

A photograph of Barack and Michelle Obama walking on a red carpet. Barack is on the left, wearing a dark suit and a blue tie, smiling. Michelle is on the right, wearing a dark patterned coat and red gloves, also smiling and clapping. The background is a blurred crowd of people.

FOURTH EDITION

# Running for Freedom

Civil Rights and Black Politics  
in America since 1941

**Steven F. Lawson**

WILEY Blackwell

# CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Title page](#)

[Copyright page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[List of Images](#)

[Preface to the Fourth Edition](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Abbreviations Used in the Text](#)

[1 World War II and the Origins of the Freedom Struggle](#)

[Victory at Home and Abroad](#)

[A Troubled Peace](#)

[Women and the Civil Rights Movement](#)

[Seedtime of Reform](#)

[2 Ballots, Boycotts, and the Building of a National Agenda](#)

[The Truman Administration and Civil Rights](#)

[The Election of Dwight D. Eisenhower](#)

[Community Mobilization and the Montgomery Bus Boycott](#)

[Massive Resistance and Eisenhower Moderation](#)

[The Tuskegee Struggle](#)

[Fayette County, Tennessee](#)

[A Measure of Progress](#)

[3 Surging Protest, Shifting Politics](#)

[Crusaders for Citizenship](#)

[The Kennedy Administration and Civil Rights](#)  
[SNCC's Encounter with Mississippi](#)  
[Martin Luther King, Jr., the SCLC, and the Crisis at Birmingham](#)  
[Freedom Votes, Freedom Summer](#)  
[The Triumph of LBJ](#)

#### [4 Reenfranchisement and Racial Consciousness](#)

[The Selma Movement and the Voting Rights Act of 1965](#)  
[Rise of Black Power](#)  
[Malcolm X](#)  
[Racial Polarization](#)  
[The Nixon Administration and Benign Neglect](#)  
[Black Caucuses and Conventions](#)

#### [5 The New Black Politicians](#)

[Civil Rights and the Promise of Electoral Politics](#)  
[Obstacles to Officeholding](#)  
[High Hopes, Limited Rewards](#)  
[Black Women Officeholders](#)  
[Black Mayors in Atlanta and Tuskegee](#)  
[Black Rule in Cleveland and Gary](#)  
[The New Challenge](#)

#### [6 Progress and Poverty](#)

[Black Political Influence and the Ford Administration](#)  
[The Election of Jimmy Carter](#)  
[Affirmative Action and Bakke](#)  
[The Election of Ronald Reagan](#)  
[The Reagan Assault and Hard Times](#)

[Harold Washington, Chicago, and the Politics of Renewal](#)

## [7 In Search of Legitimacy](#)

[Jesse Jackson for President](#)

[The Reagan Landslide and the Struggle for Black Political Survival](#)

[The Resurgence and Reshaping of the Civil Rights Coalition](#)

[Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow Revival](#)

[The Election of George H. W. Bush](#)

## [8 Hope and Despair](#)

[The Election of David Dinkins as Mayor of New York City](#)

[Black Conservatism](#)

[The Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill Controversy](#)

[The 1992 Elections](#)

[Bill Clinton and the Congressional Black Caucus](#)

[Lani Guinier](#)

[Mending Fences](#)

[The Supreme Court Curbs Redistricting](#)

[Republicans Control Congress](#)

[Racial Divides](#)

[The Second Clinton Administration](#)

## [9 Still Running for Freedom](#)

[The Presidential Election of 2000](#)

[Bush vs. Gore, Round Two](#)

[Bush vs. Gore: Round Three](#)

[The Bush Presidency, Part I](#)

[The Election of 2004](#)

[Black Political Progress](#)

[The Bush Presidency, Part II](#)

[New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina](#)

[Reversal of Political Fortunes](#)

[10 Toward a “More Perfect Union”](#)

[The Obama Candidacy](#)

[Obama vs. Clinton](#)

[Obama vs. McCain](#)

[Black Man in the White House](#)

