Angeles in 1943, she had planned to continue working as a housecleaner. "Well, I better get me a good job around here working in a hotel or motel," Hill told her sister. "No," said her sister, "you just come on out and go in the war plants and work and maybe you'll make enough money where you won't have to work in the hotels or motels." Hill applied for a job at North American Aviation. "There was a black girl that was hired with me," she recalled. "I went to work the next day, sixty cents an hour. The war made me live better, it really did." "My sister always said that Hitler was the one that got us out of the white folks' kitchen."<sup>48</sup>

However, as African Americans followed the defense jobs into the cities, they often found themselves targeted by hate crimes and violence. In 1943, at the height of industrial production for the war, urban race riots exploded across the country—242 racial battles in 47 cities. The center of the "Arsenal for Democracy," Detroit was also the scene of the bloodiest conflict. At the beginning of the war, African Americans totaled 150,000 of this city's population of 1.6 million. Between 1940 and 1943, half a million people, including more than 50,000 blacks, moved into the city. Although jobs in the defense industry were abundant, white workers were determined to continue the exclusion of blacks from the factories. Competition between whites and blacks intensified not only in the workplace but also in housing. The tremendous influx of newcomers into Detroit had created crowded living conditions, and black newcomers were forced to live in segregated ghettos.

Racial tensions in Detroit were volatile. As chief counsel for the NAACP, Thurgood Marshall tried to warn Roosevelt about Detroit's powder keg of racial tensions. "In those days," he told Carl T. Rowan years later, "I would lie awake some nights worrying that Detroit and other cities that had industries that were critical to the war effort were becoming tinderboxes because whites, from the Roosevelt brain trust to the unions, wanted to

keep Negroes out of the mobilization jobs. The tragedy was that Roosevelt didn't have a fucking clue as to the explosive tensions that were building up.<sup>49</sup>

Actually, the president was fully aware of the razor-sharp edges of racial tensions in Detroit. In a "Special Report on Negro Housing Situation in Detroit," March 5, 1942, marked "Confidential," the federal government's Office of Facts and Figures had noted the escalating racial antagonisms in Detroit. "It now appears," the report stated, "that only the direct intervention of the President can prevent not only a violent race riot in Detroit but a steadily widening fissure that will create havoc in the working force of every Northern industrial city." A clear warning was given: "Unless strong and quick active intervention by some high official, preferably the President, is not taken at once, hell is going to be let loose."<sup>50</sup>

Hell was actually let loose in the summer of 1943, when Detroit exploded in fire and violence as white and black mobs attacked each other. At the end of three days of burning, looting, and murdering, millions in property had been destroyed and nine whites and twenty-five blacks had been killed. John Sengstacke of the Negro Publishers' Association asked Roosevelt to appeal to the conscience of the nation in one of his famous "fire-side chats": "We urge you to call attention of all Americans through the radio and the press to the unpatriotic activities of those who subvert the constitutional guarantee of equal opportunity for all." Roosevelt felt the pressure to speak out. "Don't you think it is about time," he asked his press secretary, Steve Early, "for me to issue a statement about racial riots?" In the end, the president decided not to make a public address on the crisis. He realized, Eleanor Roosevelt explained, that "he must not irritate the southern leaders," whose votes he needed for essential war bills.<sup>51</sup>

President Roosevelt did not speak out against the racial violence in Detroit, but a group of wounded American soldiers did. In a letter to a newspaper in their home city of Detroit, they wrote that the riot made "us fighters think—what are we fighting for?" They declared they were fighting and willing to die for the "principles that gave birth to the United States of America. In this hospital ward, we eat, laugh, and sleep uncomplaining together." They signed their letter: "Jim Stanley, Negro; Joe Wakamatsu, Japanese; Eng Yu, Chinese; John Brennan, Irish; Paul Colosi, Italian; Don Holzheimer, German; Joe Wojiechowski, Polish; and Mike Cohen, Jewish."<sup>52</sup>

Their names with their ethnic identities said it all: the war for freedom still needed to be won at home.

### *Chinese Americans: To "Silence the Distorted Japanese Propaganda"*

"I remember December 7th so clearly," said Lonnie Quan of San Francisco. "I was living at Gum Moon Residence Club on Washington Street. It was Sunday. I didn't have a radio in the room." When her boyfriend arrived, he exclaimed: "This is it. Pearl Harbor was attacked!" The news was overwhelming: "I just couldn't believe it—it was a shock. I remember going to work in a restaurant, Cathay House, and everybody was just kinda glued to the radio." The next day, the United States and the Republic of China declared war on Japan, and the two countries became allies.<sup>53</sup>

America's entry into the war ignited patriotic explosions in Chinatowns across the country. In New York's Chinatown, excited crowds cheered themselves hoarse when the first draft numbers drawn were for Chinese Americans. According to a New York City survey, approximately 40 percent of the Chinese population was drafted, the highest of all nationalities. The Chinese wanted to join the army in order to gain respect in America. "To men of my generation," explained Charlie Leong of San Francisco's Chinatown, "World War II was the most important historic event of our times. For the first time we felt we could make it in American society." The war had given them the opportunity to get out of Chinatown, don army uniforms, and be sent overseas, where they felt "they were part of the great patriotic United States war machine out to do battle with the enemy." Similarly Harold Liu recalled: "In the 1940s for the first time Chinese were accepted by Americans as being friends because at that time, Chinese and Americans were fighting against the Japanese and the Germans and the Nazis. Therefore, all of a sudden, we became part of an American dream." Altogether 13,499 Chinese were drafted or enlisted in the U.S. Armed Forces—22 percent of Chinese adult males.<sup>54</sup>

Confined for decades to a Chinese ethnic labor market composed mainly of restaurants and laundries, Chinese workers welcomed the new and higher-paying employment opportunities, especially in the defense industries, where labor shortages were acute. Waiters left the restaurants and rushed to the industrial jobs. In Los Angeles some three hundred Chinese laundry workers closed their shops to work on the construction of the ship *China Victory*.

