

“ENABLED COURAGE”: RACE, DISABILITY, AND BLACK WORLD WAR II VETERANS IN POSTWAR AMERICA

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ON AN EARLY WINTER MORNING IN 1943, Henry Williams emerged from the baggage car of a Southern Pacific train that had just transported him back to his home town of Cleveland, Ohio. Though marking the end of the twenty-nine-year-old former taxi driver's time with the United States Army, the journey home proved to be the beginning of new difficulties. While participating in an exercise held in the California-Arizona desert area as a member of the all-black Ninety-third Infantry division, Williams had been struck by an explosive charge, sustaining serious neurological damage to his right leg. After undergoing an extended rehabilitation period at the base hospital that winter, he found that his battles were just beginning. Upon arriving in Cleveland, he received a letter from the Veteran Administration (VA) regional office informing him that the degree of his disability had been readjusted from the VA's original rating of 60 to 20 percent and that he was no longer eligible for compensation. When Williams asked the American Red Cross and local veterans' organizations of the American Legion, the Disabled American Veterans, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the American Veterans of World War II to help him appeal the VA's ruling of his disability claim, he was rebuffed at every turn. Not to be deterred, however, Williams and several other black World War II ex-GIs established a disabled veteran's group to assist unemployed war veterans with disabilities in their struggles to win appeals as the VA threatened to reduce or deny their compensation benefits. Of his organizing activities, Williams reflected years later, "I was fighting as much for my friends in the Huachucans¹ as I did in the service of my country. These

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1. The Huachucans Veterans Organization was started in 1941 by the first draftees and volunteers from Cleveland, Ohio. Created by members of the Ninety-third Infantry division's 368th Infantry Regiment, the interest in starting the organization grew out of their collective military experiences at Fort Huachuca, Arizona and continued sixty years after their discharges from the army.

millions of combined determinations won for us the war. Though broken in body, I was fighting with those millions to stamp out those same principles that we fought against during the war. Basically, sir, I was fighting for the civil rights of every disabled citizen."²

Henry Williams's story testifies to the relationship between disabled veterans, race, and mid-twentieth-century social policy.³ Returning home from overseas service was tough for all veterans, but it was tougher still for black veterans and disabled white veterans and was perhaps toughest of all for disabled black veterans. The return home not only meant coming to terms with permanent injuries and transcending the stigmatizing gaze of civil society, but also shouldering the overwhelming burden of reentering public life and continuing the fight for equality. Thus black veterans like Williams not only had to deal with the insensitive views held and expressed by some able-bodied people when encountering someone with visible disabilities, but also the racist attitudes and prejudices exhibited by much of postwar society toward African Americans. In effect, Williams and others like him faced both sides of the two-sided coin of collective social oppression and racial discrimination. Using Williams and other black WWII veterans of the U.S. Ninety-third Infantry division as a case study, this article will explore that coin by examining the relationship between race, disability, veterans, and social policy in the late 1940s. It argues that nowhere were the problems in this relationship more

2. Henry Williams, interview with author, Cleveland, Ohio, 7 February 1993.

3. For recent discussions on disability, social welfare, and veteran politicization in the context of early twentieth-century wars, see the essays in *Disabled Veterans in History*, ed. David A. Gerber (Ann Arbor, 2000); K. Walter Hickel, "Medicine, Bureaucracy, and Social Welfare: The Politics of Disability Compensation for American Veterans of World War I," in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York, 2001), 236–67; David Gerber, "Blinded and Enlightened: The Contested Origins of the Egalitarian Politics of the Blinded Veterans Association," in *The New Disability History*, ed. Longmore and Umansky, 313–34; Richard Scotch, "American Disability Policy in the Twentieth Century," in *The New Disability History*, ed. Longmore and Umansky, 375–92; and Doris Zames Fleisher and Frieda Zame's excellent essay, "Disabled Veterans Claim Their Rights," in *The Disability Movement: From Charity to Confrontation* (Philadelphia, 2001), 170–83. On the relationship between black GIs, segments of American society, and the state during the post-World War II period, see William Adkins, "Changing Images: The G.I. Bill, the Colleges, and American Ideology," *Journal of the Georgia Association of Historians* 17 (1996): 18–40; Jennifer E. Brooks, "From Hitler and Tojo to Talmadge and Jim Crow: World War II Veterans and the Remaking of Southern Political Tradition" (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1997); Dennis Onkst, "'First a Negro . . . Incidentally a Veteran': Black World War Two Veterans and the G.I. Bill of Rights in the Deep South, 1944–1948," *Journal of Social History* 31 (spring 1998): 517–43; Jennifer E. Brooks, "Winning the Peace: Georgia Veterans and the Struggle to Define the Political Legacy of World War II," *Journal of Southern History* 66 (2000): 563–604; Robert Franklin Jefferson, "Making the Men of the 93rd: African American Servicemen in the Years of the Great Depression and the Second World War, 1935–1947" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1995).

evident than in medical and VA personnel's conception of disability, and subsequent allocation of disability compensation to ex-servicemen. The article also examines the veterans' response to this discrimination, suggesting that a newfound activism stemming from the ideals for which they had allegedly been fighting found its outlet in the organization of disabled veterans' rights groups, which sought to make real the promises of the GI Bill of Rights.

Under the GI Bill of Rights, World War II veterans could purchase a home, go to college, learn a trade, finish high school, and obtain civil service work, and were eligible for government subsidized loans and life insurance pensions. Yet VA physicians and administrators implemented a means tests that combined racial perceptions of African Americans with cultural views associated with people with disabilities. The socially constructed definition of disability was not new. As scholars such as Deborah Stone, Richard Scotch, and K. Walter Hickel have convincingly demonstrated, the history of the development of service-related disability policies in the twentieth century often reflected nonclinical evaluative practices couched in cultural and racial values.⁴ As Hickel writes: "Veterans Bureau physicians and administrators defined disability with reference to medical characteristics they thought innate to each race and that distinguished racial groups of veterans from one another."⁵ In a similar vein, the popular media and veterans' organizations viewed Williams and other disabled black ex-GIs in a derogatory light and felt that they should be grateful for *any* assistance that they received. In examining World War II veterans for service-related disability, the findings of physicians regarding certain injuries and disease were often filtered through a socially constructed lens enveloped in gender-specific cultural and racial notions of moral depravity, physical and mental weakness, and stereotypical behavior. But such assessments were laced with what historian Douglas Baynton has aptly described in another forum as the "concept of the normal."⁶ For instance, medical authorities considered African American soldiers to be biologically prone to upper respiratory and venereal disease, to possess below average intelligence, more liable to succumb to the emotional strain of warfare and combat, and readily predisposed to malingering. They often couched these views in racialized conceptions of normality, however. In 1948, for example, chief medical officers told black veterans

4. Deborah A. Stone, *The Disabled State* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1984); Richard K. Scotch and K. Walter Hickel, "Medicine, Bureaucracy, and Social Welfare: The Politics of Disability Compensation for American Veterans of World War I," *passim*.

