



A HISTORY OF
RACISM
IN AMERICA

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IMPORTANT EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF RACISM IN AMERICA

1915

The film *The Birth of a Nation* becomes a hit and spurs the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan.

1857

In the *Dred Scott* case, the US Supreme Court rules that Blacks do not have constitutional rights.

1619

First slaves from Africa arrive in Virginia.

1830

Indian Removal Act forces Native Americans to relocate from their ancestral lands.

1808

The United States officially bans the importation of slaves.



1700

1750

1800

1850

1900

1735

Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus categorizes races.

1863

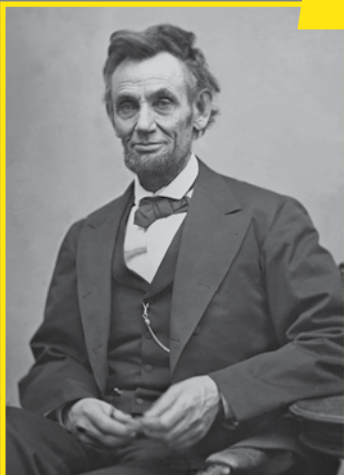
President Abraham Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation, which sought to free slaves in Confederate states but could not be enforced because those states had seceded from the Union.

1882

The Chinese Exclusion Act prohibits the immigration of Chinese laborers.

1896

In the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the US Supreme Court rules that racial segregation is constitutional under the doctrine of "separate but equal."



CHAPTER THREE

Racism in the Early Twentieth Century

Although the KKK's influence had ended by the turn of the twentieth century, White supremacists continued to terrorize Blacks. One of the most widespread means of intimidation was the act of lynching. According to a 2017 study by the Equal Justice Initiative, "Through lynching, Southern white communities asserted their racial dominance over the region's political and economic resources—a dominance first achieved through slavery would now be restored through blood and terror."²¹

In the American South lynching as a form of racial intimidation began in the 1830s. By the early 1900s lynch mobs had killed thousands of innocent Blacks. There were about twenty-five hundred lynchings from 1890 to 1910, with Blacks accounting for almost 80 percent of the victims. Whites who opposed racism by helping Blacks were often lynched as well. In what had become public exhibitions, lynchings were staged before crowds of hundreds or even thousands of spectators. Photographs of the victims' bodies were published in newspapers and made into postcards sold as souvenirs. These postcards often contained printed captions or intimidating messages. One showed a photograph of four Black lynching victims and a poem underneath that contained these lines:

The negro, now,
by eternal grace,
Must learn to stay in the negro's place.
In the Sunny South, the land of the Free,
Let the WHITE SUPREME forever be.²²

One of the most horrific incidents of lynching occurred in 1916 in Waco, Texas. Seventeen-year-old Jesse Washington, a Black farmhand, was accused of killing his female employer. Washington admitted his guilt in a brief trial, but before court officials could escort him away, a mob dragged him from the courtroom. Washington was beaten, stabbed, hanged from a tree, mutilated, and burned to death in a fire in front of Waco's city hall. A crowd of ten thousand to fifteen thousand mostly White spectators, including children, witnessed the gruesome scene. No one did anything to stop the violence. Some onlookers cheered and collected souvenirs cut from Washington's body.

The gruesome death of Jesse Washington, though tragic, helped turn public opinion against such ugly spectacles. As photographs of the lynching circulated, public disgust began to grow. The recently founded National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) saw new support for its justice campaign for Black Americans.

Rebirth of the KKK

As opinions on brutality against Blacks were beginning to change in the early twentieth century, the emerging medium of motion pictures began offering a new kind of entertainment. But sometimes those motion pictures touched on topics of public concern. Early movies were crude by modern standards, filmed in black and white with no sound, and most running just a few minutes in length. One of the earliest full-length motion pictures was 1915's *The Birth of a Nation*, a three-hour epic story of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Directed by cinema pioneer D.W. Griffith, the film became a national sensation but also helped inspire a new wave of racism in America.



The gruesome spectacle of lynchings became a favorite tool of racial intimidation—even into the early twentieth century. Lynch mobs killed thousands of innocent Blacks and some Whites too.

The Birth of a Nation, based on a novel entitled *The Clansman*, presented the Civil War and Reconstruction eras through a distorted lens of White supremacy. It depicted the antebellum South as a paradise for slaves, who happily toiled for their masters. In postwar scenes, however, newly freed Black men were depicted as ignorant, unruly thugs who lusted after White women and disrespected the White men that had once controlled their lives. The film ended with images of Klan members garbed in white robes setting crosses aflame. The clear message was that they were saving the South from the Black race.