"At Douglas, home of the A-20 attack planes and dive bombers," the *Chinese Press* noted in 1943, "there are approximately 100 Chinese working at its three plants—Santa Monica, Long Beach, and El Segundo." Chinese workers constituted 15 percent of the shipyard workforce in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1943. Chinese also found employment in the defense industries at the Seattle-Tacoma Shipbuilding Corporation, the shipyards of Delaware and Mississippi, and the airplane factories on Long Island. One of these new defense-industry workers was Arthur Wong. After arriving in New York's Chinatown in 1930 at the age of seventeen, he found himself confined to the ethnic labor market. "I worked five and a half days in the laundry and worked the whole weekend in the restaurant," he said. "And then came the war, and defense work opened up; and some of my friends went to work in a defense plant, and they recommended that I should apply for defense work. So I went to work for Curtiss-Wright, making airplanes. I started out as an assembler, as a riveter."<sup>55</sup>

Chinese-American women also flocked to the defense industries. Several hundred "alert young Chinese-American girls," the *Chinese Press* reported in 1942, "have gone to the defense industries as office workers." The paper proudly presented a partial roster of these workers in the Bay Area—including Fannie Yee, Rosalind Woo, and Jessie Wong of Bethlehem Steel, and Anita Chew, Mildred Lew, and Evelyn Lee of Mare Island's Navy Yard. "They're part of the millions who stand behind the man behind the gun." A year later, the *Chinese Press* informed its readers about Alice Yick, Boston Navy Yard's only Chinese woman mechanical trainee, who could run light lathes, grinders, shapers, planers, and other machine tools. "Helen Young, Lucy Young, and Hilda Lee," the paper continued, "were the first Chinese women aircraft workers in California. They help build B-24 bombers in San Diego."<sup>56</sup>

Fighting the war in the Pacific, the United States had to face the problem of anti-American propaganda by the Japanese government. Japan had been appealing to Asia to unite in a race war against white America. Tokyo broadcasts aimed at China described how the Chinese in the United States suffered from "a campaign of venomous vilification of the character of the Chinese people." "Far from waging this war to liberate the oppressed peoples of the world," Tokyo argued on the airwaves, "the Anglo-American leaders are trying to restore the obsolete system of imperialism."<sup>57</sup>

Alarmed by the Japanese condemnation of America's anti-Chinese laws and sentiment, many policymakers felt the need to "spike" the propaganda guns of Japan. A retired Navy officer told Congress that the Chinese exclusion laws were worth "twenty divisions" to the Japanese army. Supporters of the repeal bill expressed fears of the war turning into a racial conflict. "The Japanese have been carrying on a propaganda campaign seeking... to set the oriental world against the occidental world," one congressman warned. "They have called it a campaign of Asia for Asiatics." Another congressman predicted: "Suppose the Chinese do capitulate and join Japan; then all Asia is apt to go with her. Then you will have a race struggle in which we are hopelessly outnumbered that will last, not for 1 year or 5 years, but throughout generations to come."<sup>58</sup>

In 1943, Congress began considering a bill to repeal the Chinese exclusion laws and to allow a quota for Chinese immigration. President Roosevelt sent Congress a message favoring the repeal bill. "China is our ally," Roosevelt wrote on October 11, 1943. "For many long years she stood alone in the fight against aggression. Today we fight at her side. She has continued her gallant struggle against very great odds." Aware that the act would be essential to the war effort in Asia, the president urged Congress to "be big enough" to acknowledge an error of the past: "By the repeal of the Chinese exclusion laws, we can correct a historic mistake and silence the distorted Japanese propaganda."<sup>59</sup>

Shortly afterward, Congress repealed the exclusion acts and provided a quota for Chinese immigration. Hypocritically, the law allowed only a tiny trickle of 105 Chinese immigrants to be admitted annually. But Chinese Americans also won a long-awaited victory: immigrants from China, the new law provided, were eligible for naturalized citizenship, even though they were not "white."

#### *Mexican Americans: Up from the Barrio*

When he heard the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Alex Romandia was stunned. As a Mexican American, he felt righteous indignation. "Our country had been attacked," he told his brother Roberto, "and we had to defend it." Twenty-seven years old, Romandia was working in Hollywood as a stunt man and had befriended many Jewish intellectuals. Feeling rejected by the larger society, Romandia and several of his Jewish friends decided to volunteer for the army. "All of us," he said, "had to

prove ourselves—to show that we were more American than the Anglos.”<sup>60</sup>

Altogether, half a million Mexican Americans enlisted in the U.S. armed services—a significant proportion of this group’s population of 2,690,000. The war offered Mexican Americans a chance to claim the United States as their country, too. Soldier Anthony Navarro explained: “We wanted to prove that while our cultural ties were deeply rooted in Mexico, our home was here in this country.” A Mexican-American soldier explained what it meant for America to be his homeland: “We, too, were entitled to work, play, and to live as we pleased. Weren’t *all* Americans entitled to the same opportunities?”<sup>61</sup>

From the barrios arose the war slogan in English, “Americans All.” “All around us,” Socorro Díaz Blanchard recalled, “boys were going into the service.” Many families had several members in the armed forces. “When the Second World War started, my brother, José, my brother-in-law, my cousins, and my cousins’ husbands served,” said Socorro Delgado. “At one time there were as many as fifteen of our immediate family who had gone to war! Every Friday Father Burns and Father Rossetti had a novena for the Sorrowful Mother. We would go and mention the names of the boys who were in the war. There was a victory candelabra with seven candles, and the candles would be lit. They lasted for a week.”<sup>62</sup>

At home, families waited anxiously for news about husband, sons, and brothers at the battlefield. “It was very depressing when the men went off to war because it shattered our community,” recalled Juanita Vasquez. “Whenever a young man was killed in action, we all felt the same pain because we all went to school together and were close friends.” Margaret Villanueva Lambert worked on an assembly line in a defense factory. “I remember a few times during the war,” she said, “when I was working and all of a sudden there would be a loud scream followed by uncontrollable crying of a woman who had learned that her husband or son was dead. We all feared that moment when we, too, could be requested to go to the front office and find a representative of the military with an attaché case tucked under his arm with a letter for the next of kin. The workers would always collect a fund for these women.”<sup>63</sup>

The Mexican-American casualty rates were extremely high. California congressman Jerry Voorhis pointed out the debt America owed to the people of the barrio: “As I read the casualty lists from my state, I find anywhere from one-fourth to one-third of those names are names such as Gonzales or Sanchez, names indi-

cating that the very lifeblood of our citizens of Latin-American descent in the uniform of the armed forces of the United States is being poured out to win victory in the war.” One of the Mexican-American soldiers who returned home wounded was Raul Morin. With casts on both legs, Morin was sent to De Witt General Hospital near Auburn, California. “Among the patients there from Los Angeles I met ‘Memo’ Terrazas, who was slowly recovering from a brain injury, partially paralyzed, and loss of speech. I also met Frank Carrillo, and Florencio Rodriguez, both veterans of the North African campaign; Vincent Gonzales, Ernie Ochoa, Larry Vasquez, George Yorba . . . There must have been over one thousand Mexican Americans in that hospital.”<sup>64</sup>

Mexican-American soldiers served with distinction. *La Opinión* proudly published news of military awards: “Sergeant José Lopez was awarded the highest honor in the military—the Congressional Medal of Honor—after killing 100 Germans. He is from Mission, Texas, and is referred to as a ‘one man army.’” “Sergeant Francisco Navarro of the U.S. Air Force is currently enjoying a well-earned rest after flying 295 missions (800 hours of flight) aboard a C-47 in India-Burma. He has earned the Distinguished Flying Cross, two Oak Leaves.” “The Congressional Medal of Honor was awarded to Macario Garcia from Camp Hood, Texas, for bravery in combat. Garcia, a Mexican national, became a U.S. citizen. He lived in Sugarland, Texas, growing and picking cotton.”<sup>65</sup>