5. Hickel, "Medicine, Bureaucracy, and Social Welfare," 256.

6. Douglas C. Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," 39.

at a VA hospital in Virginia, "there is nothing wrong with your nose, that's your natural look; nature made all Negroes to look that way."⁷ As a consequence of these nonclinical assessments, physicians reduced or denied the disability claims of black veterans, attributing their injuries to experiences that had taken place prior to their entrance into military service. By rejecting the claims of disabled black GIs, VA physicians were not only questioning the prodemocratic image that their military service signified, but also challenging black veterans' claims to full citizenship rights. This was a conflict that few black GIs could ignore.

Like ex-GIs who organized veterans' groups from the Civil War to World War I, World War II veterans engaged in collective direct action to secure medical services, benefits, education, and jobs. For Williams and other returning veterans, however, the issue of disability compensation meant more than the federal government's repayment for their previous military service; it also was perceived as the bureaucratic government's acknowledgment of the activities and roles that they envisioned for themselves in their local neighborhoods and communities. Their claims both reflected their demands for full citizenship *and* their desires to exert a modicum of control over their neighborhoods and communities. In order to understand what prompted disabled African Americans like Henry Williams to participate in such movements during the postwar period, we must begin by examining the postwar struggles of disabled black GIs and their uneasy transition to civilian life. In particular we must understand some of the general fears of the larger society of what might follow the reintegration of all recently discharged servicemen.⁸

Prior to V-J Day, psychologists, sociologists, counselors, physicians, case workers, fiction writers, ex-servicemen, and military officials all openly expressed fears of a return of the Depression after the war and warned of a social and political crisis fueled by the massive demobilization of World War II soldiers. With the return of World War I veterans and the Bonus March of 1932 still fresh in

7. Philip A. Cox to NAACP Secretary of Veterans Affairs, 7 December 1948, NAACP Papers, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. (microfilm, University of Iowa Law Library).

8. For example, see Susan M. Hartmann, "Prescriptions for Penelope: Literature on Women's Obligations to Returning World War II Veterans," *Women's Studies* 5 (1978): 223-39; Susan M. Hartmann, *The Homefront and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston, Mass., 1982); Sonya Michel, "American Women and the Discourse of the Democratic Family in World War II," in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, ed. Margaret Randolph Higonnett, et al. (New Haven, Conn., 1987), 154-67; Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, 1988); David A. Gerber, "In Search of Al Schmid: War Hero, Blinded Veteran, Everyman," *Journal of American Studies* 29 (Spring 1995): 1-32; David Gerber, "Heroes and Misfits: The Troubled Social Reintegration of Disabled Veterans in *The Best Years of Our Lives*," *American Quarterly* 46 (December 1994): 545-74.

their minds, some speculated that the servicemen, who had been asked to sacrifice so much during the wartime period, would experience tremendous difficulty adjusting to demobilization and would become disillusioned by the self-absorbed civilians and the public cynicism of postwar America.⁹ The pervasiveness of such sentiments can be found in the words of University of California sociologist Robert A. Nisbet during the winter of 1945: "as the end of the war draws nearer, it becomes growingly evident that the restoration to civilian life of ten million men will be as difficult and exacting a problem as any yet produced by the war. The manner of meeting it (the problem) may prove the determining fact in the next few decades of American democracy."¹⁰

For most black political figures and organizations, however, the prospect of demobilized wounded veterans raised hopes rather than fears, as it was assumed that African American soldiers would be deeply angered by the unchanged racial climate of the country and would place the onus for their troubled reentry to civilian life squarely on the shoulders of the federal government, Congress, the VA, and the national veteran's organizations. Thus, between 1945 and 1946, black newspapers and journals, most notably Pittsburgh's *Courier*, Baltimore's *Afro-American*, Chicago's *Defender*, Los Angeles's *Tribune*, New York's *Amsterdam News*, California's *Eagle*, and the Tennessee-based Race Relations Institute's treatise titled *A Monthly Summary of Events and Trends in Race Relations* carried a series of feature articles publicizing the social and political travails that awaited black GIs immediately upon their arrival home, and advising them about educational provisions available to them under the GI Bill of Rights. At the same time, Howard University historian Rayford Logan, National Council for Negro Women founder and president Mary McLeod Bethune, noted Atlanta University historian W. E. B. Du Bois, and March on Washington Movement leader A. Philip Randolph published essays in an anthology titled *What the Negro Wants*, warning that returning black veterans, loaded down with collective notions of equality, would constitute an embittered and resentful body if fundamental

9. For works that advocated such points of view about returning World War II veterans, see Willard Waller, *The Veteran Comes Back* (New York, 1944); Dixon Wecter, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home* (Boston, Mass., 1944); George K. Pratt, *Soldier to Civilian: Problems of Readjustment* (New York, 1944); Irvin L. Child, Marjorie Van de Water, et al., *Psychology for the Returning Veteran* (Washington, D.C., 1944); Charles Bolte, *The New Veteran* (New York, 1945); Roy R. Grinker and John T. Spiegel, *Men Under Stress* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1945); Herbert Kupper, *Back to Life: The Emotional Readjustment of Our Veterans* (New York, 1945); Edward A. Strecker and Kenneth E. Appel, *Psychiatry in Modern Warfare* (New York, 1945); Alanson H. Edgerton, *Readjustment or Revolution?* (New York, 1946).

10. Robert A. Nisbet, "The Coming Problem of Assimilation," *American Journal of Sociology* 50:4 (January 1945): 261.

changes did not occur in American society.¹¹ In a similar vein, Robert C. Weaver, Chicago director of the American Council on Race Relations, stated in the spring of 1945, "it is highly inconceivable to imagine that the Negro veteran will fail to affiliate himself and take the lead in this movement. He will not be satisfied, in light of the training which he has received and in light of the occupational changes which have occurred among nonwhites, to return to his former occupational status."¹² This complex matrix of expectations of racial equality and New Deal liberalism, born of the wartime sacrifice and racial strife, gained full expression in *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, the house organ of the National Urban League. Within the pages of the journal, several prominent individuals, including the Urban League's Public Education director, Alphonse Heningburg, and Selective Service civilian assistant Campbell C. Johnson, penned editorials offering instruction to black veterans seeking public support from the VA. Witness the comments made by Heningburg in a winter 1945 editorial titled, "The Negro Veteran Comes Home":

Many Americans are deeply and justifiably disturbed over the possibility that the Negro veteran, embittered by our consistent refusal to give democracy a chance here at home, may initiate the use of violence to register his protest. The editors at OPPORTUNITY do not share in that apprehension. The Negro veteran, like all other veterans, loves his home and the little children who eagerly await his return. Our job now is to make that return a joyful homecoming, one symbolic of the great spirit in which he crossed the flame-licked beaches of Normandy.¹³

As difficult as the problems of general reintegration might prove, however, and as hopeful as some African Americans were, for Columbia University sociologist