The Birth of a Nation was a box-office hit. It also brought the KKK once more to the forefront of American racism. Inspired by the film, William J. Simmons, a Georgia minister, revived the original KKK, naming himself “Imperial Wizard.” In November 1915 Simmons led his group of fifteen Klansmen to Stone Mountain near Atlanta. There they erected a burning cross to symbolize the rebirth

Desegregating the Military

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii brought the United States into World War II in 1941. At the time, only about four thousand Black Americans were serving in the armed forces. By the end of the war in 1945, that number had grown to more than 1 million African Americans in uniform.

Harry S. Truman succeeded President Franklin D. Roosevelt upon Roosevelt's death in 1945. As a senator in 1940, Truman had made his views on racism known. "I believe in the brotherhood of man," he stated, "not merely the brotherhood of white men but the brotherhood of all men before the law." In 1946 Truman created the President's Committee on Civil Rights to examine the status of prejudice in America. The committee reported that the US military had a poor record concerning the treatment of minorities in uniform and recommended that the armed forces be desegregated. On July 26, 1948, Truman issued Executive Order 9981, banning segregation in the armed services, and a new committee was formed to carry out Truman's order. Although the navy and air force readily complied, the army remained segregated until the Korean War of 1950 to 1953.

Quoted in David McCullough, *Truman*. Simon & Schuster, 1992, p. 247.

of the KKK. "Under a blazing, fiery torch," said Simmons, "the Invisible Empire was called from its slumber of half a century to take up a new task and fulfill a new mission for humanity's good."²³ That new mission was keeping White supremacy alive and powerful. By 1921 the KKK boasted nearly one hundred thousand members.

Although less violent than the original KKK, whippings, beatings, and lynchings still occurred. Blacks were not the only targets of the revived Klan: Jews, Catholics, and immigrants were added to the KKK's list of enemies. Instead of holding secret meetings, the new Klan embraced public displays that included huge parades, outdoor carnivals, and stirring speeches. Newspaper advertisements solicited new members, and many who would never think of joining nevertheless agreed with the Klan's racist philosophy.

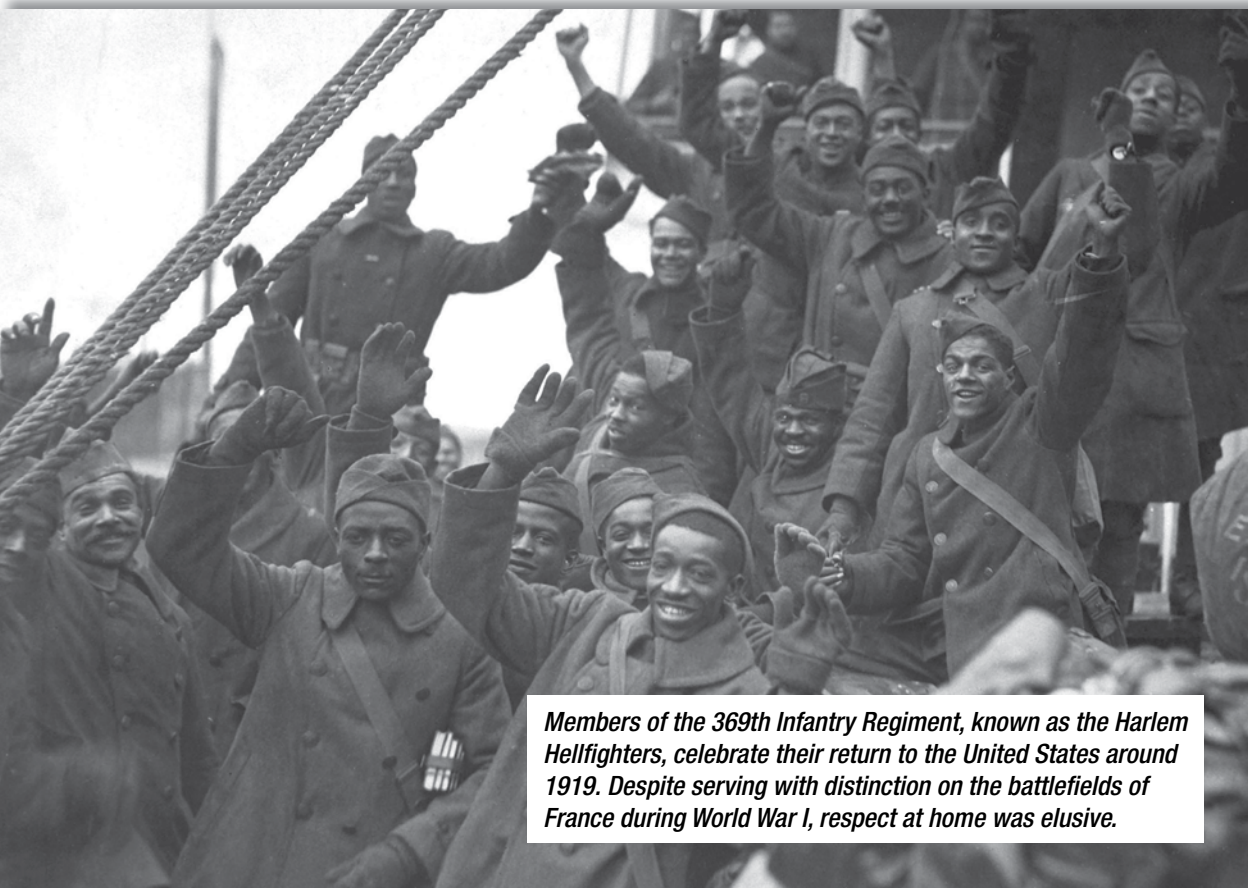
"Under a blazing, fiery torch the Invisible Empire [of the KKK] was called from its slumber of half a century to take up a new task and fulfill a new mission for humanity's good."²³