[The Shellacking of 2010](#)

[Obama vs. Romney](#)

[President Obama’s Second Term](#)

[Assessing Obama](#)

[Bibliographical Essay](#)

[Preface](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Index](#)

[End User License Agreement](#)

# List of Tables

## Chapter 03

[Table 3.1 Estimated percentage of voting-age blacks registered in the South, 1940-1964](#)

## Chapter 06

[Table 6.1 Estimated national black voter registration and turnout in the 1976 and 1980 presidential elections](#)

## Chapter 07

[Table 7.1 Estimated percentage of voting-age blacks registered in the South, 1968-1984](#)

[Table 7.2 Percentage of votes won by Jesse Jackson in democratic primaries, 1984 and 1988](#)

## Chapter 08

[Table 8.1 Black elected officials in the United States, 1975-2002](#)

[Table 8.2 Median household income \(current dollars\), 1960-2006](#)

# List of Illustrations

## Chapter 01

[Figure 1 Dorie Miller receiving the Navy Cross from Admiral Chester Nimitz. Miller was later killed in action.](#)

[Figure 2 World War II veteran Jackie Robinson, who integrated major league baseball and became a star with the Brooklyn Dodgers.](#)



Figure 3 Blacks in Charleston lining up to vote in the 1948 Democratic Party primary.

## Chapter 02

Figure 4 Protesting discrimination in the military, A. Philip Randolph heads a picket line at the 1948 Democratic National Convention.

Figure 5 The Montgomery police fingerprint Rosa Parks after her arrest for failing to vacate her seat on a segregated bus.

Figure 6 Congressional representatives William L. Dawson, on the left, and Adam Clayton Powell, standing in front of the nation's Capitol, were known for contrasting styles of political leadership.

## Chapter 03

Figure 7 Bob Moses along with other SNCC workers on a voter registration campaign in Mississippi.

Figure 8 On August 28, 1963, following the introduction of the civil rights bill in Congress, approximately 250,000 blacks and whites marched on Washington to stage a massive rally for jobs and freedom. The demonstration was highlighted by two contrasting speeches. An angry SNCC chairperson, John Lewis, complained that the progress of civil rights was moving too slowly, while Martin Luther King, Jr., pictured above, delivered his optimistic "I Have a Dream" speech for an integrated America.

Figure 9 In 1965 the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party contested the election of that state's congressional representatives. The three Freedom Democratic candidates who journeyed to Washington in hopes of replacing the regulars were, from left to

right, Victoria Gray, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Annie Devine. The House denied their claim.

#### Chapter 04

Figure 10 Alabama state troopers, wearing gas masks, attack John Lewis on “Bloody Sunday” in Selma.

Figure 11 Martin Luther King, Jr. (front in center) with Floyd McKissick of CORE (to his immediate right) and Stokely Carmichael of SNCC (to his immediate left) on the last leg of the Meredith march into Jackson.

Figure 12 Malcolm X addresses a rally in Harlem in June 1963.

#### Chapter 05

Figure 13 Maynard Jackson, shortly before his victory in being elected as Atlanta’s first black mayor.

Figure 14 Carl Stokes with his wife, Shirley, after winning election as mayor of Cleveland.

#### Chapter 06

Figure 15 Representative Barbara Jordan of Texas delivering the keynote address at the 1976 Democratic National Convention.

Figure 16 The inauguration of Harold Washington. Cook County Circuit Court Judge Charles Freeman swears in Chicago’s first African-American mayor, Harold Washington, during a ceremony attended by 3,000 guests at Navy Pier. Washington, who was 61 years old, succeeded Chicago’s first female mayor, Jane Byrne.

#### Chapter 07



Figure 17 Jesse Jackson, in the center, leading the procession at the 1983 march on Washington. Next to him, from left to right, are Walter Fauntroy, the Washington, DC, delegate to Congress; Coretta Scott King, widow of the slain civil rights leader; Joseph Lowery, president of the SCLC; an unidentified woman; and Harry Belafonte.

