A Calculated Step Forward: Harry Truman, Black Advocacy, and Military Desegregation (1940 to 1948)

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Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Department of History of Vanderbilt University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For Honors in History

April 2023

Nashville, Tennessee

On the basis of this thesis defended by the candidate on April 24, 2023
we, the undersigned, recommend that the candidate be awarded highest honors
in History.

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To my friends, loved ones, classmates, and advisers who helped make this thesis possible: thank you. I appreciate those of you who listened to my musings about 1940s politics and military integration over the past year and a half. Thank you to the Department of History for the opportunity to pursue this thesis and conduct archival research in Kansas City. This study is the highlight of my academic career, and I am deeply grateful for the support I received along the way. I would like to especially thank Professor Thomas Schwartz for pointing me in the right direction over the past three years, as well as Professor Lauren Clay for providing consistently thoughtful feedback all year.

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The U.S. military considers its demographic diversity to be a source of strength. As published on the official Department of Defense website in September 2022, Air Force General Jacqueline Van Ovost argued that "diversity, equity, and inclusion" enable "a joint force that can manage the strategic environment and these complex situations."[1] Current military policy also reflects this commitment. In September 2020, the DoD Diversity and Inclusion Management Program began, promising a "workforce that reflects the diverse population of the United States" in hopes of strengthening "business practices, readiness, and lethality."[2] The notion that diversity in military personnel advances American interests, however, has not always been accepted. In fact, although Black soldiers have contributed to every war since the Revolution, various forms of segregation limited their opportunities through 1948. Black men who served in World War One joined in hopes of advancing their position in American democracy; the military's racist practices left them bitterly disappointed. This letdown pushed famed author W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) to conclude, "You have not the faintest conception of what these men have been through. It is not only astonishing but it will arouse every ounce of sympathetic blood in your veins."[3] As recently as World War Two, Black Americans, among others, were still not afforded equal opportunities to serve. The heroism of Black troops highlighted this injustice; however, mandatory racial segregation accompanied such service.

In popular memory, the civil rights movement's legislative successes of the 1960s receive the majority of the focus on the fight for racial equality in the United States. However, two decades

[1] C. Todd Lopez, "Diversity in U.S., Partner Militaries Is a Strategic Strength," *U.S. Department of Defense*, September 21, 2022, https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3166586/diversity-in-us-partner-militaries-is-a-strategic-strength/.
[2] Matthew P. Donovan, ed., "DoD Instruction 1020.05" (Department of Defense, September 9, 2020), 3, Washington Headquarters Services, https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/102005p.pdf?ver=2020-09-09-112958-573.
[3] Chad Williams, "World War I in the Historical Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois," *Modern American History* 1, no. 1 (March 2018): 12.

earlier, Harry Truman (1884-1972) chose the path of racial reform advocacy during his 1948 reelection campaign. In that year, Executive Order 9981 mandated the racial integration of the United States Armed Forces. The causes of this order and its timing are varied and include partisan posturing, Cold War geopolitics, and strategic lobbying efforts. This thesis analyzes the relevance of these factors with a specific focus on the strategies of Black leaders with regard to race relations and military affairs from 1940 to 1948. Furthermore, this study argues that the desegregation order occurred in 1948, and as a military measure, because of a years-long strategic push by these advocates who, confronting the harsh reality that other avenues towards equality were blocked by segregationist politicians, understood this to be an achievable step.

This thesis rests at the intersection of presidential history and movement history, integrating a top-down approach (focusing on White House staff and Truman himself) with the grassroots-led push for racial desegregation by groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the March on Washington Movement (MOWM). This combination highlights a seeming ideological paradox regarding Truman's racial views. A Democrat from Missouri whose family had, to put it mildly, been skeptical of Reconstruction's merits, would ultimately claim the mantle of civil rights champion when fighting for his political life. Truman was initially willing to join to Ku Klux Klan in 1922; then a candidate for local office, he backed out upon learning of the organization's anti-Catholic bigotry.[4] A quarter-century later, he became the first president to address the NAACP's annual convention. Although this thesis does not attempt to penetrate the innerworkings of Truman's mind, available evidence from his post-presidency indicates that he did not experience a personal reckoning on racial issues. A television interview from the 1960s depicts the older Truman clinging to a Lost Clause-adjacent

[4] David McCullough, *Truman* (New York, New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1992), 164.

understanding of American racial progress.[5] In his own memoirs, he wrote, "Much progress in civil rights has been made voluntarily by the South itself, and it was to help and to speed this progress that my program was designed."[6] However, these ignorant or regressive statements do not suggest that his 1948 platform was insincere. In fact, Truman's personal correspondence conveys genuine pride in advocating for legal equality.[7] This sentiment, unfortunately, did not apply to social equality. Therefore, this thesis sheds light on how activist strategy and political realities closed this seemingly large gap between Truman's mindset and actions. This study evaluates the work completed between 1940 and 1948 to overcome this barrier.

