



## PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

# The Other War with Susan K. Freeman

### JOHN D'EMILIO

As a baby-boom child in the 1950s, World War II was always a part of history. But for the adults around me, the war was very much a living memory. Everyone knew where they were when they learned about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and when they first heard about the dropping of an atom bomb on the city of Hiroshima. Fortunately, none of the men in my family were casualties of the war; none experienced serious injury. And so, despite its toll in human life, they could talk about the war in terms of American heroism and success.

In the case of my family—and for many other white, working-class families as well—the war was also remembered for the benefits it provided at home. After the hard times of the Great Depression, suddenly all the adults in the family—except for the mothers with small children—were fully employed and saving money for that proverbial rainy day. My grandfather was able to buy a house for the first time. Marriages occurred in abundance after the war, and I and all my cousins were among the beneficiaries. We were the children of the baby boom, which the prosperity of the war years helped to make possible. And all around us were other families like ours, consisting of husbands and wives and their young children.

The heroism of World War II and the prosperity it brought to those millions of baby-boom families are a central part of the accepted narrative of U.S. history. Network-news giant Tom Brokaw has described these people and these years as “the greatest generation.” World War II is an inescapable presence in every U.S. history textbook. It is seen as perhaps the most important event in 20th-century U.S. history. No teacher could possibly ignore it.

When I think about World War II, what often comes to mind is an iconic photograph taken in Times Square in New York City, just moments after the signing of the final armistice with Japan was announced. A sailor in uniform is holding tightly onto a young woman in a nurse’s uniform. He bends forward and she is leaning back as he kisses her passionately. Without explicitly saying so, the image captures the way that the war years are understood as a heterosexual experience.

Needless to say, none of the stories about the war that I heard as a child and none of the accounts found in almost every U.S. history textbook mention anything about same-sex love and identity. Queer folks are missing entirely from the commonly accepted version of World War II, at home and abroad. And yet, as a number of LGBTQ historians have discovered, the war years can genuinely be thought of as a nationwide “coming out” experience for gay men and lesbians.

Think about it. The war took almost 16 million young men away from their homes, and families and small towns and put them in an overwhelmingly single-gender environment for several years. A smaller

number of women were also placed in a largely single-gender environment in the military. But in a world in which young men had virtually disappeared from civilian life, large numbers of young women also left their homes and families and small towns and migrated to large cities to take jobs in defense-related industries. They lived in boarding houses with other young women and socialized with other women since so many men were in the armed services and overseas.

For countless numbers of young men and women, both in the military and in civilian life, the war years provided perhaps the first opportunity they had ever had to explore same-gender love and intimate relationships. Free from the constraints that family, religion and their neighborhoods might have imposed, they could discover other men and women like themselves. Whether they were on leave from military service—in port cities like New York, Boston or San Francisco—or living and working among other women, these young people had the chance to explore the clubs and bars that catered to an LGBT population. Not surprisingly, after the war ended, many of them decided to remain in these large cities where the beginnings of queer communities were taking shape.

World War II can rightly be described as a turning point in queer history. It led to larger urban communities, to a strong sense of identity and to the beginnings (by the early 1950s) of an organized LGBT freedom movement. Just as the war is interpreted as a turning point in U.S. history—a great military victory, a larger role for the U.S. in world affairs, the force that launched the wave of marriages and the baby boom—it can also be seen as a decisive moment in the history of the LGBTQ population.

I'm John D'Emilio, and this is *Queer America*, a special series from Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. LGBTQ history has been largely neglected in the classroom. But it's necessary to give students a fuller history of the United States and to help them understand how that history shaped the society they live in. This podcast provides a detailed look at how to incorporate important cultural touchstones, notable figures and political debates into an inclusive U.S. history curriculum.

In each episode, we explore a different topic, walking you through historical concepts, suggesting useful source material and offering practical classroom exercises. Talking with students about sexual and gender identity can be emotional and complex. This podcast is a resource for navigating those challenges, so teachers and students can discover the history and comprehend the legacy of queer America.

World War II created unexpected opportunities and obstacles for young LGBTQ Americans. There was tremendous discrimination but also tremendous community-building. In this episode, historian Susan Freeman will take us from the start of the war through life after military service—providing examples you can share with your students—so you can introduce your classes to this long-hidden aspect of the history of World War II. Here is Susan Freeman.

### **SUSAN K. FREEMAN**

When the United States entered the Second World War, it was a moment of shared experience. The nation united and mobilized to fight against dictatorship and injustice abroad. Our students today have lived through a time when the country is constantly fighting wars abroad, and for them, the ways that the war unified people in the 1940s may be hard to grasp. Sixteen million people joined the armed services during the course of the war and 10 million of those were drafted. Also foreign to them will be the ways

that the war interrupted just about every aspect of daily life once the U.S. joined the fighting. Not only were the people joining the military experiencing disruptions in their lives, but also everyday civilians. They relocated to take industrial jobs in factories and accepted rationing, planted victory gardens and raised funds to support the Allied cause.

As unifying as the war was, Americans didn't experience it the same across the board. The mobilization for war sometimes made worse the divisions and hierarchies. At the same time, it put a stop to certain parts of the status quo. The contradictory impact of war can especially be seen if you look at the lives of women, racial minorities and sexual minorities. There was some good news that came with the temporary upheaval during wartime. For instance, women could report to work in factories wearing pants, and the social order did not fall apart. African Americans were drawn into the military and workplace. And we saw some relaxing of segregation in some instances even though racism persisted in job assignments, housing regulations and other ways. Still, the war enabled advances for people of color and friendships. And camaraderie across the color line formed as well. In addition, the war fueled a desire for justice among those who were being held back by racism, sexism or both.