One Mexican American was given a military award for a unique battle achievement. As a boy living in the barrio of East Los Angeles, Guy Louis Gabaldon had been one of seven children crowded into a small house. On the streets, he was befriended by two Japanese-American brothers, Lane and Lyle Nakano, and eventually moved into their home. “More and more I was with them than I was with my natural parents,” recalled Gabaldon. He lived with the Nakanos for six years and learned Japanese. But then the war came, and the family was taken away to an internment camp.<sup>66</sup>

Only seventeen years old at the time, Gabaldon joined the marines and was sent to the Pacific front. On his first day of combat on Saipan, he killed thirty-three Japanese soldiers. Perhaps they reminded him of the sons of his Japanese foster family. Filled with remorse, Gabaldon decided he would go out alone and try to persuade the Japanese soldiers to surrender, for they were completely surrounded and cut off from the Japanese navy. He captured six soldiers. Speaking in Japanese, he told them that they would be given medical care and food. “I’m keeping three of you

here," Gabaldon said. "The other three can leave and bring some friends back." But he warned them that if they did not return, he would shoot his hostages. The three came back with six more soldiers. Gabaldon kept repeating this tactic, and within seven hours, he had eight hundred prisoners. For his bravery, Gabaldon was awarded the Navy Cross. "Working alone in the front of the lines," read his citation, "he daringly entered enemy caves, pillboxes, buildings and jungle brush, frequently in the face of hostile fire, and succeeded not only in obtaining vital military information but in capturing well over 1,000 civilians and troops."<sup>67</sup>

Meanwhile, on the home front, Mexicans were contributing to the war effort. To meet new demands for agricultural production, the federal government initiated the bracero program (from the Spanish word *brazos*, or arms). Recruited in Mexico, guest laborers would work in the United States under contract and then be returned at the end of their term. On September 29, 1942, the first fifteen hundred braceros were brought to California by train. During the war years, the federal government recruited workers by the thousands: 4,000 in 1942, 52,000 in 1943, 62,000 in 1944, and 120,000 a year later. By 1947, 200,000 of them had worked in the United States.<sup>68</sup>

Also a "war industry," agriculture contributed a vital military need: food. The braceros worked in twenty-one states, where in 1944 alone they harvested crops worth \$432 million. "They're all right, good workers," a Washington farmer commented. "I only hope I can get them again." Other farmers agreed: "These Mexicans are as good as any help I ever had." "We wouldn't trade one of these Mexicans for ten of the kind of help we have had on this job before." But the good workers complained that the farmers were not good bosses. A farm laborer protested: "We come here like *animales rentados* [rented animals], not like men."<sup>69</sup>

While the braceros labored in the fields, Mexican Americans in the cities worked in the factories of the defense industry. The rapidly inclining demand for labor in the defense industries forced employers to turn to Mexican labor. In 1941, the number of Mexicans employed in the Los Angeles shipyards was zero; by 1944, it had jumped to seventeen thousand. Employment opportunities for them expanded throughout the defense industries—steel, armaments, and aircraft. *La Opinión* carried advertisements in Spanish: "Martin Ship Service Company needs Mexican Workers for repair and maintenance work. You don't need to speak English. We have Mexican supervisors. You only need a birth certifi-

cate. You don't need to be a U.S. citizen." On January 23, 1944, *La Opinión* reported that twelve thousand Mexicans were employed by Douglas Aircraft in Southern California.<sup>70</sup>

Many of these new workers were women. On April 1, 1942, *La Opinión* announced: "Roosevelt High School will open an aviation class for national defense, especially for women, on Tuesday and Thursday nights. This class will teach mounting, perforation, etc. as is taught by the various aircraft production companies." For the first time in their lives, Mexican-American women were no longer forced to be farm laborers, maids, or garment workers. "Prior to the war," recalled Natalie Martinez Sterling, "the only jobs available to young Mexican women were nonskilled types of occupations such as making cardboard boxes and sewing clothes. The war allowed us job opportunities as sales clerks and defense workers. The government was actually training us with job skills that would help us after the war." Felisa Ruiz welcomed the chance to work in the defense industry. "During the depression," she said, "the only jobs available to young Mexican-American women were limited primarily to sewing and laundry work, hotel maids, and as domestics. These jobs both were physically demanding and paid very little. When the war broke out, defense jobs were all of a sudden open to us because of the labor shortage with the men off to war. Many of us left these menial jobs into highly skilled occupations with good to excellent pay with overtime."<sup>71</sup>

During the tremendous employment expansion, thousands of Mexican-American women became riveters. One of them was Margarita Salazar. In 1942, she was twenty-five years old, working in Molly's Beauty Shop, where customers were telling fantastic stories about women assembling airplanes. "I quit Molly's and went to work for defense," Salazar recalled. "I could make more money. I could see that I wasn't going to make that much money working as an operator and the money was in defense. Everybody would talk about the overtime and how much money it was. And it was exciting. Being involved in that era you figured you were doing something for your country—and at the same time making money." She applied for a job at a Lockheed assembly plant and was hired immediately. An Italian worker taught Salazar how to drill: "Jeanette broke me in," she said.<sup>72</sup>

Working on the assembly lines, Mexican-American women learned not only how to rivet but also how to get along with workers of other races. "Aircraft work generally required a team of two women for riveting—one person working outside the plane and the

other person inside," recalled Carmen Caudillo. "At one particular plant, there were many white women from Missouri who refused to have anything to do with the Black workers. One supervisor decided to pair several Black and Mexican women together. At first, there was some prejudice on both sides, but as time passed, we became good friends both in and out of the plant."<sup>73</sup>

Women of different ethnicities also became friends in the factory cafeterias. "There were other Mexican women," said Margarita Salazar, "but I don't recall too many colored girls, not in our little section. But when we'd go to lunch, I'd see a lot of them. We all blended in—men, women, Mexican, Italian." At another plant, Antonia Molina also had affirming experiences. "I remember one day when some new Black workers came to our factory. From the start, some white workers absolutely refused to even say hello. The next day, some of us Mexican women invited the Black women over to our table for lunch. We did so because we knew what it was like to be discriminated against. By the end of the week, several white workers also joined us for lunch. We soon realized that we had to set aside our differences in order to win the war."<sup>74</sup>

"Through earning our own wages," Carmen Chavez said, "we had a taste of independence we hadn't known before the war. The women of my neighborhood had changed as much as the men who went to war. We developed a feeling of self-confidence and a sense of worth." Alicia Mendeola Shelit experienced a similar feeling. With her earnings as a worker at Douglas Aircraft, this single parent purchased her first home. Shelit was proud that she was bringing "the money in to feed [her] kids, like a man."<sup>75</sup>

For Mexican Americans in the defense industry, the war represented a convergence of patriotism and personal growth. "We didn't understand the international politics that led to the war," said a woman who had worked in a factory. "We did know, however, that the Japanese had cowardly bombed Pearl Harbor and had killed hundreds of young American boys—boys who were my brothers' ages. The Japanese had attacked our country. I say our country because I was born here. My generation went proudly to war because this country, despite the discrimination, had provided my family with a better life than my relatives had in Mexico." A better life meant a different one. "All of us were definitely changed by the four years of defense work," observed Victoria Morales. "Prior to the war, we were young women with few social and job skills. But the war altered these conditions very quickly.

