

## **Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Black Men and Women Aviators: Introduction (Handout #1)**

Early 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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-19<sup>th</sup> 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, non-landowners, 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.