



**THE NATIONAL  
D-DAY MUSEUM  
NEW ORLEANS**

**Take a Memo**  
Primary Documents:  
African American Soldiers on the Homefront

A Lesson Plan from  
The Department of Education of  
The National D-Day Museum

“America’s World War II Museum”

The National D-Day Museum  
945 Magazine Street  
New Orleans, LA 70130  
504-527-6012

[www.ddaymuseum.org](http://www.ddaymuseum.org)

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# Take a Memo

## Primary Documents: African American Soldiers on the Home Front

Primary sources can be documents, pictures, or artifacts that were produced during a certain time. Instead of merely reading second-hand descriptions (secondary sources) of how African American soldiers felt about discrimination during WWII, a good historian will also want to read any official papers from those soldiers. Brigadier General Benjamin O. Davis wrote about those realities in a memo to the War Department in 1943.

**OBJECTIVE:** By reading General Davis’s memorandum to the War Department and answering questions about it, students will learn about the limitations and discrimination endured by black servicemen during WWII. Students will gain an appreciation for researching WWII history using primary documents.

**BENCHMARKS:** **Grades 5-8:** H-1A-M2; H-1A-M3; H-1A-M4; H-1A-M5;  
H-1A-M15; H-1B-M17; H-1B-M18  
**Grades 9-12:** C-1B-H3; C-1B-H4; H-1A-H2; H-1A-H3;  
H-1A-H4; H-1B-H17

### DIRECTIONS:

1. Present a brief lesson on the African American experience during WWII.
2. Introduce students to General Benjamin O. Davis as the United States’ first African American general. Pass out copies of the General’s 1943 memorandum to the War Department for students to read or have students read it out loud. The memo describes the condition of African American soldiers stationed in the South and make recommendations for improvement of those conditions.
3. Pass out worksheet questions for students to complete.
4. Hold a class discussion to explore students’ answers.

**ASSESSMENT:** Components for assessment include the worksheet and the class discussion.

**ENRICHMENT:** Have students compose memos to the principal of the school relating an issue of importance. These memos can be shared in class, but because students do not work for the principal, they should not be sent. If students want to address the principal on a certain issue, they can do so in another form, such as a petition or a formal letter.

WAR DEPARTMENT  
OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL  
WASHINGTON

9 November 1943

MEMORANDUM FOR GENERAL PETERSON.

1. During the last two months I have, with Mr. Gibson, the Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War, visited the colored troops at the following stations: Fort Devens, Massachusetts; the New York Port of Embarkation (New York City, Brooklyn, Camp Shanks and Mitchel Field, New York; Camp Kilmer and Fort Dix, New Jersey), Selfridge Field and Oscoda, Michigan. During 1941, 1942, and the early part of this year, my visits were made to the stations located in the southeastern states, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, Arizona, and Illinois.
2. I have reviewed inspection reports and investigations made by other inspectors general from this office and the field. I was deeply impressed with the high morale and attitudes of the colored officers and soldiers stationed in the states visited in the past two months. They were so different from those of the colored officers and soldiers at the stations located in the Southern states. While there has been an improvement in general conditions, there is still great dissatisfaction and discouragement on the part of the colored people and the soldiers. They feel that, no matter how much they strive to meet War Department requirements, there is no change in the attitude of the War Department. The colored officers and soldiers feel that they are denied the protection and rewards that ordinarily result from good behavior and proper performance of duty.
3. Colored combat units, upon completion of training, have not been sent to theaters of operations. The enlisted personnel of two battalions of Field Artillery has been recently transferred to service units. The War Department, through Assistant Secretary McCloy, has stated that this was directed by military necessity. Somebody in the Department permitted this situation to develop. The personnel transferred from these Field Artillery units is reduced in morale. The commissioned and enlisted personnel left with the Field Artillery units can only look forward to another period of from 14 to 16 months of preparation. They can hardly hold out much hope for an opportunity for combat.
4. The 93<sup>rd</sup> Division has about completed the prescribed training. The disposition of this Division in the near future will have a great effect on the morale of the colored people. In the activation of new colored units, few commanding officers, if any, have been selected from the colored field officers. Some of those colored field officers have completed the courses at the service schools and have been serving in their present grades for long periods.
5. The press news items and reports of investigations show that there has been little change in the attitudes of civilian communities in Southern states. The colored man in uniform receives nothing but hostility from community officials. The attitude is still that of the Governors of six Southern states reported by General Cooke as a result of his inspections,