By the end of the war, we had been transformed into young, mature women with new job skills, self-confidence, and a sense of worth as a result of our wartime contributions."<sup>76</sup>

As soldier warriors overseas and as worker warriors in the "Arsenal for Democracy" on the home front, they were fighting for the dignity they were entitled to as Americans.

### *Native Americans: "Why Fight the White Man's War?"*

"Why fight the white man's war?" asked young Indians after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Why enlist in the U.S. Armed Forces, when the Indian people had been losing their lands ever since the arrival of the English colonizers at Jamestown in 1607? Now they were being asked to help defend their conquerers. "Why do you have to go?" an Indian mother asked her son. "It's not your war." "We had lost our own country to foreigners," said a Navajo. Navajos bitterly remembered the "Long Walk"—how in 1863 Kit Carson's forces had marched the Navajo tribe at bayonet point to the Bosque Redondo Reservation in New Mexico.<sup>77</sup>

Yet, during World War II, Navajos enlisted. Almost 20 percent of all reservation Native Americans in the military came from the Navajo Nation in the Southwest. Raymond Nakai was asked why Navajos enlisted: "Our answer is that we are proud to be American. We're proud to be American Indians. We always stand ready when our country needs us." The Navajo Nation declared: "We resolve that the Navajo Indians stand ready to aid and defend our government and its institutions against all subversive and armed conflict and pledge our loyalty to the system which recognizes minority rights and a way of life that has placed us among the greatest people of our race." In 1943, a Navajo soldier wrote to his tribal council: "I don't know anything about the white man's way. I never went outside the reservation. I am proud to be in a suit like this now. It is to protect my country, my people, the head men, the chiefs of my people."<sup>78</sup>

Another reason why so many Navajos enlisted was poverty. By the time of Pearl Harbor, the federal government's stock reduction program had made the Navajos dependent on wage income: nearly 40 percent of their annual per capita income of \$128 came from wages, mostly from temporary government employment. "I went to war," said Wilson Keedah, "because there were no jobs on the reservation." Eugene Crawford also saw the marines as a way out of squalor. "One of the recruiters," he recalled, "tried

to attract me into signing up by saying that becoming a marine would be much better than staying on the reservation."<sup>79</sup>

Pushed by poverty, the Navajos were also pulled into the military because they possessed something uniquely valuable to the U.S. military. "The marines recruited Navajos for our language," explained Cozy Stanley Brown. "They liked to use our language in war to carry messages." In May the first group of code talkers were sent to the marine base in San Diego for training.<sup>80</sup>

The Navajos who were selected to be code talkers had to be proficient in both their tribal language and English. Minimally, they had to have a tenth-grade education. The code talker, explained Navajo Jimmy King, had "to spell 'artillery,' and then 'bivouac,' 'reconnaissance,' and then words like 'strafing' and some other military terms. You had to know the English language well enough you could spell whatever you were saying, and the terms accurately so that you can carry on your code talking efficiently and effectively." Accuracy was an absolute necessity. "There are thousands and thousands of lives involved," said King. "Let's say bombing, or strafing, shelling so many xxx yards from a certain point. Suppose he gets one digit wrong. Now, that digit might mean shelling, strafing, bombing of our own men."<sup>81</sup>

At the marine base, recalled Cozy Stanley Brown, "we were taught to use the radio. We had to do that in a hurry. I guess that was why they forced us to complete the training in eight weeks." Then the code talkers had to creatively adapt their language for use in the Pacific war. "We got together and discussed how we would do it. We decided to change the name of the airplanes, ships, and the English ABC's into the Navajo language. We did the changing. For instance, we named the airplanes 'dive bombers' for *ginitsoh* (sparrow hawk), because the sparrow hawk is like an airplane—it charges downward at a very fast pace." Many Navajo words were converted into military terms: *a-ye-shi* (eggs) for bombs, *jas-chizzie* (swallow) for torpedo plane, *ne-as-jah* (owl) for observation plane, and *jay-sho* (buzzard) for bomber. The Navajo language could not be understood or mimicked by the Japanese military. Many words had sounds that could be heard only by a native speaker, and its verb forms were so complex that they had to be composed by someone who had grown up with the language. The Navajo code talkers had developed what came to be admired by the U.S. military as "the unbreakable code."<sup>82</sup>

The code talkers hit every beach from Guadalcanal to Okinawa. Altogether there were 420 Navajo code talkers, sending and

receiving reports from the field commanders. Their secret messages carried information on enemy gun locations, movements of American troops, artillery fire, plane bombardments, and the sites of enemy entrenchments and strategic lookout points.

In February 1945, the Navajo code talkers participated in one of the most important Pacific battles: the fight for Iwo Jima. "It just seemed like the island was burning early in the morning," one of them recalled. "This shelling was coming down just like rain." Teddy Draper never forgot the fear he felt during the beach landing: "There were a lot of machine guns going along all the way around Suribachi about 50 feet apart from the bottom to the top. Just flying shells, all over. You couldn't see. And I thought, 'I don't know if I'm going to live or not.'" During the first two days of the invasion, Navajo code talkers worked around the clock, sending more than eight hundred battle messages without an error.<sup>83</sup>

On the third day, the fighting focused on Mount Suribachi, a vital observation post for the Japanese defense of the island. Navajo code talker Teddy Draper recalled that on the third day of fierce fighting, "I was close to 100 feet down on the north slope when Sergeant Ray told me to send a message that Suribachi had been secured and at what time and get it down to headquarters. I didn't see the flag go up, but I passed the message when it happened." The message read: "Naastsosi Thanzie Dibeh Shida Dahnesta Tkin Shush Wollachee Moasi Lin Achi." When the message was received on a ship, a Navajo translator announced that the American flag was flying over Mount Suribachi.<sup>84</sup>

Casualty rates for the battle of Iwo Jima were enormous: twenty thousand Japanese soldiers were killed, while seven thousand marines were killed and nineteen thousand wounded. The American dead included four Navajo code talkers—Peter Johnson, Paul Kinlahcheeny, Sam Morgan, and Willie Notah. Signal officer Major Howard Conner declared: "Without the Navajos the marines would never have taken Iwo Jima."<sup>85</sup>

After returning to the reservation, many Navajo veterans found that they had been wounded psychologically by the war. George Kirk kept having dreams of enemy soldiers jumping into his foxhole, so he went to see a medicine man for a ceremony called the "Enemy Way," a symbolic slaying of the "enemy presence." Coming home after his imprisonment in a Japanese POW camp for three years, Claude Hatch had a ceremony to help him heal from his traumatic battle experiences. "My father passed away shortly before I was liberated," he recalled, "but after returning home my



relatives decided to have the Enemy Way ceremony for me because of all the things that had happened to me." Keats Begay said that he had a Squaw Dance ceremony performed on him, but he noted that there were some veterans who were still emotionally ill and were "receiving disability income." Indeed, there were veterans who did not easily recover from the psychic wounds of the war.<sup>86</sup>

