

EMANCIPATION AT 150



THE IMPACT OF THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

“Knock[ing] the Bottom Out of Slavery” and Desegregation: Some Comparisons between President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and President Truman’s Executive Order to Desegregate the Military (1948)

Steven Schlossman

As a historian and policy analyst, and as a participant in the pioneer pedagogical venture led by Harvard’s Ernest May and Richard Neustadt in the 1980s (*Thinking in Time*) to suggest how policy makers might better use historical information in decision making, I have long been intrigued by the uses of historical analogy in addressing current policy issues. Analogical reasoning, whether knowingly or unknowingly, has always been a staple of policy thinking, in both domestic and international affairs. May and Neustadt warned against the “faulty use of analogues,” yet they also insisted that the more “possibly relevant analogues” the better in any policy deliberation -- as long as likenesses and differences between circumstances in the past and present are fully spelled out. I too remain positive about juxtaposing loosely comparable historical events in order to shine new light on each of them.

I have been asked to analogize between the two most famous executive orders that American presidents have ever issued on matters of race: President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, and President Truman’s directive to desegregate the military on July 26, 1948 (Executive Order 9981). It is an appropriate assignment, as the very reason I am expert on the subject of military desegregation is because I accepted a challenge from the RAND Corporation in 1993 to analogize between President Truman’s executive order and the draft executive order that President Clinton was then formulating – later substantially modified into the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy -- to end military “discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.”

Not surprisingly, I concluded from my historical research that reasoning by analogy was inadequate to resolve such hotly debated controversies in the early 1990s, such as whether race or sexual orientation is more fundamental in defining human identity. Still, I also concluded that several aspects of the military desegregation experience did speak directly to prospects and plans for integrating gays and lesbians on terms of equality: for example, the negative public opinion (63% in a Gallup poll in June 1948) toward military desegregation that President Truman had to confront; the key, collaborative roles played by civilian and military leadership in implementing Executive Order 9981 between 1948 and 1950; and the various efforts within the military between 1944 and 1954 to assess whether black and white troops could work effectively in battlefield situations, and whether it was possible to change how racially biased white troops behaved toward black troops, even if their underlying racial attitudes changed very little.

Perhaps the most decisive finding of my study was that, contrary to a common misreading of history, the desegregation of the armed forces in the mid-20th century was anything but simple and straightforward. Instead, military integration was a long, convoluted, and highly politicized process that inspired much initial resistance from the armed forces. Many of the strong emotional reactions that the prospect of formally integrating homosexuals into the military was eliciting from service members and the general public in the early 1990s were equally evident in the build-up and implementation of military desegregation in the 1940s and 1950s.

My task today is to analogize not forward but backward in time -- to compare and contrast the Emancipation Proclamation and Executive Order 9981 as historic milestones in extending civil rights to African Americans. Viewed together, I do see each executive order in a new light, especially in demonstrating how central a change agent the military has been in race relations throughout American history, and how important the freedom to serve freely in the military has been in breaking down barriers of prejudice and extending civil rights to previously shunned minority populations -- whether African Americans, women, or LGBT service members today.

Let me briefly identify four common elements in the histories of the Emancipation Proclamation and Executive Order 9981 that, I believe, benefit from analogical comparisons.

1. The first analogy I would draw between the Emancipation Proclamation and 9981 is how often both have been erroneously portrayed as having instantaneously and conclusively solved the enormous “problems” they tackled. Lincoln freed the slaves and Truman desegregated the military; in both instances, we are often told, presidential initiative and courage, guided by moral imperative, were sufficient to uproot generations of institutionalized prejudice and discrimination, in one fell swoop.

In no way, I believe, does it diminish Emancipation Proclamation or 9981 as exemplars of moral courage to point out how little each executive order actually achieved in the short term. President Truman issued 9981 in July 1948, but in the months leading to the presidential election in November, he did nothing to publicize or enforce the order, or to call attention to other civil rights legislation he had brought to Congress earlier in the year. His political reasoning was complex, given his immediate need to cultivate southern Democrats’ votes to support key legislation to bolster Europe’s economic and political recovery and to respond to the growing Soviet threat. Moreover, military desegregation had already been incorporated into the Republican platform; calling special attention to 9981 would have done little to differentiate him from his challenger, Thomas Dewey, who actually had a stronger civil rights record than Truman.

After Truman’s surprise re-election, he did focus considerable energy on desegregating the military, but his implementation strategy was long term, piecemeal, and largely conciliatory. He refused to impose a one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, he negotiated with each military service, almost as if it were a separate nation state. Through an executive oversight group that he appointed (the Fahy Committee), Truman sought both to prod and accommodate each military service. From the start, he proved ready to tolerate a fair degree of stonewalling and outright deception. Though

he declared himself ready, as necessary, to “knock somebody’s ears down,” he remained steady in trying to maximize buy-in to major changes in personnel policy so that they would not be seen as threatening each service’s distinctive traditions. Despite President Truman’s best efforts, however, two years after 9981 the Army and the Marines remained virtually as segregated as during World War II, and they showed little inclination to do more.