When we think about the history of wartime mobilization and social change from the perspective of queer lives, we want to think both about the gains and losses; advances and setbacks. There were more opportunities to discover others like oneself, and we saw strict gender expectations and sexual taboos loosen up a bit. Yet there was also a great deal of scrutiny, surveillance and negative consequences for gay and lesbian people—especially built around the idea that homosexuality was a form of pathology. As you help your students appreciate the mixed impact of the World War II era, you can guide them to think about changes both in terms of individual lives as well as thinking about particular communities and the larger society. Since the discourse of freedom was at the forefront of the U.S. agenda in World War II, we can ask our students, “Whose freedoms were secured during the war?”

In 1941, President Roosevelt gave his “Four Freedoms” speech in which he spoke about American interests that might draw the nation into combat. He included ensuring the freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear. The propaganda and rhetoric of the war period deflected attention away from injustices that deprived Americans of basic citizenship rights, especially for Americans who were not white and who were not straight. As historians, we can get our students thinking and reflecting about how the federal government and military branches protected freedom and for whom. Also, we can engage them historiographically with how popular thinking about civil liberties protections has changed over time—which abuses were recognized and which ones received apologies. There are a number of examples you can point to. You could use the example of the apology in the late-1980s for the internment of immigrants and citizens of Japanese descent.

Revisiting with your students these past moments when people were deprived of freedoms or civil liberties is a way to have them think about democratic promises and failures. Re-evaluating past exclusions engages your students in rethinking and rewriting a more inclusive history. It also gets them thinking more about their own education—“When and how and why have educators overlooked some of the more shameful parts of U.S. history?”—especially thinking about high school and middle school classes and textbooks.

If you're listening to this podcast, chances are you're not inclined to shy away from difficult topics. So

let's dive in together and look at the Second World War in terms of queer history. Queer people's place in the story of World War II is part of our national history. Of course, queer histories of the war are rarely highlighted in documentaries on the History Channel, museum exhibits or the pages of standard textbooks—or in the national standards for how to teach U.S. history. Still, our classrooms provide opportunities to make a difference by covering this neglected material.

This episode gives examples of queer World War II-era experiences that you can share with your students. You can help them appreciate how the war was significant in bringing into being a fledgling national queer community. In a short few years, many people came to know themselves as gay or lesbian and to know others who were like them. In fact, the war cultivated and expanded the very notion of homosexuals as a distinct group of people, contrasted with heterosexuals. In terms of a teaching strategy, sharing and honing the stories of queer historical figures will help students make a personal connection with the pleasures, fears and self-understandings that arose in this era. In addition, you can draw connections to social and political questions that are important to our society today. What do we mean by freedom? Is someone more or less deserving of citizenship rights and privileges based on their identities? How did groups go from being outsiders to being insiders in our culture? And also, how do we hold political leaders accountable?

War brings to mind violence, battle scenes and the militarization of society. But World War II for young people was also a period of excitement, new scenes and new possibilities. Imagine the kid living rurally, anticipating an adult life just like their parents. Imagine the young woman whose mother and aunts are employed as domestic servants in white people's homes, with few employment options due to race and gender discrimination. Imagine a mechanically inclined woman whose best job option is office work as a receptionist. And imagine the unmarried schoolteacher whose fascination with fashion leaves him feeling isolated.

With war mobilization, young people could escape the predictable and limiting circumstances of their immediate lives. With wartime relocation came new adventures. Your students may not have thought about the fact that social life was largely sex-segregated during the war. What would that mean for people who had same-sex desires? While they were able to form fierce friendships, and new kinds of intimate relationships were possible, and at the same time the pressure to date or conform to heterosexual norms was lifted, many men and women were elated to inhabit a largely all-male or all-female social world. And many had their first encounters with people who were unapologetically homosexual. Maybe some who hadn't thought of it before would wonder if they were a little bit gay themselves.

Some knew they were gay before joining the service. As one example, Stuart Loomis was a white college student in Omaha, Nebraska. And he volunteered for the Army after Pearl Harbor. He had heard that being gay might get you kicked out, but he was still willing to sign up to join a company of men. Vincent Miles was another college student from the Midwest who had discovered his homosexuality before the war. He grew up in an African-American community in Davenport, Iowa, and quit school to enlist. Miles became an Army medical clerk and was badly injured in the line of duty.

Service members like Loomis and Miles recognized their closeness to death and the risks that came with their service. This vulnerability led many men—gay men in particular—to take chances and throw caution to the wind. Loomis recalled a mentality of “Try to enjoy things because who knows where you

might be sent tomorrow.” Stories like Loomis’s and Miles’ and many others like them can be found in the book and related documentary film, *Coming Out Under Fire*. This is based on the work of late historian Allan Bérubé, whose phenomenal 1990 book remains essential reading.

Phyllis Abry is also someone who joined the military knowing that she had same-sex attractions. During the war, she worked as a WAC radio technician, became a recruiter and was even pictured on a poster encouraging women to join the war effort. While a teenager, Abry had been thrown out of her high school after a love letter she wrote to another girl was found. She got expelled, was kicked out of her father’s house and moved in with her mother in New York City. Later she went to work as a lab technician in Princeton, New Jersey. One of the things she liked about joining the military was the opportunity to wear a uniform. It took the pressure off conforming to feminine beauty standards of the day. In later interviews, she would recall how women all looked a little “butchy” in their uniforms, which helped her and other butch women feel more at ease. And being a WAC facilitated her meeting other lesbians.