11. *Pittsburgh Courier*, 17, 24 November 1945; 8, 22 December 1945; 9 February 1946; 9, 30 March 1946; *Baltimore Afro-American*, 13 October 1945; 1, 8, 22 December 1945; 2, 9 February 1946; 9, 23 March 1946; 6 April 1946; *Chicago Defender*, 28 July 1945; 19, 26 January 1946; 9, 23 February 1946; 23 March 1946; 6 April 1946; *Los Angeles Tribune*, 19 January 1946; 6, 13, 20 April 1946; *Amsterdam Star News*, 14 April 1945; 19 May 1945; 25 August 1945; *California Eagle*, 17 January 1946; 28 February 1946; *A Monthly Summary of Events and Trends in Race Relations* 2:4, 6 (November 1944; January 1945); James A. Burran, "Racial Violence in the South During World War II" (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1977), 218–21; Rayford Logan, ed., *What the Negro Wants* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1944).
12. Robert C. Weaver, "The Negro Veteran," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 238 (March 1945): 130.
13. Alphonse Heningburg, "The Negro Veteran Comes Home," *Opportunity* 23 (winter 1945): 3; Campbell C. Johnson, "The Unforgotten Man: The Negro Soldier," *Opportunity* 23 (winter 1945): 20–23, 54.

Willard Waller it was disabled GIs who would constitute the most rankled segment of the entire homecoming group. "Talk to the wounded men, and you will discover whether veterans are bitter," he exclaimed.¹⁴ Harold Wilke, a journalist for the *Baltimore Afro-American*, offered his opinion of what the future might hold in a pamphlet published in January 1945, stating, "When you greet your wounded friend or relative for the first time, use your intelligence and imagination. Greet him as your friend, who was away and has now returned. Letting horror spread over your features and get in your voice because of his crutches or empty sleeves or sightless eyes will make him realize that you think of him, not as a personality, but as a cripple. Greet the Man, not the wound."¹⁵ Wilke's words are instructive, for they strike the familiar chords of equality and self-help ideology expressed by various segments within the African American community throughout much of the twentieth century and provide apt social and political commentary on the fear and pity that the wider society exhibited toward veterans with disabilities.

In an effort to help all its veterans, and perhaps prompted by a desire to make the transition from war to peace as easy as possible for all of society, the U.S. government passed legislation designed both to help veterans and to reward them for their wartime service. In 1943, for example, Congress enacted legislation (Public Law 16) to expand the regulations (established in 1933) that provided for rehabilitation of veterans with service-connected injuries. The omnibus measures were designed to provide protection against the discriminatory practices of the labor market and provided them with adequate financial security just in case the severity of their war-related injuries prevented a reentry into the workforce. A year later, the VA activated counseling and training facilities for veterans with honorable discharges. Generally situated near large military installations and metropolitan areas in the southeastern portion of the country, such Veterans Administration Guidance Centers were located at hospitals, universities, and colleges where ex-GIs were to receive vocational and educational counseling as well as technical or professional training to make occupational adjustments to civilian life.¹⁶ "Unless they are properly rehabilitated and trained," senior rehabilitation specialists warned, "their postwar employment

14. Willard Waller, "Why Veterans are Bitter," *The American Mercury* 61 (August 1945): 147.

15. Harold Wilke, "Greet the Man Returning Home, Not the Wound; Tips for Welcoming the Wounded," *Baltimore Afro-American* (20 January 1945): 5.

16. George W. Franklin, "An Evaluation of Counseling and Employment Activities of Disabled Negro Veterans" (Ph.D. diss., Purdue University, 1955), 2–6.

efforts may be futile."¹⁷ In addition to vocational training, and in an effort to reimburse disabled veterans for a potential loss in future employability, Congress also granted compensation to all persons who incurred a disability during military service.

In spite of the generous nature of these federal provisions, however, many black veterans found that their return to their hometowns was not so generously received. Indeed, by the early months of 1946 a combination of events had partly answered the question of how American society would respond to the return home of black veterans. Immediately upon their return stateside, many black ex-GIs were harassed, beaten, and murdered by white civilians and police authorities with impunity. Isaac Woodward, for example, while still in uniform was blinded by a South Carolina police chief; brothers Charles and Alonzo Ferguson were shot to death by a local law enforcement official in Freeport, Long Island; and James Stephenson was arrested and beaten mercilessly by police officers in Columbia, Tennessee. In addition to these physical acts of violence, blacks also faced massive unemployment in the auto, steel, and electronics industries, which, combined with the defeat of permanent Fair Employment Practice legislation, left many black veterans jobless and embittered.¹⁸ Adding to blacks' difficulties, the growing chasm between the Soviet Union and the United States and the mounting anticommunist hysteria by the end of 1946 both spelled months of increasing government harassment and persecution for many black progressive organizations and leaders. At the same time, white residents and law

17. Ambrose Caliver, *Postwar Education of Negroes: Educational Implications of Army Data, and Experiences of Negro Veterans and War Workers* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Security Agency, 1945), 13.

18. Created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in response to A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement in June 1941, Executive Order 8802 banned employment discrimination based on race, creed, color, and national origin in defense plants, labor unions, and civilian agencies of the federal government. In addition, the president created the Federal Employment Practices Committee to investigate complaints of discrimination in the war industries during the war. But passage of permanent Fair Employment Practice legislation failed to materialize following World War II due to noncompliance by employers and AFL unions and filibuster challenges from southern congressmen. While historians disagree over the accomplishments of the legislation, the legislation paved the way for civil rights reforms in other areas of employment during the post-World War II period. For more on the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practices and its activities during the 1940s, see Merl E. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946* (Baton Rouge, La., 1991); Andrew E. Kersten, *Race, Jobs, and the War: The FEPC in the Midwest, 1941-46* (Urbana, Ill., 2000); Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue*, vol. I: *The Depression Decade* (Oxford, 1978); Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996); Neil Wynn, *The African American and the Second World War*, 2d ed. (New York, 1993).

officials in cities like Chicago and Detroit rioted against black veterans when they sought entry into previously all-white housing areas. To make matters worse, although returning African American veterans and mainstream black political leaders became more militant, they also faced renewed obstacles throughout much of the South as racist reactionaries sought both to maintain the color line and to prevent African Americans from registering to vote.¹⁹ This societal hostility toward black veterans manifested itself inside hospitals as many black GIs experienced endless bouts of discrimination when they sought assistance from the VA in their search for better jobs, housing, and educational opportunities. Furthermore, officials at VA hospitals and rehabilitation centers in states such as Mississippi, South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, Missouri, and Alabama enforced racial segregation, and often provided blacks with less than adequate health care, personal adjustment counseling, and physical rehabilitation.²⁰

The numbers affected by this treatment were quite significant. In all, approximately 114,000 black soldiers were wounded, both overseas and stateside, usually during training, of whom 24,526 underwent varying degrees of hospitalization and rehabilitation.²¹ Included in this group were the twenty-nine thousand black GIs, approximately 20 percent of all African American cases, who had been hospitalized for neuropsychiatric disorders as a result of depression, anxiety, and nervousness between 1942 and 1945.²² The bulk of combat casualties were sustained during the last two years of the war, as the Allied forces withstood long periods of heavy combat while advancing along the battlefronts of the European and Southwest Pacific theaters of operation, especially in the Serchio River Valley of Italy and the Numa Numa River area of Bougainville Island. As a result, as the summer months faded into the fall of 1945, VA medical and

19. On the postwar reintegration of black veterans after World War II, see, for example, Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst, Mass., 1988); Michael Goldfield, *The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York, 1997); Gerald Horne, *Communist Front?: The Civil Rights Congress, 1946–1956* (Rutherford, N.J., 1988); Onkst, “‘First a Negro . . .,’” *passim*; Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945–1990*, 2d ed. (Jackson, Miss., 1991).