As Civil War scholars are quick to point out, the Emancipation Proclamation immediately freed no more than 50,000 of the nation’s nearly four million slaves. Additional slaves would be freed (unless they managed to run away) only as the Union soldiers liberated each of the Confederate states – a prospect that was far from certain following the disastrous battle at Fredericksburg a few weeks before the Emancipation Proclamation was announced. Moreover, the Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to the 500,000 or so slaves in the Free States or in the Slave States that had remained loyal to the Union. Nor did the Emancipation Proclamation apply to the 300,000 slaves scattered in large and small localities (e.g., New Orleans) that were already under Union military control.

Much as President Truman chose to deal delicately with the military services in negotiating a mutually agreed path to desegregation, so President Lincoln chose not to dictate but to defer to the prerogatives of loyal states and critical political allies (like General Andrew Johnson in Tennessee) who did not want the Emancipation Proclamation to apply to them -- at least, not right now. Obviously, the immediate consequences of this decision were dire for the black men, women, and children already under Union authority who remained enslaved until the end of the Civil War (and even afterward). Still, the President chose the path of political delicacy in the interest of achieving long-term, consensual support for the abolition of slavery after hostilities ended.

In short, the EP, not unlike 9981, was more a long-range plan than a guarantee of instantaneous freedom -- even where President Lincoln had sufficient authority to dictate otherwise. For both presidents, political and practical considerations required a measured pace of change. At high cost, blacks had little choice but to wait patiently for each president’s civil rights game plan to unfold.

2. The flip side of the popular historical tendency to portray Presidents Lincoln and Truman as omnipotent change agents is to view African Americans as passive beneficiaries of executive initiative, and to discount their agency in propelling each president’s decision. In my judgment, nothing could be further from the truth. Both the Emancipation Proclamation and 9981 were, in fact, the realization in public policy of long-term, systematic political agitation, as well as vigorous personal persuasion, of both presidents by black and white civil rights leaders, starting long before the issuance of each executive order.

In the 1850s and 1860s, Frederick Douglass was only the most prominent of the free blacks who sought to make the Civil War one of liberation for slaves everywhere, not just those in the rebellious states; and who, furthermore, took deep insult in President Lincoln’s plan to colonize

freed slaves in Latin America. In the 1930s and 1940s, A. Philip Randolph was only the most prominent of the black civil rights leaders who had fought for years to integrate the military -- the most pressing civil rights issue of their time. Failing to persuade President Roosevelt, they were adamant once peace returned that President Truman desegregate the military, even playing political hardball by threatening to rally African Americans to resist the draft if Truman failed to deliver (Randolph cancelled his draft-resistance plans shortly after the President announced his executive order).

Again, it does not in the least slight the moral conviction it took for Presidents Lincoln and Truman to act when they did, to recognize that much of the public voice and political leadership for eliminating slavery and desegregating the military derived first and foremost from African Americans themselves.

3. Third, let me offer a brief analogy regarding the place of public opinion in the genesis of both the Emancipation Proclamation and 9981.

Both Presidents Lincoln and Truman showed their political cards early, long before issuing their historic executive orders: Lincoln starting in the summer of 1862, most notably in his public repartee with newspaper editor and Radical Republican Horace Greeley, and Truman in the 1947 report of the Committee of Civil Rights (To Secure These Rights) and in the civil rights package that he submitted to Congress in February 1948. Both presidents were clearly trying to prepare and shape public opinion for a radical shift in American racial policies -- one that would inevitably stir great political controversy.

To be sure, at the time they issued their executive orders, both presidents were cautiously confident that public opinion was shifting in their direction. But they were also well aware that they were taking a major political risk that could jeopardize their re-election. However often historians (like me) invoke a pragmatic spin to explain the limited initial reach of both the Emancipation Proclamation and 9981, there is no denying the political perspicacity that both presidents revealed in choosing to impose their will on the polity -- via executive order -- in the expectation that their fellow countrymen would soon validate their position at the voting booth.

4. My final analogy returns to the interpretive point I introduced earlier regarding African Americans as agents in shaping their own history. I do so by focusing on the key roles they played as battlefield soldiers during both the Civil War and the Korean War — roles that would have been impossible without the moral leverage embodied in both executive orders.

The most immediate effect of the Emancipation Proclamation on slaves in the Confederate states was to provide a huge incentive for young men to run away from their masters and to seek freedom behind Union lines. To be sure, some slaves had successfully sought refuge earlier in the War, although not all military commanders were happy to see them, or certain what to do with them. But once the Emancipation Proclamation made freedom a federal guarantee, Union commanders increasingly welcomed the escapees.