Early in her training, she met up with Mildred and they became lovers. Mildred was able to make sure that they had posts at the same Army base in Texas, so they didn’t have to be separated. And they enjoyed a relationship that lasted the duration of the war and for some years after. In 1950, Abry did what so many women were expected to do: She found a husband and went on to give birth to four children. “But,” as she explained, “I couldn’t ever forget who I really was.” You can find the interview with Phyllis Abry in the *Coming Out Under Fire* documentary.

So with these kind of stories, you can help your students appreciate how queer people’s lives were altered by the war. Stuart, Vincent, and Phyllis and Mildred—these are just a few of the millions of young people of all geographic backgrounds, classes and races whose lives changed suddenly and dramatically. In this era without television and the Internet, of course, how would they have known what to expect? Suppose you were one of them? You’ve left the comforts of home, learned a whole new set of rules—both the official rules and the unofficial rules. At enlistment centers, training camps, theaters of war and other war boomtown environments, individuals found others like them—and not like them. They discovered and contributed to a growing gay subculture that would soon be recognizable across the country, whether in San Francisco or Buffalo, New York, or coastal South Carolina. Queer women developed their butch and femme styles; gay men innovated campy forms of gender play and cruising etiquette. An increasingly familiar set of slang terms was shared by homosexuals nationwide. Thanks to the movement of bodies, the creativity of queer people and proliferation of gay social venues across the country, homosexuality was becoming a collective identity.

Queer people—like others joining the war effort—had many motivations to sign up. Patriotism, escape from hometowns, and seeking new personal and professional challenges were part of it. But an additional piece was the hope that service might lead to better treatment and less discrimination. With the rampant racism, ethnocentrism and sexism of the day, people were eager to disprove myths about their inferiority. Men who were teased for not being manly enough might prove their manhood by going to war. It seemed possible that war service could elevate someone, and even an entire group, from an inferior status.

As an exercise with your students, get them talking about what motivates people to enter the service today. Have they considered it themselves? Do they have family members or members in their community who have joined the military? What professional, social and economic opportunities are

promised to those who sign up? And then have them think and imagine what young people in the 1940s would have thought and whether that'd be similar or different to the current generation.

War valorizes masculinity, physical strength and stamina. So naturally, men should rise to the occasion to fight. But what about women who entered the service or took up factory jobs in the Second World War? For them, it was a different story. Wartime propaganda illustrates that there was a delicate balancing act necessary when women began to perform so-called “men’s work.”

Newsreels and magazine features announced to the public that women possess the ability and the might necessary to work as a “Rosie the Riveter.” “We can do it!” was the slogan, one that your students may have seen on posters and memes, including a popular one with Beyoncé. The wartime propaganda had a companion message, though, besides girl power. It worked to convey—with images and words—that servicewomen and factory women were still feminine creatures and well-behaved girls next door. They weren’t doing everything that men did.

For example, when young men entered the military or workforce, there was an expectation that they would be naturally sexually active. Assumptions that men would be heterosexually involved were everywhere. They showed up in the screening of sex-hygiene films that the military offered. Soldiers were passed out pamphlets about venereal disease and distributed condoms. They were treated for VD by the military. So there were many acknowledgments of soldiers’ contact with women—whether they be prostitutes or so-called “victory girls,” girlfriends, whomever. By contrast, enlisted women were not given license to explore or enjoy their sexuality. In fact, military and industry leaders were at pains to insist that women doing war work and war service were well-behaved “good girls.” Women’s gender-unconventional behavior was only acceptable to the public for the duration of the war.

You can help students picture the cultural wartime shifts and roles newly available for women with a couple of different resources. One is the Rosie the Riveter documentary. There are also a series of vintage newsreels which you can find on YouTube. Or also you can search through the Prelinger Collection at Archive.org. If you Google “We’re In The Army Now” and “archive,” you’ll find a 14-minute video on the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps—the predecessor to the WAC, W-A-C. And it explains how women from all walks of life are entering the military, joining the WAC. There’s also a YouTube clip featuring the 1942 newsreel, “New Roles for Women in War.” And it shows, among other jobs that women are doing, women’s motorcycle corps carrying messages and first-aid equipment. Using these images, guide students to appreciate that women’s work was presented as auxiliary to men’s work—a form of help that was often given legitimacy by making it seem like things that women already did. And as was the case in peacetime, women of color found themselves with fewer opportunities for challenging work and leadership roles compared to their white counterparts.

You can further students’ appreciation of the contrast between propaganda and everyday experiences by having them think about the stories of lesbian Rosies and servicewomen. If you’re already teaching about gender and World War II, use this opportunity to go deeper. You can explore stereotypes about women in the military, and women doing so-called “men’s jobs,” then and now. Ask them to think about whether the taboos are still around today. The work women did during the war included riding motorcycles and driving buses, doing shift work, working with heavy equipment and so on. Was this really different than

the physically demanding and often dirty work that was labeled “women’s work”? What was really being transgressed here?

After hours, women had opportunities to socialize in public without men. They took up smoking, drinking, stayed out late. The double standard of acceptable behavior for women versus men relaxed quite a bit during the war. Yet what about the women who delighted in filling men’s roles a little too much?

Fears and suspicions about women’s behavior was not just a problem for individual lesbians who might get in trouble, but they might spoil the reputation of the entire Women’s Armed Forces. Women leaders of the Women’s Army Corps, for example, wanted to prove the WAC’s competence so that the experiment could continue. They understood that male-dominated society needed to believe that women were still submissive to men. If the armed services were perceived to be hotbeds of homosexuality, the experiment of women’s military branches might fail altogether. Officers in the Women’s Armed Forces, therefore, preserved the reputation of their units by downplaying the queerness that existed in their ranks.

