World War II is usually referred to as a total war involving the mobilization of all available manpower and material. However, United States involvement in the war was somewhat less than total as American prejudice against African American and female soldiers greatly hampered their efficient mobilization. Members of both of these groups were described as less intelligent and less rational than Caucasian males and unable to face battle courageously. There were fears of the social and cultural changes that might be wrought by employing these groups in combat. It was argued that if African Americans and females were integrated into the military structure, it would damage unit cohesion. As a result they were relegated primarily to support roles and kept segregated. The segregation of Black soldiers was so rigid that on occasion German prisoners of war received preferential treatment.

Part of the problem facing Jim Crow America was that Black soldiers were welcomed in Britain and interacted freely with the citizens there. Because of this positive reception, there was fear of backlash against racial discrimination back in the United States. There was also fear of sexual relationships between Black soldiers and White women.

Robert Edgerton (2001) contends, “what the Army wanted was black laborers to free whites for combat duty.” Female units were also founded with the idea of allowing White male soldiers to be freed to go to the front. African American and female soldiers were allowed to move very close to the danger of combat while filling non-combat support roles.

Women of both races were viewed as the weaker sex and one of the primary areas of perceived weakness was their inability to function rationally under stress. Female units, such as the Women Airforce Service Pilots, were demobilized even before the war was over. This decision did not make strategic or economic sense. It was driven by an American desire to see women return to their homes.

Female soldiers were under scrutiny because of fear of sexual deviance. Two sexual fears were associated with females in the military: homosexuality and promiscuity. Leisa Meyer (1992) wrote an insightful article discussing the great efforts that the Women’s Army Corps and the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps expended trying to promote the image of sexually “healthy” and chaste women. The Army had to convince the public that military women would remain chaste, heterosexual, feminine, and attractive.

Aviation – A Case Study

Aviation roles were highly sought after by White men and were fiercely protected. Females and African Americans in these roles faced stiff resistance. Once trained and deployed, most were restricted to support and maintenance roles. The primary charge leveled against African-Americans and women was that they had less ability. An African American pilot who had to parachute out of a fighter plane that had burst into flames worried that he would be blamed for the accident even though he was without fault. This fear was not without cause.
the 33rd Fighter Group treated the 99th Fighter Squadron, an all-Black force, as a burden. In a scathing review that was published in *Time* magazine and received broad exposure, Momyer portrayed the 99th, which was forced to train at segregated facilities at the Tuskegee Institute, as cowardly and uncooperative.

Meanwhile female pilots were never militarized. Yet despite being restricted from combat missions, female pilots ferried aircraft, served as engineering test pilots, trained ground crews in searchlights, towed gliders, were flight instructors, and assisted in bomber crew training Merryman (1998). In these missions they performed as well or better than male counterparts in the same roles.

**References**

