

"Should I Sacrifice to Live 'Half-American?'"

GRADES 9-12



Overview

This activity is geared toward participants in grades 9-12. The estimated amount of time to deliver this lesson is 75 minutes.

Throughout the twentieth century, Black service members were asked to fight in the U.S. military despite simultaneously waging a war against systemic racism at home.

Disenfranchisement, discrimination in employment and property ownership and segregated schools were just some of the systems in place relegating Black Americans to second-class citizen status. The military promised an escape from poverty, GI Bill benefits and a place to work side-by-side equally with other races.

In this lesson, however, participants will use primary sources to understand how systemic inequality keeps many groups in the United States from accessing all of the rights afforded to them as citizens.



Objective

Participants will be able to analyze the ways that systemic inequality in the United States affected Black Americans who were expected to fight for a country who did not afford them full citizenship rights.



Materials

- "Should I Sacrifice to Live Half-American?" by James G Thompson
- Chart paper and markers/sticky notes
- Oral history compilation of Henry Mouzon



Inquiry

Pose the following questions:

- What are the rights and responsibilities of a citizen of the United States?
- Can you think of a time in United States history when a group of people have been denied all of the rights of a citizen?

Share James Thompson's letter, "Should I Sacrifice to Live 'Half-American?'" Share context of the letter and its author. Discuss the following questions:

- What does Thompson mean by the phrase "Half-American?"
- What are the "full citizenship rights" that Thompson is referencing?
- What would it mean to Thompson to be fully American? What would need to change in the lives of Black Americans?

Provide background content on the Double V Campaign.



Investigation

Listen to or read transcripts of the [oral history](#) from Henry Mouzon. Mouzon served in the US Navy as a steward during World War II. He served on USS *Intrepid*, and because of the restrictions at the time, was only allowed to work in the steward's branch. However, when *Intrepid* was under attack, Mouzon and several other Black stewards were asked to train as gunners. Ask participants to respond to the following questions:

- How did Mouzon feel about his status in the Navy?
- How did the social climate of the United States outside of the Navy affect Mouzon's experience in the Navy?

Share James Thompson's letter, "Should I Sacrifice to live 'Half-American'?"

- How did Mouzon's experience in the Navy exemplify Thompson's notion of living "Half-American?"



Activity

Silent Discussion

Write each of the following questions on a piece of chart paper and hang them up in different spots in the room. Hold a silent discussion: give participants time to walk around the room, silently, and respond to the questions.

- What structures exist that allow for a 'half-American' status?
- Why do barriers to being fully American exist?
- What group(s) of people are still facing barriers to being full Americans?

When the time is finished, review the answers and discuss each question. Allow participants to discuss who they believe is still fighting for civil rights, why they are fighting, and what it would take for all people to be fully American in the United States.



Lesson Connection

For more primary sources, oral histories, and content on systemic inequality during before and during the civil rights movement, see our lesson: **Consequences of the GI Bill.**



Background

Citizenship

Black Americans were granted full citizenship in the United States well before World War II. The military had also established a process by which foreign nationals serving in the military could obtain US citizenship after a certain amount of time. All citizens in the 1940s had the right to vote, to a fair trial, to run for office and to attend school. They were also obligated to serve on a jury, pay taxes, and, at times, serve in the military. Despite being promised these rights and obligations,

among many others, Black Americans were stuck in a second-class citizenship status. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States was a campaign against second-class citizenship.

A second class citizen is a person who is systematically discriminated against within a nation despite technically being a citizen. It is not a legal status, but an informal category of people within a state. Black Americans technically had all of the rights listed above, and many more. However, they fought disenfranchisement, restrictions on marriage, housing, education and limits on employment. Jim Crow laws, which legalized racial segregation, discriminatory voting practices, and overt racism, prevented Black Americans from accessing public services, loans, schools and many other institutions.

"Should I Sacrifice to Live 'Half-American?'"

The Pittsburgh Courier newspaper, founded in 1907, had long used its voice to champion the rights of Black Americans. The newspaper toned down its content on racial discrimination for a while, but on January 31, 1942, just weeks after the U.S. declared war on Japan and Germany after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Courier published a letter from 26-year-old James G. Thompson, a defense worker in Wichita, Kansas. Like most Black war workers at the time, Thompson could not work on the factory floor of the aircraft manufacturing company where he was employed. He was confined to working in the factory cafeteria.

