

## The Blinding of Isaac Woodard

**Overview:** The purpose of this lesson is to assist students in thinking about how mass media influences public attitudes and government policy through a case study of police brutality involving an African-American WWII veteran that John McCray's reporting played an instrumental role in bringing to national attention.

**Time:** 3 class periods/180 minutes

**Historical Background:** In 1946, Isaac Woodard, a recently discharged WWII veteran returning to his home in South Carolina from service on the Pacific front is pulled from the bus he is on by police officers in Batesburg, SC, following a dispute with the bus driver. He is arrested and beaten so severely about the head and face with a nightstick by Chief Lynwood Shull that he loses sight in both of his eyes.

Blinded and unsure of the name of the town where he was arrested or the name of the man who beat him, Woodard is stranded in a VA hospital in Columbia, SC for several weeks recovering from his injuries. Local newspaper publisher and Civil Rights activist John Henry McCray reports on the story. Orson Welles, a film and radio celebrity who hosts a nationally syndicated radio show for NBC, learns about the incident as a result of McCray's reporting and dedicates several episodes to identifying Woodard's police assailant.

As in the years following WWI, documented acts of violence committed by whites against returning African-American servicemen in the years following WWII occurred regularly, especially in the South. The sensationalistic nature of this particular event, McCray and Welles' reporting, and the fact that Woodard, unlike many others who were likewise attacked, survived to tell his story helped this case garner far more publicity than similar instances. The Amsterdam News, a Black newspaper in New York, sponsored a benefit concert that drew 35,000 people (*appendix 1*), and the NAACP sponsored a national speaking tour to help raise awareness about how widespread the issue of racial violence was in the postwar years and to raise money to support Woodard.

All the publicity brought the issue to President Truman's attention. He ordered the Justice Department to investigate, but the federal lawyers mounted such a weak case against Shull, that the police officer was acquitted. The outcome of this case had a profound effect on the presiding judge, J. Waties Waring, who would later support the NAACP in landmark lawsuits they filed in South Carolina in support of voting rights for African Americans and desegregating schools. The case also compelled President Truman to form the President's Committee on Civil Rights, whose recommendations he acts on to desegregate federal offices and the military through Executive Orders issued in 1948.

### Materials

1. *American Experience: The Blinding of Isaac Woodard*, PBS, 30 March 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80GKeylqDW0>

2. *Orson Welles Commentaries*, 28 July 1946,  
<https://orsonwelles.indiana.edu/items/show/2169>
3. McCray, John Henry, "The Isaac Woodard Story," John Henry McCray Papers, 1929-1989, South Caroliniana Library,  
<https://digital.tcl.sc.edu/digital/collection/p17173coll38/id/18484/rec/1>
4. McCray, John Henry. "Memorandum for Orson Welles' Program, September 19, 1946," John Henry McCray Papers, 1929-1989, South Caroliniana Library,  
<https://digital.tcl.sc.edu/digital/collection/p17173coll38/id/18498/rec/1>
5. Guthrie, Woodie. "The Blinding of Isaac Woodard," 1946,  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20050114003432/http://members.fortunecity.com/fofkfred/blind.html>
6. "Former President Truman Tells the Story of Isaac Woodard," Harry S. Truman Library,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLpz8\\_szl0U8Jdyhyi36TbN7jdduVQBJI&v=dhVjWUzuY&app=desktop](https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLpz8_szl0U8Jdyhyi36TbN7jdduVQBJI&v=dhVjWUzuY&app=desktop)
7. Executive Orders
  - a. 9808 [Establishing President's Committee on Civil Rights], 5 December 1946, Harry S. Truman Library, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/executive-orders/9808/executive-order-9808>
  - b. 9980 [Desegregating the Federal Government] 26 July 1948, Harry S. Truman Library, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/executive-orders/9980/executive-order-9980>
  - c. 9981 [Desegregating the Armed Forces], 26 July 1948, National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-9981>

**Activity:** Watch the first hour of the PBS documentary *The Blinding of Isaac Woodard* (up through the section labeled "Truman's decision" on the YouTube video).

### **Discussion Prompts:**

#### *Historical Context:*

- What were the social and political conditions in the United States that led to the blinding of Isaac Woodard?
- How does this event reflect the broader racial tensions and civil rights issues of the time?
- What influence did World War II have on the development of the Civil Rights movement in the years that followed?

#### *Mass Media and Public Awareness:*

- What were the major forms of mass media in the years following World War II, and what are some examples of the role these media played in making Woodard's story well-known?
- How did media coverage and public awareness impact the response to Isaac Woodard's blinding?

#### *Impact and Legacy:*

- How did the blinding of Isaac Woodard influence public opinion and the civil rights movement?
- What role did the NAACP play in Woodard's case, and how did they use it to gain support for their civil rights initiatives?
- What specific changes to federal policy did President Truman eventually make as a result of learning about Woodard's blinding?
- What impact did the blinding of Isaac Woodard have on the life and career of Judge J. Waties Waring?

*Personal Reflection:*

- How did watching the film affect you personally? What emotions did it evoke, and why?
- In what ways can you relate the experiences of Isaac Woodard to contemporary issues of racial injustice?

*Comparative Analysis:*

- Compare the film's portrayal of racial violence to other films or books you have studied. What similarities or differences do you notice?
- How does the film's depiction of the 1940s civil rights struggles compare to the modern social justice movements?

*Call to Action:*

- What can students learn from Isaac Woodard's story that can be applied to their own lives and communities?
- How can the lessons from the film inspire you to take action against racial injustice and promote equality in your own environment?

**Assignments for Further Research and Reflection:**

1. Have students reflect more deeply on the role media play in shaping public opinion and governmental policies by asking them work with some of the primary historical sources relevant to the case, such as the Orson Welles' broadcasts, manuscripts of McCray's reporting on the incident, or the Executive Orders that Truman issues in response. Groups of students can be assigned to review one of the primary texts provided and develop a brief presentation to explain what the source is, what information it contains, and how it relates to the blinding of Isaac Woodard.
2. Use the benefit concert for Woodard to explore the role of the arts in social and political movements. Provide students with background info on some of the performers who participated (*appendix 1*). Have them read the lyrics to Woody Guthrie's "The Blinding of Isaac Woodard" (a performance for viewing can be found on YouTube as well: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4A7A5VGjSFk>). Have them write their own song or poem to raise awareness about a contemporary instance of social injustice and share with the class.

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Phil Brito	King Cole Trio
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Orson Welles	The Acramaniacs
Marion Colby	Peter Lind Hayes
Robert Alda	Cab Calloway and Band
Hilda Vaugh	Willie Bryant and Band
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Pearl Bailey	
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Tickets—\$1.20 (incl. tax)

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Amsterdam News Office, 2340 Eighth Avenue  
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**Sponsored by the  
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In case of rain the affair will be held the next available date.

**South Carolina Social Studies College- and Career-Ready Standards addressed by this lesson plan:**

USHC.5.CO - Compare South Carolina and U.S. wartime contributions and demobilization after World War II.

USHC.5.CX - Analyze the correlation between the Modern Civil Rights Movement in South Carolina and the U.S.

USHC.5.CC - Analyze the continuities and changes in South Carolina's identity resulting from the civic participation of different individuals and groups of South Carolinians.

USHC.5.E - Utilize a variety of primary and secondary sources to analyze multiple perspectives on the cultural changes in South Carolina and the U.S.