Figure 18 Jesse Jackson, flanked by some of his rivals for the 1988 Democratic Party presidential nomination. From left to right stand Senator Al Gore of Tennessee, Congressman Richard Gephardt of Missouri, Jackson, Governor Bruce Babbitt of Arizona, Senator Paul Simon of Illinois, and Governor Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts.

## Chapter 08

Figure 19 Campaigning for mayor of New York City, David Dinkins stands under a statue of George Washington on the steps of Federal Hall in lower Manhattan.

Figure 20 President George H. W. Bush with his Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas.

Figure 21 Anita Hill, who accused Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment before Congress and a nationwide television audience.

Figure 22 Kweisi Mfume, who headed the Congressional Black Caucus and left Congress to become president of the NAACP in 1995.

Figure 23 Lani Guinier, who was unsuccessfully nominated by President Clinton as head of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division and was described by her critics as a woman with a "strange name, strange hair, strange writing."

## Chapter 09

Figure 24 Rev Jesse Jackson leads a march in downtown West Palm Beach with Irma Fleishaman, from West Boca Raton (left), and Joanna Carbone, from Boynton Beach, who both said their votes did not count due to ballot confusion.

Figure 25 Democratic presidential contenders John Kerry, Al Sharpton, John Edwards, and Dennis Kucinich debating in New York City on February 29, 2004.

Figure 26 New Orleans residents appeal to be rescued, September 1, 2005.

Figure 27 The media highlighted race in ways shown by the captions that originally accompanied these photos. The one on the left read "A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans." The one on the right said "Two residents wade through chest deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina."

## Chapter 10

Figure 28 US senator and presidential candidate Barack Obama talks to local voters after a town hall meeting in Chariton, Iowa.

Figure 29 Justice 4 Trayvon signs outside the Seminole County Courthouse during the George Zimmerman trial in Sanford, Florida, in 2013.

## About the Author

Steven F. Lawson was professor of history at Rutgers University from 1998 to 2009 and is now professor emeritus. From 1992 to 1998 he was professor and head of the History Department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Before then, he taught for 20 years at the University of South Florida in Tampa. He has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the National Humanities Center. He has served as an adviser to the television documentary series *Eyes on the Prize* and has participated as a historical consultant on voting rights cases. His publications include *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969* (1976), which was awarded the Phi Alpha Theta best first-book prize; *In Pursuit of Power: Southern Blacks and Electoral Politics, 1965-1982* (1985); *Civil Rights Crossroads: Nation, Community and the Black Freedom Struggle* (2003); *To Secure These Rights: The Report of President Harry S. Truman's Committee on Civil Rights* (2004), and numerous articles and essays on the civil rights movement and politics. Along with Nancy Hewitt he has published the documentary textbook *Exploring American Histories: A Brief Survey with Sources* (2013).

# **RUNNING FOR FREEDOM**

## **Civil Rights and Black Politics in America since 1941**

Fourth Edition

Steven F. Lawson

**WILEY** Blackwell

This fourth edition first published 2015

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Inc

Edition history: McGraw-Hill Publishers, Inc (1e, 1990 and 2e 1996), John Wiley & Sons Inc (3e 2009)

*Registered Office*

John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

*Editorial Offices*

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

For details of our global editorial offices, for customer services, and for information about how to apply for permission to reuse the copyright material in this book please see our website at [www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell](http://www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell).

The right of Steven F. Lawson to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book are trade names, service marks, trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publisher is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. It is sold on the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering professional services and neither the publisher nor the author shall be liable for damages arising herefrom. If professional advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Lawson, Steven F., 1945–

Running for freedom : civil rights and black politics in America since 1941 / Steven F. Lawson. – Fourth edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-118-83654-5 (pbk.)

1. African Americans--Civil rights. 2. African Americans--Politics and government. 3. Civil rights movements--United States--History--20th century. 4. United States--Politics and government--20th century. I. Title.

