

The Tuskegee Airmen Project

Celebrating African-American heroism, an end to segregation in the military, and examining how the lessons of the past apply to issues of war, peace, patriotism, dissent, and social justice in the United States today.



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How To Use: Every class is different and teacher needs may vary. While the contents of this lesson-plan assume a multi-day program leading to a series of student presentations, you may choose to utilize these materials for a single class period or up to three weeks of classes.

Tuskegee Airmen Day



Overview: This lesson plan provides a variety of ways in which students will learn about the heroic service of a group of African American pilots known as the Tuskegee airmen. After reading a short essay and several group discussions, the students will be divided into Internet researchers, lawyers, artists / protesters, poets / rappers, and opinion writers and work on assignments which are due on "Tuskegee Airmen Day," when all students will be presenting the results of their work.

This project allows you to cover a wide range of subjects including the role of African-Americans in World War II, American participation in the war against Mexico, the Korean War, and the 2003 Iraq war, discrimination against African-Americans including segregation, Presidential Executive Orders (integrating the armed forces and don't ask don't tell), and issues concerning patriotism and political dissent.

The project utilizes a variety of learning modes and allows students to express themselves through discussion, writing, art, poetry, and music. It also requires students to research information through the Internet or library and report on the results of their findings. That research and reporting provide the foundation for discussion questions where students apply critical thinking skills. Class time is divided between full-class, small-group, and individual activities.

Teacher Preparation: While most of the information you need to carry out this project is contained in this document, you may want to do further research into the history of African-Americans in the military, events leading up to America's entry into the following wars: Mexico, World War II, the Korean War, and the Iraq conflict. Additionally, you may want additional preparation to lead class discussions, helping students explore their own thinking on the issues raised in this project, including racial segregation, anti-gay discrimination, good and bad reasons for going to war, and the balance between patriotism and political dissent.

Teacher / Student Internet Research:

- <http://history.acusd.edu/gen/WW2Timeline/Tuskegee.html>
- <http://tuskegeearmen.org/>
- <http://www.coax.net/people/lwf/ww2.htm>
- http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html/military_history.html
- <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2003/08/18/ED77642.DTL>

Standards Mapping: This program is mapped into the following Federal (NCSS) and State educational standards.

NCSS Standard:

- I.e. Articulate the implications of cultural diversity, as well as cohesion, within and across groups.
- II.d. Compare and contrast different stories or accounts about past events, people, places, or situations, identifying how they contribute to our understanding of the past.
- VI. Power, Authority, and Governance -- Experiences that provide for the study of how people create and change structures of power, authority, and governance.
 - VI.h. Explain and apply ideas, theories, and modes of inquiry drawn from political science to the examination of persistent issues and social programs.
 - VI.i. Evaluate the extent to which governments achieve their stated ideals and policies at home and abroad.
 - VI.j. Prepare a public policy paper and present and defend it before an appropriate forum in school or community.
- IX.e. Analyze the relationships and tensions between national sovereignty and global interests, in matters such as territory, economic development, nuclear and other weapons, use of natural resources, and human rights concerns.
- X.j. Examine strategies designed to strengthen the "common good", which consider a range of options for citizen action.

California Social Studies Standard:

- 10.10. Students analyze instances of nation-building in the contemporary world in at least two of the following regions or countries: the Middle East, Africa, Mexico and other parts of Latin America, and China. (This lesson provides one example of nation building – Iraq)
- 10.10.3 Discuss the important trends in the regions today and whether they appear to serve the cause of individual freedom and democracy.
- 11.7 Students analyze America's participation in World War II.
 - 11.7.3 Identify the roles and sacrifices of individual American soldiers, as well as the unique contributions of the special fighting forces (e.g., the Tuskegee Airmen, the 442nd Regimental Combat team, the Navajo Code Talkers).
- 11.10.1 Explain how demands of African Americans helped produce a stimulus for civil rights, including President Roosevelt's ban on racial discrimination in defense industries in 1941, and how African Americans' service in World War II produced a stimulus for President Truman's decision to end segregation in the armed forces in 1948.

Project Outline: Below is a suggested structure and timeline for bringing this program to life in your classroom. Your schedule and structure may require an alternative approach, more time, or less time. You may choose to do only one or a few of the activities or simply use the materials in your own way.