20. “Atlanta Officers Beat Colored Vets,” *Michigan Chronicle* (8 December 1945): 13; Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*; John Morton Blum, *V Was For Victory* (New York, 1976).

21. Frank A. Reister, *Medical Statistics in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 396; Administrator, *Annual Report of the Administrator of Veterans’ Affairs for the Year 1945* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), 58.

22. Reister, *Medical Statistics*, 726–27; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970 Part Two* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 1150.

rehabilitation centers and dormitories in places such as Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, Fayetteville, North Carolina, and Farmington, Connecticut, witnessed a steady stream of wounded veterans attempting to reenter and renegotiate their positions in society.²³

Although the responses of wounded Ninety-third soldiers to their wartime injuries varied from one GI to the next, their army experiences produced both strong sentiments of camaraderie with other black World War II veterans and an awakened social and political consciousness. Many of the men had entered the army at Fort Huachuca four years earlier as teenagers and young adults from all parts of the United States and now, returning home as seasoned war veterans, wondered how the familiar bouts of racism that had shaped their lives as young black men growing up during the Depression years of the 1930s would affect them as African American veterans with disabilities. For example, Phillip A. Coxe, a Virginia draftsman and illustrator, who lost his eyesight and both hands to an explosive charge in combat, wrapped his struggles for full citizenship in the context of his war injuries suffered in Bougainville, claiming that "the four years that I struggled to gain my civil rights and to obtain an education now lay rotting in that hell-hole of the Pacific."²⁴ Equally telling were the comments made by New York City resident James C. Lee, who sustained a head injury in New Guinea. Around the same period, Lee wrote from a VA hospital: "Is this the Democracy that I've spent nearly three years defending in the Pacific? I am a disabled veteran but the deplorable conditions that exist here in this country makes me wonder if I'm going to survive as a Negro."²⁵

It was under these general circumstances of official help but unofficial hostility that many disabled Ninety-third Infantry division veterans made the post-military transition from hospitalization to rehabilitation. Since the injury took place in the adult stages of the soldiers' lives, and as it was unclear what the future held for them, many black veterans experienced severe bouts of acute depression, helplessness, and dependence. Like white veterans with service-

23. Shelby L. Stanton, *Order of Battle: U.S. Army, World War II* (Novato, Calif., 1984), 168; Department of the Army, *Order of Battle of the U.S. Army Ground Forces in World War II: Pacific Theater of Operations* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959), 613–15.

24. Philip A. Coxe to NAACP Secretary of Veterans Affairs, 7 December 1948, NAACP Papers, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. (microfilm, University of Iowa Law Library); Philip A. Coxe to NAACP Secretary of Veterans Affairs, 14 December 1948, NAACP Papers, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. (microfilm, Willard Boyd Law Library, University of Iowa).

25. J. C. Lee to NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White, 27 October 1948, Group II, Box G 18, VA Hospital Discrimination, 1945–1948, Veterans Affairs File, 1940–1950, NAACP Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

connected injuries during the period, black veterans considered work to be of central importance to their state of well-being. At a Toledo, Ohio army hospital in March 1946, for instance, ex-Ninety-third GI Leotha Daniels, receiving intensive medical treatment for a serious foot injury suffered during a mortar attack in the South Pacific, lamented the fact that he would no longer be able to gain suitable employment in order to provide for his mother and uncle and expressed considerable uncertainty about his own future. In a letter, he exclaimed, "What am I to do now? Quite naturally I don't have a large bank account, I haven't a job and won't have one for a long time."²⁶ For some servicemen with visible disabilities, initial reactions to their war wounds and subsequent rehabilitation were framed in the context of male sexual anxieties. While being fitted for prosthetic hands at Virginia's Kecoughtan Naval Hospital, Philip A. Coxe emphasized this point when he commented, "I realize now that my condition leaves only a few things I am able to enjoy as I did when a normal man. My marital life is curtailed because of my present condition and the damage done to me is quite beyond repair."²⁷ Douglas Willis, a paraplegic who was injured during an Army trucking accident in Australia, echoed these sentiments when he bitterly asked a nurse practitioner at the Kingsbridge Veterans' Hospital in New York if it is "true that nobody loves a flat man?"²⁸ Many recently discharged black veterans experienced a constellation of emotions, ranging from self-pity to anger to embarrassment. In the summer of 1945, for example, immediately upon entering Old Farms Hospital, Connecticut, after undergoing a series of operations to be fitted with two metal prosthetic hooks, Vasco D. Hale recalled: "Look at me . . . what was I doing here? I didn't feel at home but yet here I was. I don't want anyone taking care of me but I can't see or feel anything. I was down and out and I spent several months at that hospital just trying to sort things out."²⁹ Likewise, while undergoing treatment for a neurological disorder at a VA hospital in North Carolina during the same period, Nimrod Calhoun also stated, "Being quite ill, worn out, and tired, I'm having an awful time putting things back in order."³⁰

26. Leotha Daniels to Jesse O. Dedmon, 5 March 1946, Papers of the NAACP, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

27. Philip A. Coxe to NAACP Secretary of Veterans Affairs, 14 December 1948, NAACP Papers, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. (microfilm, Willard Boyd Law Library, University of Iowa).

28. "Amputee Auto: Crippled Negro Vet Gets New Model 'Legs on Wheels,'" *Ebony Magazine* 2 (April 1947).

29. "Vasco D. Hale of Bloomfield Connecticut: The World's Most Courageous Man," *Sepia Record* (December 1953): 22-25.