Most importantly, the Emancipation Proclamation — as “a military necessity,” in Lincoln’s strategic words — authorized field commanders to incorporate escaped slaves into their units as full-fledged (albeit segregated) soldiers. Some 200,000 ex-slaves fought for the Union Army in the last half of the Civil War. Contrary to what some field commanders feared (perhaps Lincoln did too), most evidence suggests that ex-slaves craved the opportunity to fight for the Union, both to ensure permanent freedom for themselves and their loved ones, and to make an implicit case for full citizenship after hostilities ended. As Eric Foner has observed: “black soldiers played a crucial role not only in winning the ... War but also in defining its consequences.... Black military service put the question of postwar rights squarely on the national agenda.”

Most evidence also suggests that the ex-slaves fought bravely and well. Moreover, while bringing ex-slaves into Union ranks produced some desertion by whites, it occasioned little overt discord or violence. Indeed, the infusion of large numbers of black troops into the Union armies -- especially the armies that were already in the Deep South, at a time when recruitment of Northern whites had become tremendously controversial and had slowed to a trickle -- may have been decisive in the Union’s ultimate military victory. (The Confederacy, by contrast, did not allow slaves to fight on its behalf until only a month before the War ended.)

African Americans in 1941 were equally desirous to prove their merit as soldiers by fighting against the Axis forces -- only to have quotas imposed to reduce their overall participation (whether by enlistment or draft), their opportunities restricted for service overseas, and, most obviously, the tradition of segregating blacks into inferior, mainly non-combat units strictly maintained.

Shortly after the War, the Navy and Air Force chipped away at segregation and expanded blacks’ opportunities for combat. The Army and Marines, however, remained segregated, hostile environments for blacks in uniform. As indicated earlier, despite President Truman’s issuance of 9981, neither the Army nor Marines was clearly on a path to desegregation two years later, when the Korean War began.

And then, a revolution in military race relations – clearly traceable to Executive Order 9981 – occurred on the ground in Korea. Remarkably, within a year after hostilities began, three-fifths of the Army’s line infantry companies were racially mixed, and nearly one-fifth of black soldiers were serving in integrated units. The abrupt switch to a policy of integration did not begin at the top. Indeed, when the Far East Command in Tokyo learned in early 1951 about how much integration had occurred, it tried to halt, even to reverse, the trend toward integration. But the decisions of experienced Army officers on the ground continued to flout official racial policy; in short order, those ground-level decisions undermined the policy logic of segregation.

Desegregation of the Army began when several field commanders, confronted by personnel shortages due to high casualties in the War’s brutal early months, responded by combining white and black soldiers in the same units. Integration evolved out of the normal process of troop replacement. Blacks formed a substantial part of the available pool of replacements, as the number of black soldiers arriving in Korea often exceeded the needs of the segregated units stationed there.

Some Army officers concluded that the logical thing to do was to use some of the incoming blacks as “fillers” in under-strength white combat units, rather than trying to fit them into the existing segregated system.

Despite initial resentment by some white troops, the newly integrated units performed excellently in the field; moreover, as had occurred during the Civil War, the incorporation of blacks stirred little overt racial division or violence. Evidence collected by the Army itself indicated that black soldiers who served in mixed units were invigorated by the opportunity to fight in an integrated military, both as individuals and – continuing the spirit of the Double-V campaign in World War II -- as representatives of their race. Evidence also suggested that the forced need to work together on the battlefield in order to survive generated mutual respect between black and white soldiers. Strong military leadership reinforced the growing civility between white and black soldiers, as commanders refused to tolerate displays of prejudice that threatened group morale and unit cohesion.

To be sure, racist attitudes and suspicions -- by black and white soldiers alike -- shifted less surely or quickly than did actual behavior. But as the pace of integration accelerated, new levels of interracial understanding, respect, and buy-in gradually became evident at the attitudinal as well as the behavioral level. As Brigadier General John H. Michaelis succinctly put it: “There is NO color line in a foxhole. Apparently, the white soldier has no objection of serving under a Negro NCO, if the NCO has proved himself in battle....”

The dismantling of racial integration proceeded rapidly once General Matthew Ridgeway replaced General MacArthur as head of the Far East Command. With relatively little fanfare, by 1954 -- the year of *Brown v. Board of Education* -- the American military had essentially been integrated worldwide.

Like the slaves whom the Emancipation Proclamation freed to fight for the Union cause, black soldiers in the Korean theater made the best of the opportunity that 9981 had set in motion. They served with valor and enthusiasm and played a critical role in turning the tide of battle. President Truman’s executive order was not the immediately decisive factor that enabled integration in the Army; it was the ground-level dynamics of the Korean War itself that destroyed segregation. But without the moral leverage and authority embodied in President Truman’s executive order, the opportunity for field commanders in Korea to take matters into their own hands, and to integrate under battlefield conditions, would have been inconceivable.