Day One

1. 5-minutes to settle down and take role and introduce the Tuskegee project
2. 15-minutes for students to read the story (or class read-aloud and discussion)
3. 10-minutes discussing the new vocabulary in the story
 - Tarmac, hue, plight, compatriot, court martial, decoration, famine, pestilence, posthumous, quagmire, and squadron (plus other words students identify as new)
4. 10-minutes discussing general student reaction to the story
5. Break students into three groups for homework assignment (This can also be an in-class activity if students have access to a lab/library and you prefer having done during class time instead of as homework assignment. Handouts available in case research is not optimal for your group.)
 - a. Using the Internet or books, answer the following questions: Who is Yancee Williams and how did he contribute to the Tuskegee story? Which President signed Executive Order 9981 and what did that order do? What percentage of today's military enlisted force is made up of African-Americans? What does the phrase *unit cohesion* mean?
 - b. Using the Internet or books or knowledge based on past lessons, describe in one paragraph a defining moment which sparked United States involvement in WWII, the Korean war and the second war in Iraq in 2003.
 - c. Using the Internet or books or knowledge based on past lessons, describe in two to three paragraphs the current military's "Don't Ask Don't Tell" rules.

Day Two

1. 5-minutes to settle down and take role
2. 15-minutes for teacher to call on members of each group to report on their research homework.
3. 20-minutes discussing (one or more of) the following discussion questions with the entire class
 - a. *Minorities make up 25.2% of America's population according to the 2000 census. Some say that the large number of minorities (38% of overall enlisted force in 2003) making up today's military is in and of itself a form of racism. What is your opinion of that concept (is it racism, if so why, is it not, if so why not)?*
 - b. *Today, homosexuals are barred from openly serving in the military. Given that unit cohesion was given as one rationale for discriminating against blacks prior to 1950, and against gays today, compare and contrast the "don't ask don't tell" rules with the history of discrimination against black Americans in the armed forces.*
 - c. *If someone you love is in the military, how would comments like those made by Jimmie against the Iraq war make you feel? How can you discuss different opinions about the war while still showing respect for those who serve in our armed forces and those who love them?*

- d. *What are the differences between the defining moments sparking United States participation in WWII, the Korean War and the Iraq war? With these in mind, what might make Jimmie Atchison take his stand against the Iraq war?*

NOTE: These discussion questions could be used for additional discussion days or be assigned as essays for homework and read aloud in class or compiled into a student reader.

Day Three

1. 5-minutes to settle down and take role
2. 10-minutes explaining the activities for Tuskegee Day and how each student will be working on a project concerning this story. Have the students choose their role for this project as one of the following:
 - a. Lawyer (prosecution or defense)
 - b. Poet
 - c. Rap artist or singer
 - d. Opinion writer
 - e. Protester
 - f. Poster Artist

NOTE: Depending on your needs and students, you may choose to use only one or a few of these roles and/or allow students to work together in small groups. Choose what works best.

3. 20-minutes, as a group activity, have the students determine the criteria for grades on their participation in the activities and discuss how the students will present the results of their work.
4. 10-minutes to review resources available for completing the activities and clarify any issues about the activities and the results you are hoping to see.

Day Four

1. 5-minutes to settle down and take role
2. Students work on their projects with teacher offering assistance, ideas, and support.

NOTE: You may choose not to dedicate a class day to this, instead assigning it as homework.

Day Five

Tuskegee Airmen Day



On this day, you will have the students present the results of their work through legal summations, poetry, rap and song, reading of letters to the editor, and showing / discussing posters and protest signs.

Optionally, these presentations can be given to a broader audience, being especially appropriate for Black History Month. Several good movies (videos and DVDs) are available which dramatically tell the story of the Tuskegee Airmen. Tuskegee veterans may be available to present at your school. Check the web site listed as student reference for details.

Above is a painting by Edward Clay Wright Jr., used with the permission of the Black Heritage Gallery. Edward Clay Wright began his career as an illustrator and graphic artist in the Denver, Colorado area. He has become recognized as a leading African-American artist in the Northwest. His work has been shown in a variety of galleries as well as commissioned by the city of Denver for numerous specialty designs. One of his many creations is an exclusive line called "The Heritage Series" which depicts African-American historical greats. Clay works primarily in airbrush, oils and acrylics. The poster is available for purchase at www.blackheritagegallery.com

A Tuskegee Airman's Cry for Peace

By Craig Wiesner

During my first shivering days in Basic Training in 1979, on those cold Lackland Air Force Base Texas mornings, it was quite evident that the differences between the Black, Hispanic, Native-American, Asian, and Caucasian airmen standing on the tarmac would be in our acts, not our ethnicity. Our hair shaved, our clothes identical, our first names changed from those our parents had given us to a uniform "airman," the only differentiating identity left was our color. Even that was to be ignored as we all adopted our new hue, the Air Force blue. No, color would not matter here, only deeds. The most respected of deeds were those that led to the success of our squadron, not the individual. Such was the lesson the Air Force learned from the Tuskegee Airmen during WWII.

