

Grade Level Secondary

Disciplines Social Studies

Objectives

The students will be able to:

1. define how merit leads to success in a free society.
2. discern how to effectuate change.
3. explain a portion of America’s expanding franchise.
4. articulate whether opportunities come through luck or through planning.

Key Terms

Aviation- The operation of aircraft.

Barnstorm- To appear at county fairs and carnivals in exhibitions of stunt flying and parachute jumping.

Cognitive

Dissonance- The state of simultaneously holding two ideas that were in direct contradiction of one another.

Eugenics- A set of beliefs and practices that aim to improve the genetic quality of a human population, historically by excluding people and groups judged to be inferior and promoting those judged to be superior.

Merit- The qualities or actions that constitute the basis of one's deserts.

Opportunity- A favorable or advantageous circumstance or combination of circumstances; A chance for progress or advancement, as in a career.

Essential Questions

- Does persistence bring opportunities?
- Do people make their own opportunities?
- Should students look to earlier heroes as models for success.
- How can patriotism serve as motivation for heroics and success?

Background (Handout #1)

Early 20th century America was mired in what they believed to be the “scientific fact” that evolution had placed certain races above others. There was a hierarchy of races and a hierarchy of nationalities (or ethnic groups) within each race. To most “educated” Americans, eugenics was a “settled science,” studied and taught in Harvard, Yale, Oxford, Cambridge, and other major universities. The American political elite liked to state that Americans of an Anglo-Saxon (English) ancestry were the superior race. President Woodrow Wilson even believed that non-Anglo-Saxons, or at least nonwhites should not be treated as equals. He stated that giving African Americans the right to vote was “... the foundation of every evil in this country.” In contrast, Wilson’s

fellow progressive but political foe, Theodore Roosevelt, though believing in Anglo-Saxon supremacy, also held a strong traditional American commitment to meritocracy. After entertaining Booker T. Washington at the White House, he wrote: “The only wise and honorable and Christian thing to do is to treat each black man and each white man strictly on his merits as a man, giving him no more and no less than he shows himself worthy to have. . .”

This is the world early 20th century African American aviators had to endure. They were subject to vile racial repression; yet, there was always the hope of the Founding generations’ revolutionary belief in meritocracy. What seemed like societal “cognitive dissonance,” (the state of simultaneously holding two ideas that were in direct contradiction of one another) in fact, offered hope to African Americans that the United States would continue to evolve its expansion of civil, political, and social rights for all citizens.

Black aviators of the early twentieth-century, longed for the chance to contribute to the upcoming war against two extremely racist countries, Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan that threatened the existing liberal world order in the West. Unfortunately, the possibility of any salient contribution initially looked bleak. Fortunately for the would-be U.S. airmen, African American pioneers, both male and female, cleared paths for President Franklin Roosevelt’s willingness to fund what was then seen only as an experiment.

Looking at American history, we need to see things in context of their times, especially compared to earlier times and to other nations at the time of events studied. The beginning of the United States was revolutionary. For the first time they established a nation rooted in the belief that humans have rights from nature and from God that predate government. Their rights are inherent just based on their existing as human beings. The government’s only purpose was to protect those natural rights. They said all men were equal and the government must protect all men equally. This sounds strange to us today looking back on the way society treated different peoples. Woman, Blacks, Catholics, Jews, Natives, etc. did not enjoy equal protection throughout U. S. history. The Founders were primarily talking about there would be no distinction between a nobility and the common people, though many saw it applying to all men and women in theory. As history moved forward, more and more people believed those natural rights must apply to them also. A small but growing group of women started to call for more rights by the mid-19th century. Blacks and many whites of good will started to call for the end of slavery and equal rights for Black men. Immigrants came over and many times faced extreme resistance and tumultuous violence launched on ethnic communities, churches, and convents. Courageously, they too demanded their rights to be honored. Opponents had to relent as they realized their nation was founded on the protection of these rights for all, and all would have to eventually include, nonlandowners, Irish Catholic immigrants, women, Jews, Blacks, etc. The American Revolution’s principles continued to resonate and one of its key principles was equality of opportunity. Those who worked hard, and

smart deserved the fruits of their labor. For many, it was not always easy for them to admit all people deserve levels of income, status, and power commensurate with the merit they had achieved. Nevertheless, the general population gradually accepted this concept would expand and expand to cover more and more peoples. Often those who merited reward had to fight extremely hard to force those expansions and break through barriers of resistance, often seen in most human societies.

As Abraham Lincoln said at Gettysburg, *Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.* He pointed out that all those Union men who had died at Gettysburg, died protecting those principles. Liberty and equality were part of the American DNA, and every man and woman had the right to pursue their potential. Lincoln explicated that other men at that time, such as leaders in the Confederacy, did not have the right to deny Blacks their liberty or their equality. Lincoln rededicated the American people to those revolutionary principles, and he said it was really those men who had sacrificed on that battlefield who had rededicated the nation to the American Revolution. He continued, *It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*

As we know, the United States had to keep working to fulfill the goals of the American Revolution, and it took time and will continue to take time to further develop those principles.

Central to these following stories and the story of the Tuskegee Airman is that men and women worked to overcome arduous obstacles and became highly successful models for all Americans. They all overcame constructed impediments because of their race and/or sex. During this lesson, you will read the stories of these heroes and the heroes among the Tuskegee Airmen. You will determine what they did to overcome obstacles and become successful become inspirations to others and merit honor.

Procedures

- I. The teacher, coach, guide will divide the class into four groups.
 - a. Emory Malick (Handout #2)
 - b. Bessie Coleman (Handout #3)
 - c. James Banning (Handout #4)
 - d. Willa Brown (Handout #5)
- II. Each group will first read the background handout (#1).

- III. They will then read their assigned person's brief bio (using Handouts 2-5).
- IV. Then, they will further research their person online to see what obstacles he or she faced in pursuit of his or her goals.
- V. They will research the solutions their person devised to overcome the obstacles.
- VI. Each group will pick two presenters.
 - a. The groups' presenters will prepare a 3½ to 4-minute panel presentation about their person.
 - b. The presentation will provide:
 - i. A brief introduction of the person
 - ii. The obstacles he or she faced
 - iii. The solutions he or she devised to overcome the obstacles.
- VII. The non-presenters in each group will create a PowerPoint that will help the presenters with their presentations.
- VIII. All students will watch the [Tuskegee Airman video](#).
 - a. They will list the obstacles faced by those organizing the school and the obstacles faced by the students and airmen.
 - b. They will then list the solutions the organizers and the Airman devised to overcome obstacles.
- IX. Each group will review their notes from the video.
 - a. They will write where their person may have contributed to the creation and success of the Airman.
 - i. Once they arrive at conclusions and write their response, the presenters will write the group's conclusion to the presentations.
 1. The PowerPoint creators will add the conclusions to the group's PowerPoints.
 - ii. Their conclusions will include the similar obstacles the Tuskegee Airmen faced and their solutions.
- X. Each group will make sure they have a full presentation and the PowerPoint coincides with the oral presentation.
- XI. The group presenters will sit at a panel table (or desks lined as such) for the presentation.

- XII. Each group will present their person and that person's contribution to the Tuskegee Airmen.
 - a. The presentations will be videoed (phone video will do).
- XIII. Once all four groups have presented, the groups will look to create a master video of their presentations, using the video from the presentations and the PowerPoints.
- XIV. The master video can be posted as a Podcast, or on YouTube or on the schools' own platform.