30. Nimrod Calhoun to NAACP Secretary of Veterans Affairs, 14 July 1945, Papers of the NAACP, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Despite the troubled attitudes expressed by Calhoun and others toward their wartime injuries and their acute sense of loss, for some men, initial responses to rehabilitation were quickly supplanted by a fierce desire to maintain a modicum of self-sufficiency and a grim determination to re-present themselves. Holding on to the hope of regaining his vision, and uncertain of future employment, for instance, Hale rejected the long, white, metal cane that blinded men were given to aid their travel. He refused to let his wife Ethel visit him at Valley Forge General Hospital in Pennsylvania for nearly three months during his rehabilitation until he was certain that he could perform a modicum of ordinary tasks, including eating, opening a door, dialing a rotary phone, and shaving.³¹ By contrast, other soldiers openly resisted rehabilitation of their war injuries. Luther McNair, a Los Angeles, California resident, for example, resisted attempts by hospital personnel at San Francisco's Letterman General Hospital to fit him with an artificial leg to replace the one lost to a defective charge during a sniper attack on Bougainville, depending instead upon his wife Lucille to help him maneuver in public.³² While undergoing treatment for combat fatigue in Schick General Hospital in Iowa in late 1945, twenty-eight-year-old Walter Greene, a former YMCA secretary from Detroit, found himself unable to talk to hospital psychiatrists about the emotional stress, anguish, and bitterness that he developed while fighting racism and the Japanese in the thick undergrowth of New Guinea. "The psychiatrist wanted to know what was wrong and I couldn't tell him that I was bitter as gall and sick and tired of this goddamn U.S. Army and all of its goddamn prejudice and discrimination because he hadn't seen how black soldiers were being treated in combat and I had." After receiving numerous sessions of encouragement from his wife and mother, however, Greene eventually came to terms with his emotional condition and developed a new perspective toward rehabilitation, primarily based on his own immediate objective of returning home and reentering the workforce.³³

Greene's initial reaction to his wartime injuries and his gradual response to rehabilitation provides a window into the myriad degrees of ambivalence that wounded servicemen experienced while attempting to define a normalized

31. Ibid., 22-25; "Sight and Hands Gone, His Fighting Spirit Still Lives," *Baltimore Afro-American* (8 April 1944): 7.

32. "Ninety-third Vet Gets 2 Japs at Front; Hurt Behind Lines," *Baltimore Afro-American* (18 November 1944): 7.

33. Mary Penick Motley, ed., *The Invisible Soldier: The Experience of the Black Soldier, World War II* (Detroit, Mich., 1975), 95; telephone interview with Freida Bailey-Greene, Phoenix, Arizona, 19 March 1998; Walter R. Greene Clipping File (in author's possession).

postwar existence for themselves. As Marilyn Phillips, Gelya Frank, and other scholars have suggested, people with disabilities devise a wide array of strategies to disrupt public perceptions of the disabled and to reshape public responses to them while simultaneously fashioning their own definitions of personal fulfillment. By examining the life histories of chronically ill and disabled adults, these scholars have moved well beyond the stigmatic paradigms advanced by Erving Goffman, which negatively describe the lives of people with physical disabilities and their alleged internalization of the disparaging attitudes of the able-bodied population toward them.³⁴ Challenging Goffman's assumptions of devaluation and victimization, Phillips, for instance, has observed that the initial experience during rehabilitation is highly individualized and varies according to the context and situation. Also serving as a brilliant example of what recent trends in scholarship might yield for historians studying the lived experiences of GIs with disabilities, Gelya Frank, writing of adults with multiple limb deficiencies, directly challenges Goffman's view that stigmatizing experiences leads individuals to conceal their differences: "Their choices to display themselves—as in the present research, where each chose not to use a pseudonym—appear to emphasize an attitude of activity against stigma, more than of reactivity to it. By insisting on being visible as people with disabilities and opposing the discourse this visibility provokes, they appear to reject the givenness of stigma, making it an open question for society to deal with, and furthering their sense of, as well as actual opportunities for, self-empowerment."³⁵ Thus, visibility for the disabled becomes a diagnostic tool for transgressing the socially constructed notions that able-bodied segments of American society holds of them and asserting their own right to shape their identities. Although written from the vantage point of the Disability Rights Movement of the 1980s, Frank's challenge provides us with useful clues as to how visibility served as a means for wounded black WWII servicemen to gauge

34. Marilyn Phillips, "Oral Narratives of the Experience of Disability in American Culture," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1984); Marilyn Phillips, "'Try Harder': The Experience of Disability and the Dilemma of Normalization," *Social Science Journal* 22 (October 1985): 45; Gelya Frank, "Venus on Wheels: The Life History of a Congenital Amputee," (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1981); For more on Goffman's influential thesis and recent critiques of the conceptual framework, see Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963); Fred Davis, "Deviance Disavowal: The Management of Strained Interaction by the Visibly Handicapped," *Social Problems* 9 (1961): 120–32; Gelya Frank, "On Embodiment: A Case Study of Congenital Limb Deficiency in American Culture," *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 10 (1986): 189–219; Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch, "Disability beyond Stigma: Social Interaction, Discrimination, and Activism," *Journal of Social Issues* 44 (1988): 3–21.

35. Gelya Frank, "Beyond Stigma: Visibility and Self-Empowerment of Persons with Congenital Limb Deficiencies," *Journal of Social Issues* 44 (1988): 97.

the ambivalent responses of the able-bodied population to them as African Americans with physical disabilities.

The possibilities for such an interpretive approach are unveiled in the life story of Charles Rabb. A Cleveland, Ohio resident, Rabb returned home from Morotai after a round of artillery exploded near him, causing him to lose hearing in one ear. While in a VA hospital in nearby Toledo, the twenty-four-year-old partially deaf cab driver and three other wounded soldiers expressed their resentment over the offhand demeanor exhibited by civilian medical practitioners and aural rehabilitation workers when dealing with their loss of hearing and resisted the staff's attempts to both teach them sign language and give them hearing aids. As a result, the men fell far short of the readjustment goals set by the facility. Rabb and other veterans thought that denial of their disability, and their resistance to the rehabilitative process, would force the medical staff to confront the perceived racism being directed against black soldiers at the hospital. “We didn’t want their pity, just a little decency,” he stated. Yet, the resistive measures adopted by Rabb and other embittered veterans gave way as each gradually developed individual goals and objectives for rehabilitation. For Rabb, these measures of self-fulfillment revolved around his desire to obtain a college education, find comfort in his everyday life, develop a modest proficiency in sign language, and graduate from Cleveland City College in 1949. Shortly after college, Rabb established a restaurant and nightclub along Cedar Avenue, where he remained until his retirement in 1987. Yet for Rabb, and despite his postwar successes, memories of his experiences in the VA hospital still evoked feelings of bitterness and anger. He recalled, “they thought that we were a bunch of fakers. I remember a young, professorish-looking doctor telling one of the visitors, ‘don’t pay too much attention to those niggers. They only want sympathy.’ I knew right then that I had to leave that place. And I finally did.”³⁶

The ambivalent responses of Rabb and other black wounded veterans to their postinjury experiences and the bouts of discrimination they encountered while dealing with able-bodied rehabilitation specialists, medical doctors, and social workers highlight the dual burden faced by disabled black veterans. While considering the role of disabled black veterans in postwar society, medical doctors, psychiatrists, government officials, and pundits devalued the severity of wounds by employing language that combined longstanding racist stereotypes associated with African Americans with the ambivalent feelings harbored by the nondisabled (pity, fear, embarrassment, and antipathy) when they encountered someone in a

36. Charles Rabb, transcribed interview with author, Cleveland, Ohio, 3 August 1991.

wheelchair, missing a limb, using a cane, or wearing a hearing aid. In describing the physical rehabilitation of disabled black veterans, for instance, Jerome Frank, a physician who served as a medical officer with black troops during the war, reported, "exuberance of emotional expression and a strong emotional attachment to their mothers are well-known cultural characteristics of my patients. Because of these sources, there was relatively greater concern about the effects of disability on future achievement. Perhaps this was the reason why so many patients showed a degree of anxiety concerning their physical and mental conditions which seemed quite out of proportion to the actual degree of impairment."³⁷