Trained at Tuskegee Air Field, these African-American airmen flew fighter escort missions. As white crews flew planes loaded with bombs destined for enemy targets, the Tuskegee airmen flew in front, on the side, and at the rear of each bomber to protect it from enemy planes trying to shoot it down before it reached enemy targets.

The Tuskegee airmen fought two enemies, those against whom we were waging war, and their own American compatriots, whose prejudice and discrimination provided a daily reminder that the land of the free and the home of the brave were still a land and home bitterly divided. Still, these brave black pilots were so ferocious in protecting white-only bomber crews that enemy planes seeing the Tuskegee escorts would run for cover, giving the United States a clear path to enemy targets on the ground. Not a single white crewman died while the Tuskegees protected them. Hundreds of decorations are testimony to Tuskegee bravery.

In August of 2003, one of those brave Tuskegee pilots spoke out against the Iraq war. According to newspaper columnist Ruth Rosen, Jimmie Atchison has a daughter flying intelligence missions over Iraq. Jimmie says it is an "oil-oriented war" led by a "warmongering" president. He also believes "the government has shortchanged the military troops" by sending too few soldiers for an occupation. "As a result," he says, "some of the soldiers don't trust what their leaders tell them, especially what the war is about or when they're going to go home."

Reading Jimmie's words, memories of my own Air Force days came flooding back. Duty, honor, and country were the words we chanted as we marched from place to place, with stories of the many heroes from the Air Force's past shared with us each day. The Tuskegee Airmen were such heroes but in their time, heroism wasn't enough.

One afternoon when a group of Tuskegees returned from a dangerous mission through enemy skies, they decided to celebrate in the Officer's Club. Despite the hundreds of white pilot's lives these men protected in the air, their presence would not be tolerated by white officers on the ground. The Tuskegee airmen walked into the Officer's Club in violation of the white-only segregation rule, and were arrested. One eventually received a court martial. The incident, in the end, led to the dismantling of white only military facilities. Jimmie and his fellow pilots had helped the United States not only win WWII, but their contribution to that war effort hastened the end of segregation throughout America.

Jimmie defended America again when North Koreans swarmed across the 38th parallel. Why was Jimmie ready to fight for his country 50 years ago, but so critical of the war against Iraq now in 2003?

As a fellow veteran, I know it takes a real crisis of faith to criticize our government's policies, especially when our loved ones are risking their lives on foreign soil. As President U.S. Grant said about the war against Mexico, it would be *"better to advocate war, pestilence, and famine than to act as an obstructionist to a war that has already begun. The most favorable posthumous history the stay-at-home traitor can hope for is oblivion."*

Such public criticism against an ongoing war requires certainty and bravery, much the same as it did for those black pilots to demand access to the white-only Officers Club. Recently a new organization called *Military Families Speak Out* formed with a mission to bring our troops home from Iraq. Fearing quagmire like we faced in Viet Nam and a mounting death toll already exceeding the number of casualties during the main campaign to remove the Iraqi regime, these families want their loved ones brought home as quickly as possible. The key message they strive to make clear is that they support our troops 100% but don't support the continuation of this war. At a recent Veterans for Peace conference I attended, one protest sign summed up the way many people feel "The President says 'bring em on' and I say 'Bring Them HOME!'" There are those who say that such sentiments and public criticism are unpatriotic, even treasonous. I disagree. Dissent in the face of injustice, whether it means walking into a whites-only Officer's Club or standing outside the White House with a protest sign, are what make American great. I believe that it is time to bring our troops home from Iraq, allowing a UN peacekeeping force to help get the new Iraqi government started.

When we do bring our troops home, now or later, we must remember that regardless of our opinion of any war, our troops deserve respect and honor for the sacrifices they make on our behalf. After Viet Nam, some Americans treated returning troops very badly, and that legacy of mistreatment is clearly remembered any time war protesters march in our streets today. Memories of protesters spitting on American soldiers and calling them baby-killers are hard to erase.