Women only ever composed less than 2 percent of the armed services during World War II. Men were joining on such a larger scale, and their encounter with the question of homosexuality arose at the very first step of induction. At the beginning of World War II, the military formalized a process for rooting out homosexuals in the Men’s Armed Services. It’s not that avowed homosexuals were embraced before this time but now, as of World War II, they were systematically sought out and disqualified. Often, the induction procedures included a point-blank question about homosexuality.

Here’s an example from a man who was at the time an English teacher. He was in his late-20s and interviewing to enter into the Navy. During his interview for induction, he looked at the man across the table from him and decided he was probably gay. He looked to him like what he described as a “big queen.” And he recalls that the examiner asked, “Did you ever have any homosexual experiences?” Our savvy applicant replied, making direct eye contact, “No!” His examiner replied, “That’s good!” So the Navy recruit successfully gained admission into the service, but as he told Allan Bérubé in an interview later in life, he was certain that they were playing their parts without being truthful. Another way the question was posed was inquiring “Do you like girls?” You didn’t have to lie to say, “Yes, I like girls,” because liking girls wasn’t the same as sleeping with them.

Although homosexual conduct had not been welcome in previous decades, it’s only in 1942, near the beginning of U.S. involvement in the war, that homosexuals were treated as a distinct kind of person, not just someone who engaged in a particular behavior. That’s important to know because it’s part of a longer story in queer U.S. history of changing views about the nature of homosexuality. While expertise about homosexuality was in flux, the military established protocol based on what we now see as flawed and harmful beliefs. The view coming into vogue was that homosexuality was a mental or psychological state, one understood as sick or mentally ill. Psychiatrists were boosting their power through collaborating with the military screening process, and at the same time, the military was bolstering its authority in shaping social norms, using psychiatrists to do their bidding. These combined efforts helped to solidify a concept of a binary between heterosexual and homosexual. These were supposedly two different types of people: one “normal,” and the other, well, “queer.”

In the years after the war, Alfred Kinsey’s research would provide data showing that assumptions about

what counted as “normal” sexual behavior were wrong. But during the war years in psychiatric and military circles, they operated with the belief that homosexuals were an identifiable and unwanted population with mental health issues. Psychiatrists then weren’t only interested in detecting people who had committed same-sex acts, they were also trying to identify people with so-called “homosexual tendencies.” Such people might become homosexuals or “sexual psychopaths,” as they thought of it.

Beyond that, there were lingering beliefs about homosexuality from earlier schools of thought developed by sexologists. A major carryover idea was the belief that homosexuality could be revealed through the body. In this understanding, a physical exam might find evidence of a person’s “degeneracy,” to use their term. Of course, we don’t share these views of homosexuality being written on the body. To these thinkers, degenerates and homosexuals included a variety of men including men whose bodies didn’t conform to masculine ideals, men who they felt displayed effeminate gestures and behaviors, and also men who had anatomical irregularities that supposedly indicated past sexual histories.

The techniques they used to identify queer people made queer individuals vulnerable to ongoing questioning and policing. At the same time, kind of ironically, the topic of homosexuality seemed to crop up everywhere, including the sex-education talks that the Army was offering. Whereas before World War II, homosexuality was a bit of a fringe issue in the military and in the larger society, it took on a bigger life in the Second World War. Not only were there the men who confessed to homosexuality, men without experience who possessed homosexual tendencies were a new group to detect. The new and rather muddy thinking tested the capacity of screeners to distinguish hetero from homo. So even as they were working to classify people with their binary terms, the methods were crude and ineffective. It’s in this context that we see men resisting and deflecting the questioning in various ways, and it’s estimated that about 4,000 to 5,000 were kept out of the service because of homosexuality. Many, many, many more times that number people with same-sex desires and histories entered the military undetected.

### JOHN D’EMILIO

This is *Queer America*, and I’m your host, John D’Emilio. You can learn even more about gay men and lesbians in the Second World War in a valuable collection of essays called *Understanding and Teaching U.S. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History*. This podcast is produced in partnership with the University of Wisconsin Press—publishers of this anthology, which was edited by Susan K. Freeman and my co-host, Leila Rupp. It is the first book designed for high school and university teachers who want to integrate queer history into their standard curriculum. From now until the end of the year, the University of Wisconsin Press is offering a 30 percent discount for *Queer America* listeners who order this collection. You’ll find a link to purchase the book at [Tolerance.org/Podcasts](https://tolerance.org/podcasts). Just use the promotional code: QAPODCAST, all caps. Again, here is Susan Freeman.

### SUSAN K. FREEMAN

During the war, the military put on variety shows, and these were performed by casts of amateur GIs. These GI shows were intended to help build morale, raise funds and entertain troops and civilian audiences. They included song-and-dance numbers, acrobatics and juggling, comedy and more. In the sex-segregated military, the shows put on by male soldiers and sailors required somebody to play the women’s parts, assuming that those women’s roles were important to the storylines on stage. Well, apparently they were, and many numbers addressed the problem by using female impersonation by male

performers. The shows, in other words, provided a stage for something that we think of as drag today. These variety shows complicate the picture of masculinity during World War II, and they'll provide an interesting opportunity to expand students' appreciation of the era.