In a similar manner, clinical tests and published case histories gathered by researchers specializing in neuropsychiatric casualties among black troops saw only those characteristics that confirmed longstanding stereotypes. After months of interviews, testing, and examinations at Ninth General Hospital in the Southwest Pacific during the latter stages of the war, for example, two psychiatrists, Colonel Herbert S. Ripley and Major Stewart Wolf, reported "mental instability," "paranoia," and "hypersexuality" in their diagnosis of black GIs hospitalized for depression, anxiety, and other "minor nervous disorders." The researchers observed, "The incidence of medical and surgical conditions as well as neuropsychiatric disorders was much higher among the Negro organizations than in the white units. Compared to white men, the Negroes in the group observed appeared to be especially prone to develop disorganization of thinking, hallucinatory experiences, and resort more easily to sexual perversion. All of these factors contribute to an exaggeration of mental illnesses among them."³⁸

Equally revealing are the recollections of Henry Williams of his return home. As he prepared to leave military service, he bitterly recalled a conversation between a black physician at the Fort Huachuca post hospital and a newspaperman during which the physician pointed toward a group of African American servicemen receiving treatment, stating: "these are people who not only are of

37. Jerome Frank, "Adjustment Problems of Selected Negro Soldiers," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 105 (June 1947): 651.

38. Herbert S. Ripley and Stewart Wolf, "Mental Illness among Negro Troops Overseas," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 103 (January 1947): 499–512; Also see Isidore I. Weiss, "Psychoses in Military Prisoners," *Journal of Clinical Psychopathology* 8:5 (July–October 1947): 801–15; Morris H. Adler, "The Management of the Maladjusted Soldier at the Basic Training Center," *Journal of Psychopathology* 7 (April 1946): 713–29. However, others attributed the problems of reintegration that black disabled veterans faced to the presence of segregation and discrimination in American society during the period. For example, see Rutherford B. Stevens, "Racial Aspects of Emotional Problems of Negro Soldiers," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 103 (January 1947): 493–98.

no value to the military but of very little use to American society as well."³⁹ Williams's recollection of discrimination shows how deeply he resented the unflattering attention that he and other veterans received from the able-bodied public. For Williams, the failure to accept him as an African American with a disability meant failure to accept him as a functioning human being. By the end of 1946, the degree of anger and frustration that black disabled veterans like Williams felt in dealing with insensitive white able-bodied people became even more acute, as the experience of injury and rehabilitation combined with a new political consciousness to result in the creation of a new, more assertive sense of self.

For Williams and other wounded black GIs, the offensive attitudes and behavior that the public exhibited toward them both as African Americans and as people with disabilities was clearly evident in the VA's distribution of GI benefits during the immediate postwar period. As previously stated, Public Law 16 provided disabled veterans with the opportunity to receive job training. In order to qualify, honorably discharged veterans had to have served on active duty since 7 December 1941, to have sustained a service-connected disability rated at 10 percent or more, and to be in dire need of rehabilitation training to help ease their transition to civilian life. Qualified GIs would then undergo an extensive training period, during which they would receive a monthly allotment based on the degree of their disability, ranging from \$10 to \$100.⁴⁰ Scarcely a year later, Congress passed the GI Bill of Rights providing a large benefits package for World War II veterans, including federally subsidized home loans, college loans with monthly allotments, tuition and books, farm and business loans, vocational rehabilitation training, unemployment compensation, burial allowances, hospital care, subsidized life insurance, physical rehabilitation, and cash bonuses.⁴¹ Far-reaching and broad in scope, these federal aid packages for World War II veterans were much more extensive than any other measures adopted during previous wars.

While federal laws provided blanket benefits to all veterans, however, the administration of these measures was not so universal. In June 1946, Congress authorized the VA to revise its rating schedule for evaluating disabilities. Whereas compensation was previously allocated according to the difference between the

39. Henry Williams, transcribed interview with author, Cleveland, Ohio, 7 February 1993.

40. *U.S. Statutes at Large*, 1943, 43.

41. Davis R. B. Ross, *Preparing for Ulysses: Politics and Veterans during World War II* (New York, 1969), 49; "Government Pensions for Disabled Veterans," *Baltimore Afro-American* (April 1944): 5; John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory* (New York, 1976), 333-40.

productive potential of an able-bodied person and the abbreviated capacity of disabled veterans, future awards were now to be predicated on the assessments rendered by medical examiners and adjudication officers of the veterans' progress during the hospitalization process. "A veteran could continue to receive his full compensation or pension monthly for the first six months in hospital. After that, the pension could be reduced to half the normal amount so long as the recipient remained in hospital," lawmakers declared.⁴² This reliance on the medical diagnosis of physicians, and the arbitrary nature of the term "progress" in adjudicating disability claims, granted wider discretionary power to physicians.

Charged with implementing the injury ratio system, physicians applied non-clinical criteria to reduce or minimize the injuries of black disabled veterans, including "appearance," "cleanliness," and "mental ability."⁴³ Often their evaluations betrayed notions of personal morality. "Guardianship arrangements for Negro patients," the assistant surgeon general and hospital division chief of staff of the VA stipulated, "are the best way to insure that all personal affairs are handled according to the high standards of civilization established by white men."⁴⁴ A Coatesville, Pennsylvania physician expressed his belief to a clinical director that "the time that Negro disabled GIs spent in the service doesn't qualify them for royalties from this man's Army." In his view, "the only legitimate patients in this hospital are free white and twenty-one."⁴⁵ In some instances, VA physicians and officials attributed their diagnosis of disability to perceived medical characteristics that differentiated white and black patients from each other. In particular, white medical examiners drew upon Civil War-era beliefs that blacks possessed weak immune systems and were especially vulnerable to disease and death after emancipation. While examining spinal injuries in black veterans receiving treatment at a California hospital, a VA physician contended, "conversion hysteria is much more common in the Negro than whites and they are particularly vulnerable to the exceptional nature of modern warfare. His awareness extends only to the fact that he feels ill, but he can by certain methods be made to see in many instances that his illness is being kept up by reason of their [sic] being imaginary

42. *U.S. Statutes at Large*, 1946, 319; United States Veterans' Administration, *VA Proposed Revision to the Schedule for Rating Disabilities*, November 1975 (Washington, D.C., 1975).

43. "VA Denies Discrimination at Veteran's Hospital," *Baltimore Afro-American* (16 November 1946): 7.

44. "See New Hope for Negro in New Veterans Post," *Chicago Defender* (1 September 1945), Tuskegee Institute Clipping File, microfilm, reel #93, frame # 0037 (hereafter cited as TCF).