Despite differing opinions on this war against Iraq, it is good to remember that when our troops do come home this time, there won't be any doors or water fountains marked "Whites Only," reminding us all that the enduring values of freedom and equality are what make America worth defending, even if it means standing on a chilly tarmac at 5:00 in the morning, chanting "*Duty, Honor and Country*," or trudging through 120 degree heat in the desert, with an enemy that doesn't care what color you are, but knows you represent the red, white and blue. 24 years after my first shivering and shaking day in the Air Force, I find myself once again standing side by side with someone a different color than me, and remembering that it is our duty to protect the honor of our country and speak out for the good of the nation, no matter what the cost to the individual. You go Jimmie! (And thanks Ruth Rosen!)

About the author: Craig Wiesner is a decorated United States Air Force veteran, who served as a Korean linguist and military foreign language instructor at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. Craig was the John L. Levitow Honor Graduate from the United States Air Force NCO Academy Leadership School in 1985. Craig is a member of Veterans for Peace and works with a variety of organizations promoting peace and social justice causes. He can frequently be heard on KQED, the San Francisco National Public Radio affiliate, where he is a contributor to the daily *Perspective* series. Craig is the co-founder of ReachAndTeach, a provider of K-12 educational products as catalysts for a more peaceful and just tomorrow.

Student Activities and Resources

Activities:

1. Write a poem, rap or song about the Tuskegee airmen.
2. You are a trial lawyer, preparing the (5 minute) summation of your case against the Tuskegee airman who went into the Officer's Club. You are trying to convict him for breaking military law. What arguments would you use to justify his exclusion from the club? Write that summation and be prepared to present it during class.
3. You are a trial lawyer for the defense in the same case (above). Prepare your own 5-minute summation defending his right to walk into that club. Write that summation and be prepared to present it during class.
4. Create a poster, combining art and words, commemorating the heroism of the Tuskegee Airmen. Be prepared to show it during class, explain why you included each element of the poster, and answer questions about the poster from other students.
5. Create a protest sign (in support of the accused) that you would hold outside the courtroom where the Tuskegee Airman who entered the Officers Club was tried. Be prepared to show it during class, explain why you included what you did, and answer questions about it from other students.
6. Write a letter to the editor, quoting Jimmie's comments about the Iraq war, and voice your support of or argument against what Jimmie said. Be prepared to read it during class and answer questions about it from other students.

Student Internet Research:

- <http://history.acusd.edu/gen/WW2Timeline/Tuskegee.html>
- <http://tuskegeearmen.org/>
- <http://www.coax.net/people/lwf/ww2.htm>
- http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html/military_history.html
- <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2003/08/18/ED77642.DTL>

If you don't find enough information on the sites listed above or other sites linked to from within them, go to www.google.com and try searching for words and phrases including:

- A. Tuskegee
- B. African-American and WWII
- C. Don't Ask Don't Tell
- D. Segregation
- E. Korean War
- F. Iraq
- G. Segregation

Bonus Questions: What other famous story concerning African-Americans includes a reference to the name "Tuskegee?" Why was President Grant opposed to the war against Mexico?

Evaluation Criteria for _____ (fill in role)

Given a possible 100 points for completion of this activity, select three criteria which will be used to judge each student's performance, define each, and assign point values.

First Criteria:

Number of Points:

Details:

Second Criteria

Number of Points:

Details:

Third Criteria

Number of Points:

Details:

Student Peer Grading Sheet

Your teacher will review the three grading criteria for the activity. This is your opportunity to evaluate your peers and help assign a grade for the work they have done on this project.

Student Name:
Student Role:
Criteria One Description:
Criteria One Possible Points:
Criteria One Score (your opinion):
Criteria Two Description:
Criteria Two Possible Points:
Criteria Two Score (your opinion):
Criteria Three Description:
Criteria Three Possible Points:
Criteria Three Score (your opinion):
General Comments:
Your Name (optional):

Answers to Research Questions

Who is Yancee Williams and how did he contribute to the Tuskegee story?

According to MSgt Linda E Brandon of the Air Force Times:

One day after Yancy Williams, a student at Howard University, sued the government to be accepted as an aviation cadet, the War Department announced it was going to accept applications from black cadets for aviation cadet pilot training and eventually form a black flying unit.

"We proved that the antidote to racism is excellence in performance," said retired Lt. Col. Herbert E. Carter, who started his military career as a pilot and maintenance officer with the 99th Fighter Squadron. *"Can you imagine," asked Carter, "with the war clouds as heavy as they were over Europe, a citizen of the United States having to sue his government to be accepted to train so he could fly and fight and die for his country?" The government expected the experiment to fail and end the issue, said Carter. "The mistake they made was that they forgot to tell us and the instructors."*

Reference: http://www.af.mil/news/features/features95/f_950216-112_95feb16.html

Which President signed Executive Order 9981 and what did that order do?