Visuals are necessary to convey what the World War II shows were like to your students. The documentaries *Coming Out Under Fire* and *Before Stonewall* both feature video footage of wartime cross-dressing performances. And they use footage drawn from the 1943 movie, *This Is the Army*. It's a movie based on Irving Berlin's Broadway show of the same title. And you can find the video version of the movie available online in its entirety. This vintage movie allows your students to view men on the stage dancing and singing in women's costumes, makeup and wigs. You can view the material and discuss lyrics and dialogue including double entendres, ironic situations and campy performances with gay subtext and coded language—inserting terms like “fairy” and “fruit” and introducing characters called Nelly or Butch. Also, note the cross-dressing and camp wasn't confined to the stage. It seeped into nearby communities, too. While preparing for a show in Myrtle Beach called “Private Maxie Reports,” a group of soldiers went looking for costumes at a women's dress shop in Savannah, Georgia. The owner not only helped the men try on a bunch of gowns to find ones that would work—and this was a bit of a challenge, given that one of the men was 6 foot 6 inches tall. The proprietor didn't just loan the gowns, she gave them to the men for free and they promised her comp tickets to the show in exchange.

Besides cross-dressing, the shows sometimes employed blackface and tropes from racist minstrel performances. *This Is the Army's* cast, for example, included both black and white performers, yet segregation prevailed in the individual numbers. “Mandy,” for example, is a song performed by an all-white cast of men—men wearing blackface—who then formed male-female black couples. A different number set in Harlem has an all-black cast of men singing and dancing, along with a significant role for Joe Louis as himself in military uniform. Most of the black dancers in the Harlem number are masculine presenting, but there is a bit of female impersonation in it as well. Also know that in the backdrop, the stage set has paintings of oversized racist caricatures of black people. So after previewing this material, then you'll want to give thought about how to contextualize these harmful representations in your classroom.

Probably most convenient for your classroom use is a four-minute New York Historical Society YouTube video. It features historian George Chauncey talking about the soldier shows, with images and video interspersed. The title is “World War II and New York City: Staging Soldiers Shows from Burma to Broadway,” and it was uploaded in September 2012. The clip shows videos of GIs wearing dresses, dancing and acting in women's roles, and in some cases enacting romantic scenes. The YouTube video also includes still images of dress patterns for drag outfits supplied to the troops by the U.S. Army.

After screening, you can ask: “What surprises you most about the cross-dressing elements of the variety shows? How is having fun in drag a thing that men in the Army would do in the 1940s? And what does this say about masculinity and its flexibility in the mid-20th century?”

So we've got, on the one hand, people being screened out of the military for homosexuality and at the same time, military leaders are not just tolerating gender-bending performances, but facilitating and encouraging them. If cross-dressing and dancing with other men onstage was seen as an amusing spoof,

was it possible that in other parts of straight society that there was more tolerance or even pleasure in observing gender transgression and camp?

Consider with your students the many different meanings performing in drag could have for different participants and audiences, and also whether “drag” is even the right term for it. It might be an occasion to talk as well about how the world of theater and performance has a reputation for embracing nonconformity of gender and sexuality. Drama students and dancers and others in your classes can testify about whether they see this at your school or in the community or not.

So we’ve established that war was a time of upheaval, with both discomforts and opportunities. Gays and lesbians could demonstrate their membership in the national struggle and also enjoy greater acceptance of unconventional behavior. Gay and lesbian people might also understand themselves to be part of a community with a growing repertoire of ways to communicate identity and desire ... was becoming more uniform from place to place. There was a staggering new visibility of homosexuality in World War II as we’ve seen: screening questions about homosexuality, the GI variety shows full of campy cross-dressing and bawdy humor, couples of men and women pairing up all over the place, and even the list of off-limits bars known to be frequented by queer people.

Political debates arose about how to handle homosexual cases in the military, and we’ll talk in a moment about the people who were kicked out of the military because of their homosexuality. This new amount of visibility had its upside and its downside. As it reduced isolation and built community, it also made people vulnerable to detection and punishment. So gay visibility in World War II, with its pluses and minuses, is an excellent topic to engage your students with.

The topic resonates with some of the more recent history on transgender and gay troops. And since it was before their time, you can explain to them about how the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” approach initiated in the 1990s by the Bill Clinton administration, how that worked. On the one hand, it was clearly a step backward that encouraged people to lie or be deceitful. But on the other hand, it was supposedly a step forward: the military had concluded that gay people were no longer constitutionally or psychologically unsuited to be in the service. But up until the repeal of “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” gay service members had to keep their sexuality secret or to stay in the closet. Half a century earlier, the explicit ban on homosexuals in the service meant a similar pressure to be discreet. This need for discretion applied to not just the screening phase, but also the entirety of one’s service, and even after that.

The vast majority of those ejected from the military for homosexuality during World War II were men. Before talking about their experience, it’s worth mentioning that women were less systematically scrutinized than men during the war. Part of this is due to sex stereotypes; women weren’t as readily imagined as sexual psychopaths. But also it’s about numbers. With only 275,000 people joining the women’s branches of the armed services during the war—and, of course, no draft—their situation was very different from men’s. In the latter part of the war, though, fears and rumors arose about whether women were joining up to “indulge” their “sexual perversity.” Enlisted women, their officers and other higher-ups in the military were then discussing homosexuality and, in some cases, fretting over the possibility.

There was a letter sent to the War Department in 1944 claiming that a WAC camp at Fort Oglethorpe outside Chattanooga was full of homosexuals and sex maniacs. So they investigated the rumor. The

conclusion? The Inspector General's finding was that there was very little evidence of homosexual practices and that the incidence seemed no greater and probably less than in the civilian population. Lesbians' oral histories would suggest otherwise, a topic we'll come back to in a moment.

### JOHN D'EMILIO

This is *Queer America*, and I'm your host, John D'Emilio. We hope you're enjoying the Teaching Tolerance family of podcasts: *Teaching Hard History*, *Queer America*, and now, *The Mind Online*. In our newest show, host Monita Bell explores the critical aspects of digital literacy that shape how we create and consume content online. Discover what educators and students alike need to know to become safer, better-informed, digital citizens. You can find *The Mind Online* at [Tolerance.org/Podcasts](http://Tolerance.org/Podcasts). Here is Susan Freeman.