This thesis frames military integration as a long-sought achievement of racial justice advocates throughout the 1940s by expanding the time period in question to encompass both World War Two and the remainder of Truman's first term. This renewed focus relies on increased attention to the MOWM and its leader, A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979), for calling for military desegregation as early as 1941. That Randolph and his organization had lobbied for such an order under a previous president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, reframes the relationship between Black activists and U.S. military policy throughout the decade as a long crusade towards full integration. This sharply contrasts with a tendency to divide the history of race relations by the artificial demarcation of 1945, the end of World War Two. Lastly, the focus on Randolph and the MOWM allows for a greater appreciation for the political implications of Executive Order 9981; although Randolph had a complicated relationship with the Truman administration, the order represented a completed goal instead of the half-measures achieved in 1941. Though the MOWM is most widely

[5] *MP2002-78 Former President Truman Discusses Civil Rights*, Decision: The Conflicts of Harry S. Truman, accessed January 29, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddtViwF7Va0.
[6] Harry Truman, *The Memoirs of Harry S. Truman: A Reader's Edition*, ed. Raymond Geselbracht (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2019), 497.
[7] John Acacia, *Clark Clifford: The Wise Man of Washington* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 129.

known for its limited short-term success in persuading Roosevelt to create the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), the organization must be considered central to Truman's eventual 1948 order. The MOWM, in its original proposal, demanded the complete desegregation of the armed forces.[8] Although Roosevelt did not take this step, the fact that Randolph opened such a conversation with the executive branch helped bring the goal within the realm of political possibility for the president's successor.

The second aspect of Black advocacy from the 1940s that comes to the forefront of this study is the two-pronged lobbying approach from the MOWM and the NAACP. The civil rights movement was not a monolith, and the varying tendencies of groups combined for this successful phenomenon. The NAACP, led by Walter White (1893-1955) and Thurgood Marshall, took a more incrementalistic stance, working with both the Roosevelt and Truman administrations on research collaboration and public relations. In contrast, Randolph maintained a hostile posture, including his willingness to threaten and publicly condemn politicians. This thesis highlights the way in which the combination of the two approaches allowed the executive branch to pursue a noble goal, civil rights advancement, while simultaneously appearing to reject the movement's most radical elements. In other words, the presence of the hard-liner Randolph aided the NAACP in its quest to pressure the Truman administration on civil rights. While many scholars have explored the contentious dynamic between these two groups, the combination thereof and its contribution to Executive Order 9981 merit additional emphasis.

This thesis also examines the decision-making process of the Truman White House, as many observers believed the racial aspects of the campaign made the difference in the close contest's outcome. In *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration*, the

[8] Paula E. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, 1st ed. (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 49.

authors' data analysis demonstrate that Black voters delivered Truman success in the Electoral College (though this same monograph seems to downplay the relevance of Executive Order 9981 in its own right).[9] Historian Paula E. Pfeffer even claims that "Truman could not win without the [B]lack vote."[10] Political adviser Clark Clifford (1906-1998), often credited with Truman's electoral success, specifically recommended bold steps on racial justice in 1948. In the following decades, pundits considered his civil rights strategy so central to the victory that Clifford became a "legend" in political circles and landed advisory jobs for future Democratic presidents Kennedy and Johnson.[11] Similarly, Philleo Nash (1909-1987), a White House staffer who had studied military race relations during the Roosevelt administration, argued for the move after collecting extensive documentation regarding Black soldiers' experiences and the issue's political ramifications. Files from these administration officials, together with the analyses of Randolph and White, indicate that the executive order was the fruit of both elite and grassroots pushes for progress.

In short, this is a thesis about Black advocates' successful long-term strategy to create an incentive structure for the integration of the armed forces, the military's reluctant embrace of equal opportunity, and President Truman's civil rights stand to win reelection. This thesis is about ensuring progress within the realm of the possible and seeks to explain how this remarkable, yet limited, civil rights achievement came to be. This effort was achievable because the armed forces are under the jurisdiction of the federal government; thus, segregationist state governments could not block the order's implementation, though their leaders may have voiced opposition. As this study illustrates, the segregation-era military did not fully exclude Black Americans from

[9] Donald R. McCoy and Richard T. Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration* (The University Press of Kansas, 1973), 143–44.
[10] Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, 146.
[11] Acacia, *Clark Clifford: The Wise Man of Washington*, 119.