45. Harold Blackwell to NAACP Secretary of Veterans Affairs, 27 October 1945, NAACP Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

gain."⁴⁶ While not written specifically into the VA's disability ratings schedule, these assumptions shaped the practices of regional physicians and claims adjudicators when dealing with black veterans. As a result, African American veterans often found themselves barred from access to the special vocational compensation and rehabilitation allotted to them under Public Law 16 and the GI Bill of Rights. The ordeal of Ninety-third Infantry Division veteran Philip A. Coxe provides an example both of how the revised ratings system was used by the VA to devalue the service-connected wounds of black veterans, and of the frustrations experienced by black disabled veterans as they sought to secure their pension and training rights. After receiving a 90 percent rating for the loss of his hands and eyesight in 1945 Coxe received a letter from the VA Regional Office a year later informing him that the VA's evaluation of his wartime injuries had been reduced to 30 percent and future payment of his pension benefits had been suspended. To make matters worse, after traveling to the VA regional office in Richmond, Virginia to present his case in person, Coxe bitterly recalled, "I was ushered into the office of an eye specialist and this doctor informed me that there was nothing wrong with me, and that my condition was normal. At the same time, a white veteran passed on crutches and the doctor simply turned and asked me if I thought that I should be getting more than the compensation than he was getting." "The whole thing just frustrates and confuses me because I know there are more Colored Veterans who have suffered because of the meanness of local VA groups," Coxe complained.⁴⁷

Fellow Ninety-third division veteran Lemuel Shiver had a similar encounter. The New Haven, Connecticut native received an honorable discharge from the army and a 30 percent rating for debilitating back injuries suffered while performing exhausting labor duties in the Southwest Pacific in 1945. After returning home, Shiver received a letter from his local VA office informing him that his pension benefits were terminated due to the fact that his disability claim had been reduced to below 10 percent. While seeking legal help from civil rights and veterans organizations as he petitioned his injury claims, he vented the frustration he felt when dealing with VA officials. "My physical being bears witness to my disability claim. I feel that I have received an awful injustice and demand that you adjudicate my claim," he told the veteran's committee chairman of the New

46. Percy G. Hamlin, "Camptocormia: Hysterical Bent Back of Soldiers," *The Military Surgeon* (March 1943), 295-300; For more on these beliefs, see James H. Jones, *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment* (New York, 1981), 16-29; Hickel, "Medicine, Bureaucracy, and Social Welfare," *passim*.

47. Philip A. Coxe to NAACP Secretary of Veterans Affairs, 7 December 1948, NAACP Papers, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. (microfilm, University of Iowa Law Library).

Haven chapter of the NAACP in 1948.⁴⁸ As early as the fall of 1944, and thus even before Congress had authorized the revision of ratings schedules for disability claims, some prominent members of the black press had begun to notice the struggles that Shiver and other injured GIs would face. As Baltimore African American reporter Joseph Maddox stated in the fall of 1944, "that many wounded colored veterans will be cheated out of their benefits, unless assisted, is revealed in the VA's rating boards' practice already begun of reducing their disabilities below their initial ratings."⁴⁹

The responses of national veterans' organizations and an array of other institutions to the indifferent attitudes that Shiver and other disabled black GIs encountered from the VA was varied and certainly differed from expectations raised by a war against fascism. The largest existing veterans' organizations, such as the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, refused memberships to black veterans in states like South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, and Louisiana, while segregating them in other states. Likewise, other major veterans organizations, such as the American Veterans of World War II (AMVETS), the Disabled American Veterans, and the Veterans League of America made efforts to recruit blacks during the postwar period, but encouraged them to organize separate chapters and posts at the local and state level rather than tackling the issue of open membership.⁵⁰ More restrictively, some voluntary veterans groups such as the Christian War Veterans, the Committee Veterans of World War II, and the Military Order of the Purple Heart opposed the inclusion of blacks among their memberships altogether.⁵¹ By contrast, some smaller veterans organizations such as the American Veterans Committee, the American Veterans Association, and the United Negro and Allied Veterans of America, Incorporated, admitted black ex-GIs in large numbers and were quite outspoken on civil rights issues, including permanent fair employment practices, anti-lynching, and anti-poll tax legislation, as well as equal housing measures.⁵²

48. Lemuel Shiver to Curtis Smith, 28 July 1948, NAACP Papers, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. (microfilm, University of Iowa Law Library).

49. Joseph H. Maddox, "Veterans' Administration Cheats Wounded Veterans," *Baltimore Afro-American* (28 October 1944): 7.

50. CIO Veterans Committee, *Veterans' Organizations* (CIO Veterans Committee, 1946), 6.

51. "Survey of Veterans' Organizations Show Only Few Open to All Minorities," *Baltimore Afro-American* (22 December 1945): 7.

52. For more on these organizations, see Congressional Quarterly Service, *Congress and the Nation, 1945-1964: A Review of Government and Politics in the Postwar Years* (Congressional Quarterly Service, 1965), 1347; Charles Bolte and Louis Harris, *Our Negro Veterans* (New York Public Affairs Committee, 1947); Howard Johnson, "The Negro Veteran Fights for Freedom," *Political Affairs* 26 (May 1947): 429-40; and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994).

When disabled black Ninety-third veterans sought public assistance from these organizations in their fight to secure their pension benefits, they often encountered indifference and outright hostility. New Haven, Connecticut native James Dailey provides a case in point. Discharged from the Ninety-third Infantry division's 368th Infantry Regiment after receiving a foot injury in Guadalcanal during the latter stages of the war, Dailey arrived home in April 1946. Although Public Law 16 stipulated that GIs with service-connected injuries were entitled to receive counseling and training at a Veteran's Administration Guidance Center after their return to civilian life, Dailey did not receive assistance in his appeal of his disability rating until two years later. During the period, Dailey also sought help from the local DAV office in appealing the adjusted claim, but to no avail.⁵³ During the period, he recalled contacting a local chapter of Disabled Veterans in his hometown on several occasions only to receive “the run around.”⁵⁴

The common experiences that wounded black World War II veterans like Dailey encountered upon their return home, the sense of outrage that they felt regarding the de-evaluative policies of the VA while trying to obtain their GI Bill entitlements, and the grim resolve to forge a new existence led some black veterans to get involved in organizing and community activism. For instance, some injured black ex-GIs gathered at the Sheraton Hotel in Cleveland and formed a disabled veterans group within the Huachucans Association in March 1946. Shortly afterwards, Henry Williams and a handful of association members developed programs to aid the rehabilitation of black Cleveland veterans and staged a series of public demonstrations—“wheel-ins” and “body-pickets”—in front of the mayor's office, demanding adequate rehabilitation centers and housing for returning injured ex-servicemen.⁵⁵ The Huachucans was not the only organization to create a group for and of disabled veterans in Cleveland during the period, however. Less than a month later, Joseph Sokel, Reuben Lewis, and approximately ten wounded ex-division members met at the city's East Side Community Center and created the Collinwood Veterans Group. Through informal gather-

53. Edward McE. Lewis, “Educational Benefits for Veterans,” *American Journal of Nursing* 45 (November 1945): 889.

54. James Dailey to NAACP Director of Veteran's Bureau, 28 July 1948, NAACP Papers, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. (microfilm, University of Iowa Law Library).