### SUSAN K. FREEMAN

For people whose homosexuality was detected during the service, they were likely to receive what was known as a "blue discharge," and it was called that because of the color of paper that it was printed on. A blue or an undesirable discharge didn't fit into the usual categories that the military used. Honorable and dishonorable discharges were the ones that they normally administered. Blue discharges were for people dismissed because they possessed what the military saw as undesirable habits and traits of character. They were subject to immediate expulsion with a blue discharge. Cases of homosexuality, bedwetters, alcoholics and people who engaged in acts of resistance—and especially, for example, by black soldiers who faced racism in the service and fought back against it—these were all causes for a blue discharge. Over 50,000 people received these blue or undesirable discharges during the war, and the largest subgroup was African-American men.

People with blue discharges lost important rights throughout the process. First of all, they didn't get a process to have counsel, to submit evidence—the normal impartial process of court-martial investigation that other people discharged under the honorable or dishonorable system did. They also didn't get a public hearing. So on the one hand, the informality and expediency of blue discharges may have been momentarily appealing to soldiers, because you could just avoid having your business made public, at least temporarily. But in the long run, a blue discharge could not be kept secret indefinitely. Families and friends learned about them. You had to present your discharge papers if you're going to look for jobs, seeking education or other benefits. So the stigma of a blue discharge haunted veterans for life. As many as 9,000 gay or lesbian GIs were kicked out of the military with one of these discharges.

The GIs who received undesirable discharges were shortchanged, but they also weren't entirely isolated. They formed a community of sorts, including a group that referred to themselves as "Blue Angels." Howard Taylor—that's a pseudonym—saved a treasure trove of World War II-era letters among him and his friends who referred to themselves as the "Blue Angels," as they all had received blue discharges. Taylor's story was that he had been stationed in Missouri. And in 1944 he ended up having a sort of mental breakdown—exhausted by the experience of anti-homosexual harassment—and he told people he was gay. He expected to receive an honorable discharge. It was clear to him that it was the Army's discriminatory environment that was making him sick, not his sexual orientation. So even though his military service ended with a blue discharge, he had his Blue Angels friends, and his correspondence also shows that his mother and father were proud of him and did not condemn him for being gay.

Also, the story of Army mess sergeant and officers steward Stan Carlow shows what the blue discharge

process was like. His ejection was part of a mass investigation that removed homosexuals who were stationed in Australia. He came across a notice stating that men with homosexual tendencies should report to a medical officer to be sent home. The announcement promised no benefits would be lost. So he and some of his friends reported. They ended up being transferred to some different hospitals where they were treated as inmates and psychiatric patients, and eventually, they were told to sign confessions about their homosexuality. Carlow's Coral Sea badge was taken away, and he was deposited back in the United States with a blue discharge. For decades he contested this discharge. Finally, in 1981 he was upgraded to an honorable discharge. At that point, he received an apology for the Army's acts of injustice during the war. Over the years, up to a third of those receiving blue discharges for homosexuality contested their status.

The protest against unfair treatment in the service is a theme of queer history that you can link to civil rights struggles more generally. For example, the African-American newspaper the Pittsburgh Courier was one of the most vocal critics of the blue discharges in the 1940s. A widely read black newspaper of the era, it objected to the termination of black men who received blue discharges because of their resistance to being treated as inferior. "Undesirable traits of character" was a label, as I mentioned, that was applied to African Americans who expected to be treated with fairness and respect. "Undesirable discharges should end," the Courier editorialized, "as there is no twilight between honor and dishonor." After the war, psychiatrist William Menninger called the undesirable or blue discharges punitive and unfair, and certainly non-medical.

Some gay soldiers embraced their outsider or outlaw status, perhaps experiencing a rush from flouting the conventions of the day. For example, while assigned to an office in Myrtle Beach, Woody Wilson didn't tamp down his gay sensibility. In fact, he's one of those that was out shopping for gowns in Savannah. At his desk, with extra time on his hands and access to printing resources, Wilson created a gossipy newsletter about military friends and acquaintances who were gay. Creators Wilson and his compatriot known as Kate were thrown in the stockades when the newsletter was discovered. While in detention, they proceeded to wisecrack and camp it up for the amusement of themselves and others. The two men got discharged without honor, although they did not get a blue discharge. They received a court-martial trial and spent a year at a federal prison which concluded with a dishonorable discharge for wasting military resources. You can learn more on this story and see a few images of the pages of the mimeographed newsletter in a 2011 collection of Bérubé's writings, *My Desire for History*.

Some lesbian WACs possessed a similar boldness. In the decades before the war, WAC veteran Johnnie Phelps shared how she found community with other lesbians in the armed services. In the documentary *Before Stonewall*, Phelps memorably tells a story involving her commanding officer at the time, General Dwight Eisenhower. When, according to Phelps, she was put on the spot about providing a list of lesbians in her battalion, she insisted that she would need to be the first on the list. Phelps recounts that she then conveyed to the general that it would be a mistake to eliminate lesbians. "Be aware that among these women are the most highly decorated women in the war. There've been no cases of illegal pregnancies, there have been no cases of AWOL, there have been no cases of misconduct. And as a matter of fact, every six months since we've been here, sir, the general has awarded us a commendation for meritorious service," she claimed. Writing in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, historian Donna Knaff has shown that the details of the story are contradicted by Phelps' actual war service records. But the story's still very teachable. It conveys the self-concept that Phelps had—locating the war as a time when she learned to stand up for herself and other lesbians and to see them as having a common plight. The story also

illustrates the courage it would have taken to come out and speak without shame as a gay person, risking expulsion from the military. Also, it suggests that having military units full of lesbians could serve the purpose of improving performance and unit cohesion, not weakening it.