One such veteran was described in a letter a woman had written to a marine commanding officer:

I don't know I do rite in writin you this but no harm try. It about Big Bill \_\_\_\_\_, can he be kept from comin home to he family, he was a fine guy till he got to be Marine, got big Head so many stripes on sleeve and decorate in front, first time come home got heap drunk, was maybe sick, cold not so bad, no want go back, next time staid over got wife take back, and made lie for him, she no like, she scared of him, all time want take car, her need live 1/4 mile out of town, she work hard, he all time send for money, talk he got woman, want car is talk, last week sends from town off far, her come after him, she no money, no gas, no go, he cot ride, made hell all time, argue, argue, car, money, he hit her maby broke nose, black both eyes, kick her round, he sure bad umbra, now take car, no paid for, how he pay, she works for his two chilren and one with till school out, and he put other woman fore her for spite. Bill no not me I get this from friends, they say fraid we write, he kill them and her maby. I going away tomorrow, try not let him know where, you get these army police here, maby you say they told. Her land woman for over one year, I sure will back this up.

Mrs. B \_\_\_\_\_

No like bad man buse woman.<sup>87</sup>

Why men like this veteran had become drunken and abusive husbands was explained by Oliver La Farge of the Association of American Indian Affairs. Writing in *Harper's Magazine* in 1947, he described how a Navajo had returned from the war only to feel he was "in a box" of poverty. The land was too dry for farming, and his welfare check was too meager. "He knew what he was going to do now," La Farge wrote. "He was going to hook a ride into town, sell his coat, buy a pint of bootleg rotgut, and get drunk. He hated what he was doing, but he could not help himself. He could not get out of the box; he could only momentarily forget it."<sup>88</sup>

The problem for many despondent Navajo veterans was not simply the post-traumatic stresses of the war. There was little

economic opportunity on the reservation waiting for these military heroes. A year after the war, the New Mexico Association on Indian Affairs reported that the average male on the Navajo reservation was earning less than \$100 a year. The association concluded: "The poor economic situation of the Navajo is beyond belief." The reason for this devastating suffering was revealed in a single set of statistics: the tribal population had reached sixty thousand in 1946, and the reservation lands could support only thirty-five thousand people.<sup>89</sup>

Still, the war had revived a Navajo spirit. Embedded in the deployment of their language as a weapon was an irony. "When I was going to boarding school," said Teddy Draper, Sr., "the U.S. government told us not to speak Navajo, but during the war, they *wanted* us to speak it!" Recalling how he was not allowed to speak Navajo in his boarding school, Keith Little said he viewed his code-talking contribution as a fight for Navajo "freedom," including the cultural right to have their tribal language. On the blood-soaked beaches of Pacific islands, the Navajos had demonstrated the value of America's cultural diversity. "We, the Navajo people," declared Kee Etsicity, "were very fortunate to contribute our language as a code for our country's victory. For this I strongly recommend we teach our children the language our ancestors were blessed with at the beginning of time. It is very sacred and represents the power of life."<sup>90</sup>

### *Jewish Americans: A "Deafening Silence"*

After World War II, the still molten memory of their near extermination as a people made Jewish Americans wonder what they should tell their children about the Nazi "heart of darkness." This was the question a father raised in a 1956 letter to the "Bintel Brief" (similar to "Dear Abby") editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*. The editor advised the parents to wait until their children had grown old enough to understand the "massacres" of six million Jews. "Certainly we should tell our children about the holocaust," he answered, "and about the fact that the whole world was silent."<sup>91</sup>

That "whole world" included the United States. When Hitler came to power in 1933, four and a half million Jews were living in the United States. Safe from Nazism on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, they found themselves facing an agonizing dilemma: how should they respond to the unfolding genocide in Europe?

In 1933, representative Samuel Dickstein of New York offered a congressional resolution for the admission of all German Jews

who were related to American citizens and were fleeing from persecution in Germany. Unexpectedly, Dickstein encountered opposition from three of the leading Jewish-American organizations. The American Jewish Committee voiced the strongest criticism of his resolution. Founded in 1906 by wealthy German-Jewish immigrants, the committee believed that Jews in this country should simply be loyal Americans, and warned that Dickstein's proposal was provoking the anti-Semitic charge that Jews in America were willing to sacrifice American interests in order to help Jews in Germany. B'nai B'rith asserted that the immigration restrictions should be enforced to protect American labor. The American Jewish Congress also called for keeping the gates closed. Composed of Eastern European Jews, the Congress was led by Rabbi Stephen Wise of New York City. Speaking against the passage of "special amendments to American immigration laws" or "new legislation" for Jewish victims of Nazi Germany, Wise argued that the existing restrictions were needed to keep out immigrants who would take jobs away from American workers. Jews in this country, the rabbi declared, were "Americans, first, last, and all the time."<sup>92</sup>

But, in 1938, Jewish Americans realized that they could not be just "Americans." During one terrifying night, rampaging mobs murdered scores of Jews in Germany. According to the *New York Times*, in Berlin "raiding squads of young men roamed unhindered through the principal shopping districts, breaking shop windows with metal weapons, looting or tossing merchandise into the streets or into passing vehicles and leaving the unprotected Jewish shops to the mercy of vandals who followed in this unprecedented show of violence." The night of fear and breaking glass came to be known as "Kristallnacht."<sup>93</sup>

At a press conference, Roosevelt condemned the night of mayhem and murder: "The news of the past few days from Germany has deeply shocked public opinion in the United States.... I myself could scarcely believe that such things could occur in a twentieth-century civilization." Asked if he had considered a possible mass transfer of Kristallnacht victims to the United States, Roosevelt replied: "I have given a great deal of thought to it." Then he added: "The time is not ripe for that." Roosevelt was also asked if he would relax the immigration laws for Jewish refugees. "That is not in contemplation," he answered; "we have the quota system." Roosevelt was empathetic to the plight of Jews in Europe: he himself had appointed a Jewish American to his cabinet, Henry Morgenthau, secretary of the treasury. But the

president was heeding the polls. A Gallup poll conducted after Kristallnacht in November 1938 showed that 77 percent of the Americans surveyed opposed increasing the immigration quota for Germany. Although Roosevelt extended the visas for twelve thousand refugees already in the United States, he refused to open the gates to new refugees.<sup>94</sup>