E185.61.L38 2015

323.1196'073-dc23

2014017308

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama walk in the Inaugural Parade during the 57th Presidential Inauguration in Washington, January 21, 2013. Photo AP Photo/Charles Dharapak/Press Association



*For Nancy and Scooter, best friends both*

## List of Images

1. [Dorie Miller receiving the Navy Cross from Admiral Chester Nimitz](#)
2. [World War II veteran Jackie Robinson, who integrated major league baseball and became a star with the Brooklyn Dodgers](#)
3. [Blacks in Charleston lining up to vote in the 1948 Democratic Party primary](#)
4. [Protesting discrimination in the military, A. Philip Randolph heads a picket line at the 1948 Democratic National Convention](#)
5. [The Montgomery police fingerprint Rosa Parks after her arrest for failing to vacate her seat on a segregated bus](#)
6. [Congressional representatives William L. Dawson and Adam Clayton Powell, standing in front of the nation's Capitol](#)
7. [Bob Moses along with other SNCC workers on a voter registration campaign in Mississippi](#)
8. [Martin Luther King, Jr., at the march on Washington, August 28, 1963, when he delivered his optimistic "I have a Dream" speech](#)
9. [Victoria Gray, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Annie Devine, the three Freedom Democratic candidates who journeyed to Washington in 1965 to contest the election of Mississippi's congressional representatives](#)
10. [Alabama state troopers, wearing gas masks, attack John Lewis on "Bloody Sunday" in Selma](#)

11. [Martin Luther King, Jr., with Floyd McKissick of CORE and Stokely Carmichael of SNCC on the last leg of the Meredith march into Jackson](#)
12. [Malcolm X addresses a rally in Harlem in June 1963](#)
13. [Maynard Jackson, shortly before he won election as Atlanta's first black mayor](#)
14. [Carl Stokes with his wife, Shirley, after winning election as mayor of Cleveland](#)
15. [Representative Barbara Jordan of Texas delivering the keynote address at the 1976 Democratic National Convention](#)
16. [The inauguration of Harold Washington in 1983 as Chicago's first African-American mayor](#)
17. [Jesse Jackson leading the procession at the 1983 march on Washington, with Walter Fauntroy, Coretta Scott King, and Joseph Lowery](#)
18. [Jesse Jackson, flanked by some of his rivals for the 1988 Democratic Party presidential nomination](#)
19. [Campaigning for mayor of New York City, David Dinkins stands under a statue of George Washington on the steps of Federal Hall in lower Manhattan](#)
20. [President George H. W. Bush with his Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas](#)
21. [Anita Hill, who accused Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment before Congress and a nationwide television audience](#)
22. [Kweisi Mfume, who headed the Congressional Black Caucus and left Congress to become president of the NAACP in 1995](#)
23. [Lani Guinier, who was unsuccessfully nominated by President Clinton as head of the Justice Department's](#)

## Civil Rights Division

24. Jesse Jackson leads a march in downtown West Palm Beach with voters who said their votes did not count due to ballot confusion
25. Democratic presidential contenders John Kerry, Al Sharpton, John Edwards, and Dennis Kucinich debating in New York City on February 29, 2004
26. New Orleans residents appeal to be rescued, September 1, 2005
27. Contrasting media treatments of race in the Katrina disaster
28. US senator and presidential candidate Barack Obama talks to local voters after a town hall meeting in Chariton, Iowa
29. Justice 4 Trayvon signs outside the Seminole County Courthouse during the George Zimmerman trial in Sanford, Florida, in 2013

## Preface to the Fourth Edition

*Winning is new people running.*

*Winning is also new voters.*

*Winning is more young voters.*

*Winning is providing hope. ...*

*We're not just running for an office.*

*We're running for freedom.*

(Jesse Jackson, "On Winning," 1984)

In the more than five decades since the civil rights movement achieved some of the most momentous reforms of the twentieth century, scholars have produced a rich body of literature detailing the battle for racial and political equality. Initially, most of the works focused on the activities of major civil rights organizations and leaders and their efforts to enact national legislation, gain presidential support, and win litigation before the federal courts. In general, they concentrated on the responses of government institutions and officials to demands for social change. Subsequently, a second generation of scholarly studies shifted the emphasis away from powerful leaders, interest groups, and agencies to indigenous mass movements, seeking to discover their unique structures, ideologies, strategies, and tactics. From this perspective, black protest and politics are not viewed primarily as a struggle for obtaining civil rights laws in the national arena but for liberating black communities at the grassroots level.