Another example of queer solidarity: some gay soldiers who were honorably discharged after the war formed a Veterans Benevolent Society in New York City. They brought together 75 to 100 members and hundreds more who joined them for social activities. The Veterans Benevolent Society members shared identities as homosexual and veteran, and they functioned as a mutual aid society for social events as well as legal and employment assistance. The group lasted until 1954, and it was one of the earliest gay membership organizations in the country. These men are a reminder of the growing sense of community that developed during the war and beyond. People were beginning to want to be seen and to see one another as homosexuals, as part of a community. With individuals contesting their persecution and glimmers of collective struggles, we can see that the queer history of World War II reveals how being seen led to vulnerability as well as the possibility of joining together for social change.

### JOHN D'EMILIO

This is *Queer America*, and I'm your host, John D'Emilio. Teaching Tolerance has learned a lot about what LGBTQ students need to thrive—how even small policy adjustments and curriculum changes can make a big difference in the lives of queer and nonbinary students. We also know that LGBTQ-inclusive schools benefit all students. Our new LGBTQ Best Practices Guide can help educators and school leaders ensure that all students feel safe, seen and capable of success. By creating a curriculum as complete and representative as possible—and cultivating a school climate that fosters open and respectful dialogue among all students and staff—you're preparing your students to engage and thrive within our diverse democracy. You can find it at [Tolerance.org/Podcasts](https://tolerance.org/podcasts). Again, Susan Freeman.

### SUSAN K. FREEMAN

Discrimination and resistance persisted into the post-war period. Likely more than a million gay World War II veterans—people who made it through undetected—received a warm reception back home. As veterans, they were eligible for generous GI benefits that were part of the expansion of the middle class. As your students are learning, the benefits were an important route to social citizenship in post-war society. You can stress that the benefits were primarily for men because the premise was that men were and should be heads of household. They could get funding for college and vocational training; unemployment allowances; employment placement through the Veterans Administration; as well as home, farm and small business loans.

Remember, the 9,000 people with blue discharges for homosexuality, and the tens of thousands of others with similar undesirable discharges did not receive those benefits. So, as you invite students to think about the many things gained during the war in terms of reducing isolation and building queer community, one of the war's lasting impacts was pretty negative. The war further solidified a link between citizenship and heterosexuality.

This points us to our final theme for the World War II era. With guidance from Margot Canaday's book *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, we can think about how various policies institutionalize citizenship rights and responsibilities. These rights and responsibilities are designed by and for heterosexuals. They explicitly privilege heterosexuality in their design and implementation.

So imagine you were a man who had served in the war and then discovered to be gay after the war, were asked to pay back the federal government your GI loans. Historians have found a handful of cases

of this sort, and probably there were many more that we'll never know about. So here's one example. There was a veteran who was attending school in Miami at LaFrance School of Beauty Culture. He used GI benefits to cover his \$500 of tuition and received an allowance of \$50 a month. Then he gets outed in a Miami Herald newspaper story, which a Navy official read and then reported him to the Veterans Administration. Promptly his benefits were canceled.

So queer people's ability to thrive and enjoy social welfare programs that expanded citizenship during the post-war era was not guaranteed. This points to larger questions you can ask your students about the links between citizenship and heterosexuality. How does being straight open doors and ensure fair treatment in this time period? How does heterosexual privilege interact with racism, sexism and class inequality to protect some people's interest at the expense of others?

Talk to them about the ways that people who were considered minorities—gays and lesbians, African Americans, Native Americans and so on—were excluded or else offered only partial citizenship privileges. You can get them to recognize how fragile gay and lesbian citizenship was, and you can get them to think about all the ways that straightness gets embedded into systems and structures. Lots of examples you can use to illustrate this, including educational benefits. If these are extended to all veterans and yet schools and universities have policies of racial segregation or racial quotas, how accessible is the educational benefit to all veterans?

Besides universities, banks would be another institution, or also Veterans Administration offices with all-white employees where people would face discrimination. Another facet of discrimination came through neighborhoods that employed redlining and restrictive covenants to exclude homeownership for Jews and African Americans, supposedly in the service of protecting the property values—resale values—for the white and non-Jewish homeowners.

So you see the rewards of service and citizenship were not straightforwardly available to everyone. The government's generosity through GI benefits were not received in equal measure by all former service members. If you had to pass through hospitals, banks, schools, businesses, employers, other institutions, the forms of inequality one face could be multiplied.

And still, gay individuals and communities came out of the war stronger than ever. The government's rewarding of heterosexuality was not enough to suppress burgeoning queer communities. They continued to grow, even as repression ramped up during the 1950s. Yes, the Cold War and the Lavender Scare made so-called sexual deviance even more dangerous. And the return of conventional gender roles after the war was especially tough for women who had experienced freedoms of dress and movement in the prior decade. The stakes were higher in some cases, such as the particularly virulent efforts to purge lesbians from the Women's Armed Services that happens right after the war in the late-'40s and early-'50s.

But as your students will appreciate, the state was merely one force—of course, a powerful force—in people's lives. Networks and house parties and bar communities thrived. Queer people found lovers, formed relationships and friends circles, organized socially, and not too far down the line they would be organizing politically as well. The war contributed to and accelerated these developments in cities across the country. Within a decade of the war's end, individuals who formed the homophile movement would pave the way for collective struggle for recognition, self-understanding and fair treatment. In the era of gay liberation, coming out became an imperative and a powerful way to mobilize a marginalized community to demand full citizenship. It was all about visibility and claiming the right to self-define gay and lesbian identity against the false and harmful beliefs in the general public and among professionals: things like the idea that homosexuality was sick, immoral or a criminal behavior.