55. Henry Williams, transcribed interview with author, Cleveland, Ohio, 7 February 1993; Charles Rabb, transcribed interview with author, Cleveland, Ohio, 3 August 1991; “New Veterans Organization Seeks to Help in Soldiers Rehabilitation,” *Cleveland Call & Post* (5 January 1946), 5.

ings, its members assisted other returning disabled veterans in matters relating to VA benefits, employment, and housing.⁵⁶

Even before the Huachucans Association and the Collinwood Veterans Group were founded, however, another group of veterans formed a grassroots organization intended to translate protest politics into action for black wounded ex-GIs. In March 1945, Ninety-third Infantry division member Vasco D. Hale and approximately 130 blind servicemen from the army, navy, marine corps, coast guard, and merchant marine gathered at Old Farms Convalescent Hospital in Farmington, Connecticut and organized the Blinded Veterans Association (BVA). Emphasizing a sense of camaraderie born of injury and rehabilitation, members of the BVA opened its ranks to black and Jewish GIs. For instance, in 1946, association members welcomed Isaac Woodard into their organization and launched a vigorous campaign to raise funds to compensate him for the injuries he suffered while returning home from the war.⁵⁷

But BVA members also practiced the politics of visibility to publicize the concerns and needs of other blinded veterans throughout the country. They offered assistance to veterans who wished to apply for Veterans Administration rehabilitation programs and pensions, or to appeal VA ratings board decisions. Throughout much of the postwar period its members appeared before the House and Senate committees on veterans affairs to testify on problems related to blind rehabilitation, veterans' access to health care, improved prosthetic services, and the VA's annual budget.⁵⁸ In 1947 and 1948, BVA members raised their voices loudly in protest and presented their cases before the House Veterans Subcommittee and Senate Veterans Committee when they learned that the veterans affairs administrator voiced his disapproval of a Congressional measure to extend free automobiles to all disabled veterans. But their efforts produced mixed results. While the Senate passed the measure, it failed to gain passage by the House of Representatives. But the problems that disabled ex-GIs faced became an integral

56. "Allied Veterans Plan Mass Meet," *Cleveland Call & Post* (27 April 1946), 11.

57. "Woodard Greeted by Blinded Veterans," *New York Times* (9 August 1946), 15; "20,000 Raise a Fund for Blinded Veteran," *New York Times* (19 August 1946), 10.

58. "Blinded Veterans Form Association," *Baltimore Afro-American* (30 June 1945): 7; Richard Dier, "Blind Veterans Organization to Solve Special Problem," *Baltimore Afro-American* (7 July 1945): 3; Robert Brown and Hope Schutte, *Our Fight, A Battle Against Darkness* (Washington, D.C.: Blinded Veterans Association, 1991), 33; My analysis of the Blind Veterans Association has been greatly influenced by David Gerber's "Memory of Enlightenment: Accounting for the Egalitarian Politics of the Blinded Veterans Association," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 18 (fall 1998): 257-63.

part of an expanding public debate over the rights of veterans in society.⁵⁹ Regarding the infinite possibilities of the visibility politics and the linkages of race and disability, perhaps Baynard Kendrick,⁶⁰ a white honorary chairman of the BVA's board of directors, may have expressed what was on the minds of many wounded ex-servicemen when he stated: “These boys who have lost their sight in war don't know the meaning of race or prejudice. Their blindness has blotted out all prejudices. Our aims are to educate the world as to the things blind people can do. They can't all be considered as a class or a group. Our main idea is that if a man's good for a job—he's good for it—that's all. We don't want to depend on charity.”⁶¹ Although a bit overstated, Kendrick's comments are significant, for they demonstrate the ways in which the struggles waged by black and white wounded veterans to aid their injured comrades represented a new brand of antiracist and progressive politics.

This sentiment, along with linkages between race and disability in society, later gained its fullest expression with the Hollywood motion picture production of Kendrick's provocative novel, *Lights Out*, in 1951. Based on the readjustment of Larry Niven, a blinded World War II veteran, the novel and the film trace Niven's experiences while undergoing rehabilitation at Old Farms. There he is confronted with his own deeply ingrained racial prejudices when he discovers that Joe Morgan, a GI that he has befriended, is an African American. Only after engaging in a dual struggle over his own racist feelings and despair over losing his sight does Niven decide to resume his friendship with Morgan. While it reflects many of the convention-alized tropes present in the Hollywood motion picture industry in the mid-twentieth century, the film also demonstrates the extent to which black and white disabled veterans attempted to link race and disability during the period. Perhaps the protest politics that Kendrick and other BVA members embraced provides a partial answer to the question that historian David Gerber poses in another venue: “Why not then proceed to let Kendrick dictate a hypothesis about the BVA's politics: that their politics were born in internal struggle,

59. “Warns on Giving GI Cars,” *New York Times* (9 May 1947), 23; “Asks Limits on Gift Cars,” *New York Times* (13 May 1947), 3; “Blinded Veterans Silent on Defeat,” *New York Times* (8 August 1948), 20.

60. Kendrick was selected as honorary president of the organization because although he was not blind, he had done so much to aid the struggles of blinded veterans during the period while working as an instructor at the Army Convalescent Hospital for Blind Veterans at Avon, Connecticut. There he worked with more than 700 blinded World War II veterans, assisting them as they attempted to re-enter civilian life.

61. Richard R. Dier, “Blind Veterans Organize to Solve Special Problem,” *Baltimore Afro-American* (7 July 1945): 3.

within and among men who shared their society's prejudices but who, in the process of rehabilitation, as they reached out to one another and came to understand the value of solidarity, had an experience of political enlightenment?"⁶² The path to political enlightenment, according to members of the BVA and other disabled veterans, lay in the fact that they understood race and disability to be social markers used to justify social and political inequality between groups, rather than as markers of personal tragedy and insult.

As successful as the Huachucans Association and the BVA were, however, in bringing attention to the concerns of black veterans, their success was limited by the politics of the era. Indeed, in addition to the persistence of the racism against which they fought, activist black veterans, even as they continued to stage demonstrations to air their grievances, were hampered by the advent of the Cold War and subsequent anticommunist hysteria that forced the protest politics developed by wounded black World War II servicemen underground. Yet despite these limits to their success, for Henry Williams and other surviving disabled black veterans, memories of their postwar struggles for their entitlement rights as African Americans and people with disabilities were forever preserved in the rituals of veterans' reunions held years later as they continued to reevaluate and resuscitate this important chapter in their lives. The legacy of their struggle has yet to be fully realized.

62. John Jasper, "Lights Out," *Baltimore Afro-American* (9 March 1946): 5; Thomas M. Pryor, "Happy, Happy Author: Baynard Kendrick Expresses Delight over Film Version of His 'Lights Out,'" *New York Times* (28 January 1951), 5; David A. Gerber, "Blind and Enlightened: The Contest Origins of the Egalitarian Politics of the Blinded Veterans Association," 317–19.