As scholarly inquiry refocused the vision of this struggle "from the bottom up," it is appropriate to consider how efforts at the local level intersected with those on the national stage. Both national civil rights campaigns aimed at legislation and litigation and community organizing

directed toward consciousness-raising were part of a larger process of empowerment. In an interconnected way, the civil rights movement altered local black institutions and shaped national goals; in turn, the actions of the federal government and established civil rights groups transformed local communities in the process of expanding freedom.

An interpretive synthesis, this book examines the freedom struggle and black political development since the beginning of World War II. Moving along two tracks, the national and the local, this study attempts to gauge the connections between the two. Pressure from below ultimately pushed the federal government to challenge disfranchisement. Northern blacks, whose votes swung the balance of power in close national elections, demanded that lawmakers remedy the plight of blacks deprived of their rights in the South. The urgency of a response became greater as southern blacks, prevented from registering their discontent at the polls, used nonviolent civil disobedience to spark crises, forcing the national government to come to their aid. In organizing against racism, the civil rights movement mobilized blacks for political action and prepared the way for extensive black participation in the electoral process following the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

The franchise figured prominently in the thinking of both white officials and black protesters, though in different ways. White leaders saw the ballot as a means of promoting orderly social change during a period when black protests and hostile white reactions to them threatened civic peace and the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Blacks considered the franchise less as an implement of social cohesion and more as a weapon for destroying racist institutions and encouraging liberation. In pursuit of group power, African Americans marshaled their forces to elect candidates of their own race, a preference that has



highlighted the conflict between proportional representation and color-blind politics, between affirmative action and traditional notions of political equality.

Since 1941, the political system has been opened up, gradually though sometimes dramatically, to active minority participation, and black Americans are working through it to acquire the advantages long denied them. Consequently, they have come to rely much less on the tactics of agitation and confrontation employed so effectively during the civil rights struggle and to depend more on the process of bargaining and compromise associated with professional politics. As a result, increased electoral power at the local level and influence at the national level generally have come at the expense of mass-based activism. Many black leaders made the transition from the civil rights battlefield to the electoral arena, but they had to heed the realities of practical politics. Furthermore, despite considerable progress, the political system has only partially settled black grievances, especially those related to economic deprivation. Race has not disappeared as a divisive element, and polarization of the electorate often stands in the way of further resolution of critical problems.

Whatever these limitations, the quest for freedom over the past half-century released blacks from serving as passive objects of white domination and forged them into active agents striving to shape their own political destinies. Much of this story necessarily focuses on the South, where the civil rights movement originated and tested its most innovative political strategies. Yet the problems of racial inequality and political powerlessness were not confined to any one region, but were national in scope. Though they did not have to reacquire the ballot, as was the case in the South, northern blacks nonetheless had to struggle to mobilize their communities to compete successfully for

electoral office and obtain political legitimacy. In doing so, they joined black southerners in trying to redefine the meaning of success and to infuse American politics with a greater dose of democratic participation.

For this fourth edition, I have provided some new material on the George W. Bush administration in [Chapter 9](#), but more substantially I have added a new chapter ([10](#)) on the presidential election of Barack Obama, his first term in office, his reelection in 2012, and the first year of his second term. In addition to his two presidential elections, this chapter includes a discussion of the 2010 midterm elections, which produced a Republican majority in the House of Representatives and in statehouses across the nation; the impact of the killing of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent trial of George Zimmerman; the commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington; and state voter suppression efforts and the Supreme Court's weakening of the Voting Rights Act. Indeed, I have tried to make this new concluding chapter up-to-date, though it necessarily remains a work in progress, as events continue to unfold even as these words are written.

# Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my debt to the many scholars of civil rights history and black politics whose fine works I have drawn on. The bibliographical essay at the end of the book is not only a guide for readers but also an expression of appreciation to the many authors from whom I have benefited.

Writing this edition constitutes something of an archaeological expedition into my career as a historian. The first edition coincided with my tenure at the University of South Florida; the second my years at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro; and the third my ten years at Rutgers. Although this fourth edition comes in my retirement from academic teaching and service, it evidences my continuing presence as a historian. For persuading me to undertake this latest edition, I thank Peter Coveney at Wiley-Blackwell, who has been a delight to work with over many years.

The silk thread weaving all four editions together is Nancy Hewitt. Without her generosity, sharp intellect and editorial skills, and her unflagging patience this book would have been impossible to write.

Steven F. Lawson  
Metuchen, New Jersey

## Abbreviations Used in the Text

ACA	Affordable Care Act
ACORN	Association for Community Organizations for Reform Now
ARRA	American Recovery and Reinvestment Act
BPP	Black Panther Party
CAP	Community Action Program
CBC	Congressional Black Caucus
CETA	Comprehensive Employment and Training Act
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
COFO	Council of Federated Organizations
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
DCVL	Dallas County Voters League
EEOC	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FEPC	Fair Employment Practice Committee
LCFO	Lowndes County Freedom Organization
MFDP	Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
MIA	Montgomery Improvement Association
MOWM	March on Washington Movement
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NACGN	National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses
NAG	Nonviolent Action Group
NCBCP	National Coalition on Black Civic Participation
NCLB	No Child Left Behind

NUL	National Urban League
PDP	Progressive Democratic Party
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
POWER	People Organized for Welfare and Employment Rights
PUSH	People United to Save Humanity
SCHW	Southern Conference for Human Welfare
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
UFT	United Federation of Teachers
VA	Veterans Administration
VEP	Voter Education Project
VISTA	Volunteers in Service to America

# 1

## **World War II and the Origins of the Freedom Struggle**

For African Americans, the ultimate aim of politics, either protest or electoral, has been liberation. Seeking emancipation from the bondage of white supremacy, disfranchised southern blacks challenged the political system for admission, even as they hoped to transform it by their participation. Civil rights proponents have long believed that blacks could not be free without obtaining the right to vote. At the turn of the century, W. E. B. Du Bois set the standard for rejecting racial solutions that excluded the exercise of the franchise. Attacking Booker T. Washington for his strategy of postponing black participation at the ballot box, Du Bois insisted that the right to vote was intimately connected to first-class citizenship. Without it blacks would never command respect, protect themselves, and feel pride in their own race. To Du Bois, a scholar of the freedom struggle after the Civil War, Reconstruction provided vivid evidence that black elected officials could transform the lives of their constituents. From this experience they derived the historical lesson, summarized by Eric Foner, that "it was in politics that blacks articulated a new vision of the American state, calling upon government, both national and local, to take upon itself new and unprecedented responsibilities for protecting the civil rights of individual citizens."

The long history to obtain the right to vote suggests that reenfranchisement was considered the decisive first step toward political equality. Civil rights proponents expected participation at the polls to yield the kinds of basic benefits



that groups exercising the franchise customarily enjoyed. Yet, for black Americans, much more was at stake. With their systematic exclusion from the electoral process, the simple acquisition of the vote constituted an essential element of liberation from enforced racial subordination. The political scientist Charles V. Hamilton, who studied the voting rights struggle both as a participant and as a scholar, found this passion for the ballot very understandable. "White America had spent so much effort denying the vote to blacks," he observed, "that there was good reason to believe that they must be protecting some tool of vast importance. Perhaps it was reasonable to put so much emphasis on the one fundamental process that clearly distinguished first-class from second-class citizens."