Senator Robert Wagner of New York and Representative Edith Rogers of Massachusetts hoped that Americans would at least have the heart to save Jewish children. In 1939, they jointly introduced a bill that would allow the nonquota entry of twenty thousand refugee children from Germany over a two-year period. The children would be admitted on the condition that they would be supported by responsible private agencies or individuals and would not become public charges. The bill quickly came under attack from restrictionists. John B. Trevor of the American Coalition of Patriotic Societies scolded Wagner and Rogers for sponsoring such legislation in view of the needs of a million "neglected boys and girls, descendants of American pioneers, undernourished, ragged and ill."<sup>95</sup>

The Wagner-Rogers bill needed support from the president. While on a Caribbean cruise in February 1939, Roosevelt received a cable from Mrs. Roosevelt: "Are you willing I should talk to Sumner [Wells] and say we approve passage of Child Refugee Bill. Hope you are having grand time. Much love. Eleanor." Roosevelt replied: "It is all right for you to support the child refugee bill, but it is best for me to say nothing till I get back." After he returned, Roosevelt maintained his silence. Trying to get the president to issue a statement on the proposed legislation, Representative Caroline O'Day wrote to ask him for his view on the bill. Instead, Roosevelt penciled on her letter the following instructions to Secretary "Pa" Watson: "File, no action. FDR."<sup>96</sup>

Roosevelt was aware of widespread public opposition to the bill. A Gallup poll revealed that 66 percent of those questioned did not want the government to admit the children. Eleanor Roosevelt understood her husband's sensitivity to the pulse of the people. "While I often felt strongly on various subjects," she wrote in *This I Remember*, "Franklin frequently refrained from supporting causes in which he believed, because of political realities."<sup>97</sup>

The Wagner-Rogers proposal also turned out to be an extremely sensitive political issue for Jewish-American leaders. During the congressional hearings on the legislation, Rabbi Wise stated that he would be willing to admit "a rather limited number of children," but that he wanted the immigration restrictions to remain.

"If there is a conflict between our duty to those children and our duty to our country, speaking for myself as a citizen, I should say, of course, that our country comes first; and if children cannot be helped, they cannot be helped, because we should not undertake to do anything that would be hurtful to the interests of our country." The Wagner-Rogers bill failed to leave the committees, and even frightened refugee children would not be saved.<sup>98</sup>

A few months later, 907 German Jewish refugees tried to rescue themselves. They boarded the steamship *St. Louis* bound for Cuba, where they expected to find asylum. When their ship reached Havana, however, the Cuban government suddenly invalidated their immigration visas. Turned away at the dock, they remained on board while their ship steamed in circles between Cuba and Florida. The passengers saw the lights and beaches of Miami, but the U.S. Coast Guard escorted their ship out of American waters. Frantically, they pleaded for permission to land in the United States. Describing the *St. Louis* as "the saddest ship afloat today," carrying a "cargo of despair," the *New York Times* editorialized: "We can only hope that some hearts will soften somewhere and some refuge found. The cruise of the *St. Louis* cries high to heaven of man's inhumanity to man." The *Jewish Daily Forward* printed a scream for help from the passengers: "We appeal to world Jewry. We are being sent back. How can you be peaceful? How can you be silent? Help! Do everything you can! Some on the ship have committed suicide. Help! Do not allow the ship to go back to Germany!"<sup>99</sup>

As the ship sailed along the U.S. coastline, a Jewish-American organization, the Joint Distribution Committee, tried to post a bond of \$500,000 guaranteeing that the refugees would not become public charges in Cuba. The Cuban government refused the offer. The rejected refugees now focused all of their hope on Roosevelt. "The desperate passengers on the *St. Louis* telegraphed the President," wrote historian Arthur Hertzberg, "but he ignored them." They were forced to sail back to Europe where a ghastly future awaited them.<sup>100</sup>

The *St. Louis* incident unleashed a sense of frustration within Jewish-American communities. "Let our leaders lead!" demanded Samuel Margoshes impatiently in the Yiddish daily, *The Day*. "Let them not delay and postpone. Let the General Jewish Council meet and deliberate immediately. The Jewish masses are waiting to go out into the streets, to close their places of business, to stop all work, to declare a fast and to demonstrate to the entire world that we will no longer allow ourselves to be slaughtered by a barbaric regime."<sup>101</sup>

The anguish intensified in September 1939 when Germany occupied Poland, and three million more Jews came under Nazi rule. "In the matter of the treatment of Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland," Wise wrote in *Opinion* in February 1940, "we face a spectacle of daily torture and horror such as men have not beheld since the days of Genghis Khan."<sup>102</sup>

But what awaited the Jews of Europe would surpass the atrocities of Genghis Khan. Hitler's homicidal plan was unshrouded during the German invasion of Russia. Following the advancing German army, Nazi execution squads, known as the *Einsatzgruppen*, began murdering Jews by the hundreds of thousands. The atrocities were reported in newspapers throughout the West. The shocking revelations forced Wise to reassess his reluctance to give special consideration to the Jewish victims.<sup>103</sup>

News of the mass murders continued to reach the United States, and on July 21, 1942, twenty thousand people gathered at Madison Square Garden to protest the Nazi atrocities. In a message sent to the rally, Roosevelt urged the people there to support his rescue-through-victory strategy. "Americans who love justice and hate oppression," he declared, "will hail the solemn commemoration in Madison Square Garden as an expression of the determination of the Jewish people to make every sacrifice for victory over the Axis powers." At the mass meeting, Rabbi Wise endorsed Roosevelt's strategy when he declared that the "salvation of our people" could come only through a "speedy and complete" victory.<sup>104</sup>

At this point, Americans were still unaware of the extent of the Nazi extermination effort—the systematic and complex apparatus of trains, barracks, factories, gas chambers, and crematoria. But within weeks, they would no longer be able to claim that they did not know. On August 28, 1942, Wise received a cable from Gerhart Riegner, the World Jewish Congress representative in Geneva. The message stated: "Received alarming report that in Fuhrer's headquarters plan discussed and under consideration according to which all Jews in countries occupied or controlled by Germany numbering 3½–4 millions should after deportation and concentration in East be exterminated at one blow to resolve once for all the Jewish question in Europe." The Riegner report made one thing absolutely clear: there was no longer a reason for doubting the genocide, or an excuse for hesitating to make every effort to rescue Jews. Hitler had, in fact, unleashed his ultimate pogrom—the "Final Solution."<sup>105</sup>

Wise took the incriminating cable to Under-Secretary of State

Sumner Wells, only to be told that he should wait until the information could be confirmed. The wait for Wells's response was agonizing for Wise, for he knew that Jews were being murdered by the thousands daily. "I have had the unhappiest days of my life," the rabbi wrote to Reverend John Hayes Holmes. "Think of what it means to hear, as I have heard, through a coded message—first from Geneva, then from Berne, through the British Foreign Office,—that Hitler plans the extermination at one time of the whole Jewish population of Europe; and prussic acid is mentioned as the medium." Wise writhed in anguish: "I don't want to turn my heart inside out, but I am almost demented over my people's grief."<sup>106</sup>

Three months later, after the Nazis had murdered an additional one million Jews, Wise was finally summoned by Wells. "I hold in my hands documents which have come to me from our legation in Berne," the under-secretary of state said. "I regret to tell you, Dr. Wise, that these documents confirm and justify your deepest fears."<sup>107</sup>