—KKK Imperial Wizard William J. Simmons

War and Racism

While enthusiasm for *The Birth of a Nation* swept the United States, across the Atlantic Europe was embroiled in a conflict known as the Great War, with France and its allies fighting against nations allied with Germany. When the United States entered the war in 1917, Blacks saw an opportunity to earn the respect of White America by joining the military. Some 380,000 Black Americans eventually served during the war. The US military at the time was segregated. The navy allowed Blacks to perform only unskilled tasks, and the marines barred them from joining altogether. Blacks could also serve in segregated units of the army. One especially honored Black regiment, the 369th Infantry, known as the Harlem Hellfighters, fought courageously on the battlefields of France.

When the war ended in 1918, American troops were hailed as heroes as they returned from Europe. Despite the bravery of Black soldiers during the war, however, homecoming for them



Members of the 369th Infantry Regiment, known as the Harlem Hellfighters, celebrate their return to the United States around 1919. Despite serving with distinction on the battlefields of France during World War I, respect at home was elusive.

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13. Abraham Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address," Avalon Project. www.avalon.law.yale.edu.
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ORGANIZATIONS AND WEBSITES

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

www.aclu.org

The ACLU works to preserve the constitutional rights of all Americans through lobbying and litigation. Its website includes information on Supreme Court cases, an Action Center for local activism, and multimedia presentations about the ACLU's areas of concern.

History of Race in America, Smithsonian

www.smithsonianmag.com

This website is a compendium of resources on the history of American racism. It includes links to articles, videos, podcasts, and other resources that illuminate the problem of racial bias, from the earliest slaves to athletes taking a knee in protest.

Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror, Equal Justice Initiative

<https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org>

This report covers the history of lynching from its earliest incidents to its legacy, which has had a powerful effect on Blacks and Whites alike. It includes historical illustrations and photographs, lynching statistics by state, and graphic and disturbing descriptions of the horror of lynching.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

www.naACP.org

The NAACP fights against race-based discrimination in all areas of society: education, policing, housing, and business. With 2 million members, the organization supports grassroots activism for social justice. The NAACP website offers a resource library and current news about civil rights.

Segregation in America, Equal Justice Initiative

<https://segregationinamerica.eji.org>

This website explores the spread of racial bigotry in the United States. It includes information on activities of the civil rights era, profiles of segregationists, and information on the iconography of White supremacy. Videos document the civil rights era.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Books

Michael Eric Dyson, *Long Time Coming: Reckoning with Race in America*. New York: St. Martin's, 2020.

Patrisse Khan-Cullors and asha bandelle, *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Story of Black Lives Matter and the Power to Change the World*. New York: Wednesday, 2020.

Kenrya Rankin, *Words of Change: Anti-racism: Powerful Voices, Inspiring Ideas*. Seattle, WA: Spruce, 2020.

Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped (for Kids): Racism, Antiracism, and You*. New York: Little, Brown, 2021.

Rachel Marie-Grane Williams, *Elegy for Mary Turner: An Illustrated Account of a Lynching*. New York: Verso, 2021.

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Shannon Luibbrand, "How a Death in Ferguson Sparked a Movement in America," CBS News, August 7, 2015. www.cbsnews.com.

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