## **Victory at Home and Abroad**

Going off to war in the months after Pearl Harbor, black GIs might very well have pondered the connection between politics and freedom. They had many reasons to wonder about the principles of the democratic creed and their promise of first-class citizenship for all. Like their white counterparts they remembered December 7, 1941, when Dorie Miller, a black sailor, performed heroic deeds that would win him the Navy Cross; but they also carried with them the memory of Sikeston, Missouri, where on January 25, 1942, a black prisoner named Cleo Wright was taken out of the local jail and cruelly burned and lynched by a white mob. Unlike Japan and its Axis partners, which were eventually defeated on the battlefield and forced to accept unconditional surrender, the killers of Cleo Wright were never brought to justice. Helping to combat fascism abroad, black fighting men and the families they left behind also demanded unconditional surrender from the forces of racism at home. Blacks failed to persuade the American

government to wage total war in their behalf, but they did lay the groundwork for continuing the battle in the decades to come.

This determination to stand up for their rights, strengthened by World War II, grew out of both disillusionment and optimism. In response to Woodrow Wilson's pledge during World War I to make the world safe for democracy, blacks had followed the advice of Du Bois to "close ranks [and] while this war lasts, forget our special grievances." Rather than freedom, the end of the war produced bloody race riots and a continuation of Jim Crow practices. At the same time, African Americans refused to plunge into despair and experienced instead a heightening of racial consciousness. The Harlem Renaissance and the black nationalist movement spearheaded by Marcus Garvey explored the roots of black identity and helped forge renewed racial solidarity. A. Philip Randolph organized workers into the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and not only fought for economic benefits from employers but also challenged racial discrimination within the trade union movement. In addition, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an interracial organization founded in 1909, kept alive the battle for equal rights by lobbying Congress to enact an antilynching bill and petitioning the Supreme Court to outlaw disfranchisement measures such as the white primary.



**Figure 1** Dorie Miller receiving the Navy Cross from Admiral Chester Nimitz. Miller was later killed in action.

(Photo courtesy US National Archives)

The Great Depression provided unexpected opportunities for black advancement. Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal extended economic relief to the one-third of the nation that was ill housed, ill clothed, and ill fed, which included blacks as well as poor whites. Blacks profited from these programs because of their poverty, not because of their race; in fact, many New Deal agencies, especially in the South, were administered to preserve prevailing racial practices that maintained blacks in a subordinate position. For example, programs for federal housing construction contained provisions guaranteeing segregation in the North as well as

the South. Despite the perpetuation of racial discrimination and the unwillingness of President Roosevelt to fight for special civil rights measures, African Americans welcomed federal assistance. "Any time people are out of work, in poverty, have lost their savings," Du Bois remarked, "any kind of a 'deal' that helps them is going to be favored."

Blacks showed their appreciation by abandoning their traditional allegiance to the Republican Party of Abraham Lincoln and hopping aboard the Roosevelt bandwagon. This realignment was facilitated by the appointment of blacks to federal posts, a sufficient number to convene an informal "black kitchen cabinet" in Washington. Whites sensitive to racial concerns headed several New Deal agencies and worked to see that relief was distributed more fairly. Furthermore, Roosevelt's selections to the Supreme Court after 1937 paved the way for a constitutional revolution that augured well for NAACP attorneys preparing a legal assault upon racial discrimination. Most of all, the President's wife, Eleanor, nurtured the growing attachment African Americans felt toward the Roosevelt administration. Mrs. Roosevelt's commitment to civil rights was far greater than her husband's, and she served as an ally in the White House to see that complaints of black leaders received a hearing in the Oval Office. This combination of racial gestures and economic rewards led the majority of the black electorate to vote for Roosevelt beginning in 1936.

On the eve of World War II, blacks stood poised to consolidate their gains and press ahead for full equality. Their political agenda included an end to job discrimination, which helped keep black unemployment at a high 11 percent in 1940; legislation to empower the federal government to prosecute lynchers and to abolish the poll tax on voting imposed by eight southern states; the destruction of the lily-white Democratic primary; and the abandonment of the principle of "separate but equal" that