At once, Wise held a press conference to report the evidence of the official Nazi policy of genocide. Incredibly, the press did not cover the shocking news as a major story. In order to arouse the American public from its moral lethargy, Jewish leaders organized a Day of Mourning and Prayer on December 2, 1942. In New York City, half a million Jewish union laborers stopped production for ten minutes, and special services were held in synagogues. NBC broadcast a quarter-hour memorial service. "In every country where Hitler's edicts run, every day is a day of mourning for Jews," editorialized the *New York Times*. "Today has been set aside, by action of the chief Rabbinate of Palestine, supported by the Jewish organizations of the United States, as a day of mourning, prayer and fasting among Jews throughout the free countries of the world."<sup>108</sup>

That day, Wise requested a meeting with President Roosevelt: "Dear Boss: I do not wish to add an atom to the awful burden which you are bearing with magic and, as I believe, heaven-inspired strength at this time. But you do know that the most overwhelming disaster of Jewish history has befallen Jews in the form of the Hitler mass-massacres... and it is indisputable that as many as two million civilian Jews have been slain."<sup>109</sup>

Six days later, Wise and delegates from major Jewish organizations met with Roosevelt. The meeting turned out to be a great disappointment. The meeting lasted twenty-nine minutes, and Roosevelt engaged in casual conversation for nearly the entire time. Finally, the discussion turned to the Jewish crisis in Europe. "The entire conversation lasted only a minute or two," wrote one

of the participants in his diary. In a letter to Sumner Wells, the Joint Emergency Committee on European Jewish Affairs charged that the relegation of Jews to "the day of victory" was "virtually to doom them to the fate" that Hitler had designed for them.<sup>110</sup>

The most militant criticism of Roosevelt's rescue-through-victory strategy came from the Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews. To stir the moral conscience of America, this committee turned to drama to break the intolerable silence of the White House. In March 1943, they sponsored a tour of Ben Hecht's pageant *We Will Never Die*. Forty thousand people attended the opening presentation at Madison Square Garden. The performance presented the history of Jews, their contributions to civilization, and the genocide they were experiencing. Hecht's powerful dramatization of the Jews caught in the jaws of genocide conveyed a passionate plea to Americans: do everything possible to rescue the remaining four million Jews.<sup>111</sup>

Determined to help save his Jewish brethren in Europe, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau decided to prod Roosevelt into action. At a meeting with the president on January 16, 1944, he presented a report on the mass murders of Jews. The opening sentence expressed moral indignation: "One of the greatest crimes in history, the slaughter of the Jewish people in Europe, is continuing unabated." Morgenthau called for immediate measures. "The matter of rescuing the Jews from extermination is a trust too great to remain in the hands of men who are indifferent, callous and perhaps even hostile. The task is filled with difficulties. Only a fervent will to accomplish, backed by persistent and untiring effort, can succeed where time is so precious."<sup>112</sup>

Six days later, Roosevelt signed an executive order establishing the War Refugee Board, a government agency that would be responsible for "the development of plans and programs and the inauguration of effective measures for a) the rescue, transportation and maintenance and relief of the victims of enemy oppression, and b) the establishment of havens of temporary refuge for such victims."<sup>113</sup>

Welcoming the creation of the War Refugee Board, Jewish leaders urged the government to create havens of refuge in the United States. "Every surviving Jewish man, woman and child who can escape from the Hitlerite fury into the territories of the United Nations," the American Jewish Congress declared, should have "the right of temporary asylum."<sup>114</sup>

Roosevelt rejected these proposals. He defended his administration's policies by explaining that the government was

transporting to North Africa all of the refugees who had been able to escape from Nazi control. In the end, Roosevelt offered a small concession: he agreed to create an emergency shelter near Oswego, New York, for one thousand refugees representing "a reasonable proportion of various categories of persecuted people." At Auschwitz the gas chambers were murdering twelve thousand people daily.<sup>115</sup>

In June 1945, Roosevelt's rescue-through-victory strategy came to a conclusion as Allied military forces swept across Germany and liberated the prisoners of Hitler's death camps. By then, six million Jews had been exterminated.

What the liberating U.S. troops witnessed in the camps was the heart of a ghastly darkness. An African-American soldier recalled the sickening sensation he experienced as he scanned the searing scene—the survivors looking like ghosts, the ovens still warm. "Why Jews?" Paul Parks asked. "It doesn't make sense. Why were they killed?" A prisoner explained: "They were killed because they were Jews." Park commented: "I understand that." Then he added: "I understand that because I've seen people lynched just because they were black." Park compared the experiences of the two groups: "There's one other great incident of humanity that I'm very familiar with, the three hundred years of slavery in my own country, where people for generations were not allowed to be free, subject to the dictates of another race. Held in bondage, forced to work, and forced to do what another person wanted you to do. And if you didn't obey, there were no laws against killing you and destroying your family. So I said, 'As you talk, I see there's a close parallel between the history of my people in America and what's happened to the Jews in Europe.'<sup>116</sup>

The liberators also included Japanese-American soldiers. With their families in internment camps in the United States, they had fought their way through Italy and France, and had reached Dachau. In his diary, Ichiro Imamura gave an eye-level account: "When the gates swung open, we got our first good look at the prisoners. Many of them were Jews. They were wearing black and white striped prison suits and round caps. A few had shredded blanket rags draped over their shoulders. The prisoners struggled to their feet [and] shuffled weakly out of the compound. They were like skeletons—all skin and bones." Initially, the Jewish prisoners were surprised and confused to see soldiers of Japanese ancestry. "When they first came in, we thought they were allies

of the Germans," a prisoner stated years later. "We believed they were there to torture us." Indeed, Japanese-American soldiers had to explain who they were. One of them recalled that at first the Jewish prisoners thought that their liberators did not look like "Americans." "I am an American soldier," he reassured them, "and you are free."<sup>117</sup>

Also among the liberators were Jewish-American soldiers. Entering one of the barracks at Buchenwald, Chaplain Rabbi Herschel Schacter saw hundreds of survivors lying on shelves from the floor to the ceiling. They were "strewn over scraggly straw sacks," looking down at him out of dazed eyes. Schacter then shouted in Yiddish, "Sholem Aleychem, Yiden, yir zent frey!" "You are free." Schacter felt a special empathy for this pitiful humanity before him: "If my own father had not caught the boat on time, I would have been there."<sup>118</sup>

During an inspection of the camp at Dachau, Walter J. Fellenz visited one of the gas chambers. He noticed that over its entrance, written in Yiddish, was the word "Showers." The room itself was inlaid with high-quality brown tile and had two hundred chrome shower nozzles. Chaplain Judah Nadich tried to picture what it was like to be in the gas chamber with chrome shower nozzles. The rabbi then noticed thousands of scratches on the inside of the door, "scratches that must have been made by the fingernails of so many men and women and children."<sup>119</sup>