18 May to 20 June 1942. The colored man in uniform is expected by the War Department to develop a high morale in a community that offers him nothing but humiliation and mistreatment. Military training does not develop a spirit of cheerful acceptance of Jim-Crow laws and customs. The War Department has failed to secure for the colored soldier protection against violence on the part of civilian police and to secure justice in the courts in communities near-by to Southern stations. In the areas recently inspected, the colored soldier feels that he can secure justice in the civil courts. He has not been set upon by the civilian police. He has not been denied the privilege of occupying empty seats in public busses, street cars, etc. Taxicabs do serve him. This is not so in Southern communities.

6. On the training fields the development of morale does not take into consideration Jim-Crow laws and customs. The "Four Freedoms" cannot be enjoyed under Jim-Crow influences. Officers of the War Department General Staff have refused to attempt any remedial action to eliminate Jim-Crow. In fact, the Army, by its directives and by actions of commanding officers, has introduced the attitudes of the "Governors of the six Southern states" in many of the other 42 states of the continental United States.
7. I believe the time has come for the War Department to give some consideration to relieving the colored troops now located in the six Southern states referred to by General Cooke. Some consideration should be given to the replacement of white commanding officers by colored officers of proven ability--those who have met War Department requirements for promotion and assignments. Colored officers commanding colored units would go far toward insuring the confidence of the colored citizens in the fairness of the War Department. Unless something is done in the near future, the War Department in coming in for a great deal of criticism by the politicians in next year's political campaign.
8. I have always tried to be wholly impersonal in connection with the performance of my duties. I have at all times received the kindest consideration and cooperation from those with whom I have been associated. I have striven at all times to successfully accomplish the missions assigned to me. I am grateful for the privilege of contributing to the war effort. The Department can justify its failure to give me a promotion. The colored people only know the long time I have been in grade. I believe a promotion coming to me at this time, and a gradual relief of colored troops from Southern stations, and the assignment of colored officers of field grade to the command of colored units would go a long way toward inspiring confidence of colored people in the War Department.
9. May I take this opportunity to say that I am grateful for the consideration and interest you have displayed in my personal comforts and welfare. I feel that it would not be fair to you if I did not keep you informed of the trend of colored opinions. I ask your indulgence for the personal references.

B. O. DAVIS,  
Brigadier General,  
U.S. Army.

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Primary Documents: African American Soldiers on the Home Front

## Student Worksheet

**Directions:** After reading General Benjamin O. Davis's memo to the War Department, answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper. Some answers are found within the text; other answers require you to analyze the text and use your knowledge of the time. If you use quotes, be sure to put quotation marks around them.

1. What is General Davis's impression of the African American ("colored") officers and soldiers in the north and northeast?
2. What is his impression of the African American officers and soldiers in the southeast?
3. To what does the general ascribe the differences? Use specific examples from the memo.
4. What evidence is there that African American troops want to enter combat against the enemy?
5. What are some overall concerns the general has regarding African American troops, all across the United States?
6. General Davis writes of "Jim-Crow laws and customs." To what is he referring? Look up this term if you do not know.
7. What solutions does the general suggest for increasing the morale and safety of African American troops?
8. What does he suggest for himself?
9. What do you think was the result of the general's memo? Was it effective? How can you find out?
10. Do African Americans and other minorities in positions of power have a responsibility to campaign for minority rights, as the general did in his memo? Why or why not?