On July 26, 1948, President Truman signed Executive Order 9981, which states, "It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin." The order also establishes the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services.

Reference: <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/deseg1.htm>

What percentage of today's military enlisted force is made up of African-Americans?

The Department of Defense reported in 2003 that, "Blacks today account for 21 percent of the enlisted force.

Reference: http://chblue.com/artman/publish/printer_1552.shtml

What does the phrase *unit cohesion* mean?

General Edward Meyer, former Army Chief of Staff, defined unit cohesion as "The bonding together of soldiers in such a way as to sustain their will and commitment to each other, the unit, and mission accomplishment, despite combat or mission stress."

Reference: <http://vikingphoenix.com/public/rongstad/military/unitcohesion/cohesion.htm#defunitcohesion>

Defining Moments Sparking War

A defining moment that sparked United States involvement in World War II could be the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941.

A defining moment that sparked the United States involvement in the Korean War could be that on June 25th 1950, the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) forces (North Korea) artillery and mortars opened fire on Republic of Korea (ROK) forces (South Korea) army positions south of the 38th parallel, which was then serving as the border between the two countries.

A defining moment that sparked the United States involvement in the second Iraq war (Operation Iraqi Freedom March 19, 2003) is more difficult to pinpoint than the previously discussed wars. Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2nd 1990. The United States led a coalition to drive Iraq out of Kuwait, launching Operation Desert Storm in January of 1991. By March 3rd, the Iraqis had left Kuwait and the coalition announced a cease fire. Between 1991 and 2002, the United Nations imposed economic sanctions against Iraq while attempting to rid the Iraqi regime of any weapons of mass destruction. Throughout that time there were intermittent periods of United Nations weapons inspectors finding and destroying weapons in Iraq, and other periods when either the Iraqis refused to allow inspectors in, or inspectors were pulled out of Iraq by the UN because of uncooperative behavior by Iraq military and civilian leaders.

Between November 2002 and March 2003, weapons inspectors returned to Iraq under a new UN mandate. Iraq is more cooperative with these inspectors than they have ever been, but inspectors find virtually no evidence of weapons of mass destruction or plans for creating them. Throughout these inspections, the United States is moving troops into neighboring countries in preparation for war against Iraq.

On Wednesday March 19th, President Bush announced the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom, with a series of missile attacks against locations in Baghdad where Iraq's leader Saddam Hussein was thought to be hiding. Hussein survived that attack, and the full-scale air, sea, and land war began. By Wednesday April 9th, the Iraqi regime fell, leaving the United States in control of much of the country.

Some might say that September 11th was the defining moment that sparked the war against Iraq, even though there is absolutely no evidence of any involvement whatsoever between the Iraqi government and Osama Bin Laden (the man who orchestrated the September 11th hijackings) or any of the hijackers (most of who came from Saudi Arabia and none of who came from Iraq).

Others might say that President Bush's election as President was the defining moment that sparked the war against Iraq, because President Bush's father had led the coalition during the first Gulf War to drive Iraq out of Kuwait, and many people criticized the first President Bush for not driving forward into Baghdad and removing Saddam Hussein back in 1991.

Sample Assessment Questions (Rubrics) for Student Activities

Poem or Rap Song

- Is the poem or rap song on topic?
- Does it communicate the key issues?
- Does it demonstrate creativity?
- Does it demonstrate a good understanding of poetic devices?
- Does it use stanza form, with a minimum fourteen lines?
- Are there few or no spelling errors?
- Is the handwriting legible or is it typed?

Trial Lawyer (prosecution or defense)

- Does the argument identify the key elements of the case?
- Does it provide at least two reasons for the jury to cast a favorable decision?
- Is it well organized, focused, and detailed?
- Does it express ideas that prove knowledge and understanding of the Constitution and its principles?
- Are there few or no spelling errors?
- Is the handwriting legible or is it typed?

Opinion Writer

- Is the central idea of the letter clear?
- Does the writer make a logical argument?
- Is the letter interesting?
- Is there sufficient evidence to support the argument?
- Is the letter focused?
- Is there extraneous material in the letter?
- Are there few or no spelling errors?
- Is the handwriting legible or is it typed?

Poster / Protest Sign

- Is the topic very clear just by looking at it?
- Are the main ideas appropriate to the topic and presented correctly?
- Do the illustrations, photographs, and drawings add to the purpose and interest level?
- Do the design, use of color, organization, and use of space help to make the poster interesting and communicate the message?
- Is it highly creative and original?
- Is it neat and presentable and are there few or no spelling errors?