The "scratches" told the story of a "deafening silence."<sup>120</sup>

Listening, American Zionists were determined that Jews had to have a homeland: a Jewish nation in Palestine would be their Promised Land. Before the rise of Hitler, Jewish Americans had little interest in Zionism. In 1930, the Zionist Organization of America had such a dwindling membership that Rabbi Stephen Wise observed: "There is a complete lull in things Zionistic in America." When Hitler came to power, however, "the dire developments" of Nazism, as historian Henry Feingold noted, would do for "the Zionist movement what it had been unable to do for itself." Membership in the Zionist Organization of America jumped from 18,000 in 1929 to 52,000 in 1939, and 136,000 by 1945. In 1947, the General Assembly of the United Nations scheduled a vote on the proposal to partition Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state. But President Truman hesitated on the issue when his secretary of defense, James Forrestal, informed him that enforcing the partition would require 160,000 U.S. ground troops. At this point, one of Truman's Jewish-American

friends begged the president to meet with Chaim Weizmann, chief of the World Zionist Organization. At a meeting with Weizmann on March 18, 1948, Truman agreed to "press forward with partition." On May 14, 1948, the British withdrew from Palestine, and in Tel Aviv, David Ben-Gurion declared the existence of the Jewish State of Israel. In Washington, President Truman signed the document recognizing Israel.<sup>121</sup>

### *A Holocaust Called Hiroshima*

In a poem written in 1946, Robert Frost reflected on America's use of the atomic bomb as a weapon of mass destruction:

*Having invented a new Holocaust,  
And been the first with it to win a war,  
How they make haste to cry with fingers crossed,  
King's X—no fairs to use it anymore!*<sup>122</sup>

A year earlier, on April 12, 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt suddenly died, and Vice President Harry S. Truman was sworn into office. That night, the new president wrote in his diary: "I was very much shocked. I am not easily shocked but was certainly shocked when I was told of the President's death and the weight of the government had fallen on my shoulders." The former senator from Missouri felt most anxious about the tremendous burden of international responsibility and his ignorance of foreign affairs.<sup>123</sup>

Feeling inadequate to fill the shoes of the great F.D.R., he confided to his friend Senator George D. Aiken of Vermont: "I'm not big enough. I'm not big enough for this job." What made his new job especially difficult was the sting of personal indignities and sarcasms. *Time* magazine described the new president as "a man of distinct limitations, especially in high level politics." Margaret Truman recalled that her father "snorted with indignation when someone called him the 'little man in the White House.'" But Truman hid his insecurity behind a facade of toughness. Publicly, he presented himself as a man of the frontier. He blustered: "The buck stops here."<sup>124</sup>

As a southerner coming from a family of slaveholders and supporters of the Confederacy, Truman brought to his bluster strongly held ideas about race. Long before his sudden ascendancy to the presidency, he had written to his future wife, Bess:

I think one man is as good as another so long as he's honest and decent and not a nigger or a Chinaman. Uncle Will [Young, the Confederate veteran] says the Lord made a white man of dust, a nigger from mud, then threw up what was left and it came down a Chinaman. He does hate Chinese and Japs. So do I. It is race prejudice I guess. But I am strongly of the opinion that Negroes ought to be in Africa, yellow men in Asia, and white men in Europe and America.<sup>125</sup>

Like many Americans, Truman was swept into a revenge-seeking rage over the treacherous attack on Pearl Harbor. Unlike the war in Europe, the violent conflict in the Pacific was a war of racial hatreds. The Japanese military denounced the American enemy as white "brutes" and "devils." On this side, the American military depicted the enemy as "yellow apes" and "yellow sub-humans." *Time* magazine declared: "The ordinary unreasoning Jap is ignorant. Perhaps he is human. Nothing . . . indicates it." In American society, the term "Jap" was widely used, implicitly identifying the enemy as the Japanese people, in contrast to the term "Nazis," referring only to the followers of Hitler, not the German people. Disturbed by Pearl Harbor and the Bataan Death March, Truman argued: "When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast." In his diary entries written at the Potsdam Conference in July 1945, Truman expressed hatred for the "Japs—savages, ruthless and fanatic."<sup>126</sup>

Intersecting with each other, these personal and cultural dynamics drove Truman to insist on unconditional surrender. At the Potsdam Conference in July, the president rejected Winston Churchill's suggestion to let Japan surrender, with the condition that they be allowed to keep the emperor system. Truman also refused to heed the recommendation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of War Stimson that the United States let the already defeated Japan surrender on a conditional basis. They knew from intercepted messages from Tokyo to Moscow that the Japanese government was asking Russia to help negotiate a surrender. On July 18, in his diary at Potsdam, Truman wrote: "Stalin had told P.M. [Churchill] of telegram from Jap emperor asking for peace."<sup>127</sup>

In that same diary entry, he excitedly recorded: "Manhattan (it is a success)." Truman had received a top-secret message that the atomic bomb had been successfully tested by the Manhattan Project in New Mexico. Buoyed by the sudden possession of twenty thousand tons of TNT, he decided to act unilaterally,

independent of both England and Russia. In the Potsdam Declaration of July 26, Truman issued a fierce ultimatum: Japan had to accept "unconditional surrender" or face "utter devastation."<sup>128</sup>

Japan refused, and Truman ordered the atomic attack. The first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6. Some seventy thousand people were instantly incinerated, most of them women and children. Three days later, the second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki.

But the Japanese government still refused to surrender unconditionally. On August 10, Washington received from Japan an acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration, except on one crucial condition: that it "does not comprise any demand which prejudices the prerogatives of His Majesty as a Sovereign Ruler." At that point, Truman realized that his ultimatum had not worked. He ordered that the third atomic bomb not be dropped, and accepted a surrender with the stipulated condition. That day, Truman had privately told cabinet member Henry Wallace an admission he would never acknowledge publicly. He confided that "the thought of wiping out another 100,000 people was too horrible," and that he did not like "the idea of killing all those kids."<sup>129</sup>

Shortly after the earth-shattering event, W. E. B. Du Bois condemned the atomic attack on the "colored nation" of Japan. "We have seen in this war, to our amazement and distress, a marriage between science and destruction. . . . We have always thought of science as the emancipator. We see it now as the enslaver of mankind." For America's leading black intellectual, the atomic flash over Hiroshima illuminated in a ghastly way "the problem of the color line."<sup>130</sup>

For Du Bois, Hiroshima was a tragic way for the war to end. Before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the men and women of different racial and ethnic minorities had felt little in common and lacked a shared sense of national purpose. Suddenly swept into the already raging international conflict, they came to find themselves fighting as one people against fascism in Europe and Asia, bound by what Abraham Lincoln had described as the "mystic chords of memory" stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every "living heart and hearthstone" all over America. They also fought to make their country live up to its founding principles for all Americans. The war, Du Bois declared, was a struggle for "democracy not only for white folks but for yellow, brown, and black."<sup>131</sup>