

## FDR on racial discrimination, 1942

### Introduction

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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

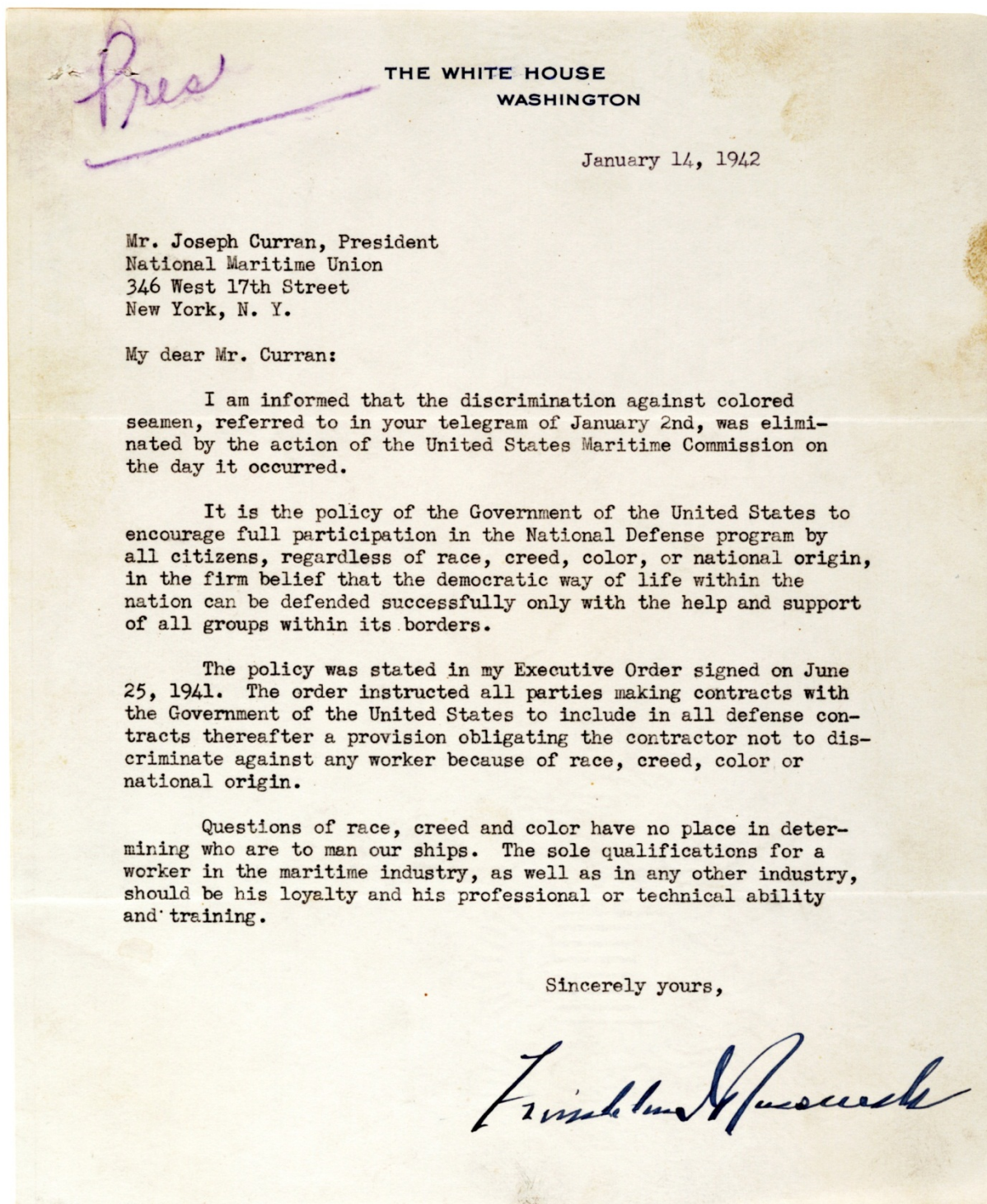
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Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

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?

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Image



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