Teaching your students with stories from the Second World War helps them see how an assertion of visibility and acts of resistance in the 1960s, like at Compton's Cafeteria or the Stonewall Inn, didn't arise from nowhere. Gay and gender-nonconforming people were beginning to see themselves as an oppressed minority in the 1940s. And over time, individuals would unite to contest that status. The disability rights slogan—"Nothing about us without us"—might be instructive here. Federal government and military leaders—largely straight and cis-gender people—were the ones who exerted authority about homosexuality based on their supposedly disinterested viewpoint. Yes, there were some well-meaning straight allies and a few of the experts were queer themselves, but it took a strong social movement to de-center straight people as the main experts about homosexuality. In the Second World War, we see the beginning stages of homosexuals speaking as homosexuals, advocating for their own rights, knowing that others like them were persecuted as well and deserve something better. We began to see a glimmer of hope for change.

We've looked together now at how visibility in the era of World War II had a double-edged quality. Gay people could find one another, but they might also be found out and deprived of an opportunity to serve or to work. Gay and lesbian communities were emerging, instilling a stronger sense of collective identity that would eliminate isolation and enable more resistance in coming decades. But in that war and afterward, there were still powerful forces treating homosexuals as second-class citizens. The experience of the war only brought material benefits for gay and lesbian veterans who served undetected. They were, after all, the vast majority of gay and lesbian people who served. And yet, the ultimate message was that freedom and citizenship was most secure for heterosexual white men.

Visibility is often seen as a positive accomplishment by the LGBTQ community. Yet World War II shows how it could also make you a target for persecution. This is no less true today. For example, perhaps you've noticed it's become popular in social movement, queer and academic circles to have everyone share their pronouns. This practice is meant to eliminate people guessing and attributing gender based on superficial clues, and also to reduce misgendering. A lot of us proudly adopt this practice, and many in the trans community applaud it as a way to call attention to using everyone's correct pronouns.

And you may have noticed that we've moved away from saying "preferred" pronouns to something more like "correct" pronouns in the same way that many gay people would come to reject the notion of sexual "preference" as sounding a little bit too flimsy and preferring something like sexual "orientation" or sexual identity. So introducing oneself with pronouns can be a valuable way to validate trans identities. But that visibility isn't safe or comfortable for everyone. Think for a moment about what this sharing of pronouns does for trans people who would like to stay under the radar, who aren't secure in a particular space to name their identity, or for people who for a variety of reasons don't wish to specify pronouns.

All of this returns us to where we started, thinking about questions of freedom. The United States has decided that people who serve their nation deserve compensation, respect and benefits. And now that queer people can openly serve in the military, they can access those rewards. But how secure is their freedom? What about trans people whose right to serve openly and obtain equal benefits is in jeopardy? Also, we must think about queer people whose citizenship status, their racial and ethnic identities, religion, disability status or experience of sexual harassment and violence still subjects them to biased treatment.

A new generation of young people—the students we teach—they're less likely to think that heterosexuality is a prerequisite for citizenship than previous generations. But full membership in society is more than rights on paper. It's also how you're treated in small ways on a day-to-day basis. Whether that's in the classroom or at the bus stop, at a park or in a department store, while scrolling through social media or dancing at a club, we learn our place in society.

As a teacher, you can attend to both historical and present-day dimensions of citizenship and inclusion. Equipped with even a cursory knowledge about queer history, you have a powerful opportunity to expose your students to questions about justice, to introduce them to past struggles for visibility and fairness, to attend to the social dynamics of inclusivity and respect as they play out in a day-to-day way. Doing this, you can truly make a difference in individuals' lives. And you can help transform the culture as well.

### JOHN D'EMILIO

Susan Freeman is an associate professor and chair of Gender and Women's Studies at Western Michigan University. She also co-edited the anthology that is the basis of this podcast. This episode is inspired by a chapter on gay men and lesbians in the Second World War by Marilyn Hegarty. Susan is the author of *Sex Goes to School: Girls and Sex Education before the 1960s*. Her current research examines the development of Gay and Lesbian Studies classes beginning in 1969.

We hope you're enjoying *Queer America* so far. We'll be back after the new year with our next episode. In the meantime, drop us a line on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram and let us know what you think.

*Queer America* is a podcast from Teaching Tolerance, in partnership with the University of Wisconsin Press. They're the publisher of the award-winning anthology *Understanding and Teaching U.S. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History*. In each episode, we're featuring a different scholar to talk about material from a chapter in that collection. Use the code: QAPODCAST—all caps—to get a 30 percent discount when you purchase the book through [Tolerance.org/Podcasts](https://Tolerance.org/Podcasts).

You'll also find additional tools—including resources we've mentioned, episode transcripts and an LGBTQ Best Practices Guide to help your school create an inclusive curriculum and an open ... and respectful climate for dialogue among students and staff. Teaching Tolerance is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center—providing free resources to educators who work with children from kindergarten through high school. You can also find those online at [Tolerance.org](https://Tolerance.org).

Thanks to Dr. Freeman for sharing her insights with us. This podcast was produced by Shea Shackelford, with production assistance from Russell Gragg. Kate Shuster is our project manager. Music in this episode is by Chris Zabriskie. I'm Dr. John D'Emilio, Professor Emeritus of History and of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago and your host for *Queer America*.