Thompson's letter, "Should I Sacrifice to Live 'Half-American?'" challenged the lofty rhetoric of U.S. War aims, contrasting them to the actual treatment of one tenth of its population, the African Americans. At the end of his letter, Thompson reminded his readers that the V for victory sign was being displayed prominently across the U.S. and among its allies, calling for victory over tyranny, slavery and aggression as represented by the aims of the Axis Powers: Germany, Italy and Japan.

Thompson called for adopting the "double VV for a double victory" sign, with the first V standing for victory of enemies from without and the second V for victory over enemies within, meaning those in the United States who limit the freedoms of Black Americans. Even with the military's need for more people, military policies toward Black service members were a misuse of human resources. There existed a persistent racist idea in the military that Black sailors were less capable.



Additional Resources/References

For information on Double Victory and the Civil Rights Movement:

<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/events-african-american-history/the-double-v-campaign-1942-1945/>

<https://www.adl.org/resources/background/civil-rights-movement>

<https://www.history.com/news/qi-bill-black-wwii-veterans-benefits>



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Documents and Images

James G. Thompson, "Should I Sacrifice to Live 'Half-American?'" Pittsburgh Courier, January 31, 1942.

Should I Sacrifice To Live 'Half-American?'

Suggest Double VV for Double Victory Against Axis Forces and Ugly Prejudices on the Home Front.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: A young man, confused and befuddled by all of this double talk about democracy and the defense of our way of life, is asking, like other young Negroes, some very pertinent questions. We reprint this letter in full because it is symbolic.)

DEAR EDITOR:

Like all true Americans, my greatest desire at this time, this crucial point of our history; is a desire for a complete victory over the forces of evil, which threaten our existence today. Behind that desire is also a desire to serve, this, my country, in the most advantageous way.

Most of our leaders are suggesting that we sacrifice every other ambition to the paramount one, victory. With this I agree; but I also wonder if another victory could not be achieved at the same time. After all the things that beset the world now are basically the same things which upset the equilibrium of nations internally, states, counties, cities, homes and even the individual.

Being an American of dark complexion and some 26 years, these questions flash through my mind: "Should I sacrifice my life to live, half American?" "Will things be better for the next generation in the peace to follow?" "Would it be demanding too much to demand full citizenship rights in exchange for the sacrificing of my life? Is the kind of America I know worth defending? Will America be a true and pure democracy after this war? Will Colored Americans suffer still the indignities that have been heaped upon them in the past? These and other questions need answering; I want to know, and I believe every colored American, who is thinking, wants to know.



Jas. G. Thompson

This may be the wrong time to broach such subjects, but haven't all good things obtained by men been secured through sacrifice during just such times of strife.

I suggest that while we keep defense and victory in the forefront that we don't lose sight of our fight for true democracy at home.

The V for victory sign is being displayed prominently in all so-called democratic countries which are fighting for victory over aggression, slavery and tyranny. If this V sign means that to those now engaged in this great conflict then let us colored Americans adopt the double VV for a double victory. The first V for victory over our enemies from without, the second V for victory over our enemies from within. For surely those who perpetrate these ugly prejudices here are seeking to destroy our democratic form of government just as surely as the Axis forces.

This should not and would not lessen our efforts to bring this conflict to a successful conclusion; but should and would make us stronger to resist these evil forces which threaten us. America could become united as never before and become truly the home of democracy.

In way of an answer to the foregoing questions in a preceding paragraph I might say that there is no doubt that this country is worth defending; things will be different for the next generation; colored Americans will come into their own, and America will eventually become the true democracy it was designed to be. These things will become a reality in time; but not through any relaxation of the efforts to secure them.

In conclusion let me say that though these questions often permeate my mind, I love America and am willing to die for the America I know will someday become a reality.

JAMES G. THOMPSON

"Should I Sacrifice to Live 'Half-American?'"

Credit: Pittsburgh Courier

Transcript:

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James G. Thompson