## Introduction

On June 25, 1941, almost six months before the United States' entry into World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law Executive Order 8802, prohibiting racial discrimination by government defense contractors. The order, which required defense contracts to include a "provision obliging contractors not to discriminate against any worker regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin," was challenged in January 1942, when a US merchant ship refused to take on twenty-five African American sailors. Roosevelt responded with a strongly worded letter stating that "questions of race, creed and color have no place in determining who are to man our ships. The sole qualifications for a worker in the maritime industry, as well as any other industry, should be his loyalty and his professional or technical ability and training."

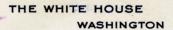
The changes Roosevelt initiated in June 1941 and January 1942 came to fruition with President Truman's 1948 order desegregating the US Armed Forces.

## **Questions for Discussion**

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

- 1. How did FDR use the national crisis to begin the process of breaking down patterns of discrimination?
- 2. African Americans served with distinction during the war. Besides the issue mentioned in FDR's letter, what other forms of discrimination did they face?
- 3. FDR lists "race, creed, color or national origin" in his letter. Why were women, who also faced discriminatory practices, not mentioned? What problems did they face as they sought to serve their country?

## **Image**



January 14, 1942

Mr. Joseph Curran, President National Maritime Union 346 West 17th Street New York, N. Y.

My dear Mr. Curran:

I am informed that the discrimination against colored seamen, referred to in your telegram of January 2nd, was eliminated by the action of the United States Maritime Commission on the day it occurred.

It is the policy of the Government of the United States to encourage full participation in the National Defense program by all citizens, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, in the firm belief that the democratic way of life within the nation can be defended successfully only with the help and support of all groups within its borders.

The policy was stated in my Executive Order signed on June 25, 1941. The order instructed all parties making contracts with the Government of the United States to include in all defense contracts thereafter a provision obligating the contractor not to discriminate against any worker because of race, creed, color or national origin.

Questions of race, creed and color have no place in determining who are to man our ships. The sole qualifications for a worker in the maritime industry, as well as in any other industry, should be his loyalty and his professional or technical ability and training.

Sincerely yours,

Franklin D. Roosevelt to Joseph Curran, January 14, 1942. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC06686)