participation. When they served, however, they were often treated with distrust and contempt. Importantly, this environment contributed to Black skepticism at many stages of Truman's civil rights push. Even after Executive Order 9981, A. Philip Randolph remained hostile to the administration, claiming the order did not effectively ban military segregation.[12] This fear was mitigated by further dialogue later in the summer of 1948, leading Randolph to describe the order as "a step in the right direction."[13] That Randolph's immediate reaction to achieving a long-term goal was one of continued pushing demonstrates the degree to which activists demanded Truman back up his pro-equality rhetoric to earn the support of Black voters. William C. Berman's seminal work in the field, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration*, portrays Randolph as divisive within the civil rights movement but ultimately credits him with convincing the administration to issue the order in July 1948.[14] Thus, scholarship regarding the individuals involved in the creation of Executive Order 9981 transmits complicated portraits of strategic political actors; this thesis explores how various incentives, pressures, and convictions created Executive Order 9981.

Much of the existing literature on Truman deals with the impact of politics, both domestic and international, on the administration's civil rights aims. Mary Dudziak, in *Cold War Civil Rights*, portrays the decision as one of many instances in which American foreign policy elites supported racial justice reform on the grounds that it would improve the nation's standing abroad.[15] Truman oversaw the beginning of the Cold War, a time when the U.S. was jockeying with the Soviet Union for influence over neutral countries. This geopolitical vision further increased the

[12] Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, 147.
[13] Pfeffer, 148.
[14] William C. Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (Ohio State University Press, 1970), 99.
[15] Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000).

stakes of the 1948 presidential election, as the Marshall Plan and anticommunist rhetoric drew harsh criticism from the left wing of Truman's Democratic Party. Hypocrisy on issues of civil rights and democracy were of great concern to administration officials, as Dudziak's monograph and primary documentation from the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum indicate.[16] Dudziak demonstrates that American officials pushed for civil rights reform to mitigate Soviet propaganda that promoted the country's racial injustices, which some American officials viewed as exaggerated, nonetheless. Such Soviet messaging was powerful because it threatened to discredit the notion that U.S. influence would increase democracy and establish a world order grounded in equality.

Meanwhile, historian Harvard Sitkoff argues that Truman eventually identified a successful campaign strategy on civil rights issues, including Executive Order 9981, after imprecise early positioning on such topics.[17] Sitkoff explains that previous Democratic candidates relied on Southern white segregationist support, even while publicly supporting racial equality; however, party officials feared that this loyalty would dissipate if any legal reforms included strong enforcement mechanisms. Eventually, however, Clark Clifford convinced Truman that a decrease in Southern white support was negligible relative to the potential gains of appealing to urban Black voters in northern swing states. Crucially, Sitkoff demonstrates that enforceable policy changes on integration issues were necessary to secure Black support, as Republican opponent Thomas Dewey maintained a strong civil rights record. Sitkoff correctly argues that Truman's strong rhetoric at the outset of the campaign would be insufficient if not paired with action. Similarly, scholar

[16] L.K. White, "Foreign Radio Comment on American Civil Rights (16 June-30 July 1947)" (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Group, August 5, 1947), RG 220: Pres. Committee on Civil Rights Box 7, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[17] Harvard Sitkoff, "Harry Truman and the Election of 1948: The Coming of Age of Civil Rights in American Politics," *The Journal of Southern History* 37, no. 4 (November 1971): 597–616, https://doi.org/10.2307/2206548.

Jonathan Bell argues that the 1946 midterm elections, in which Truman's Democratic Party suffered immense losses, increased the administration's estimation of what level of concreteness in action would be required to earn Black support in 1948.[18] Another researcher, Garth E. Pauley, examines Truman's historic 1947 NAACP address and effectively argues that it "provided an impetus to action for civil rights activists."[19] These factors paint a picture of a multifaceted domestic political scene that incentivized a president to issue a strong civil rights executive order. In some sense, this was facilitated by Black migration to northern cities located in swing states, but the role of the NAACP and Randolph in solidifying this incentive structure for Truman to court Black voters must be emphasized.

Both Dudziak and Sitkoff emphasize factors other than strategic efforts of Black leaders and publications to make Executive Order 9981 politically viable and beneficial. In treating Black activists (such as White and Randolph) as a unique and effective group, and not one tied unconditionally to one political party, this thesis will show that military integration was the product of decisions dating back to the early days of World War II under Franklin Roosevelt. Some scholars expand upon the relationship between the NAACP and the military during this period, ranging from crediting it for the creation of the Tuskegee airmen program[20] to documenting its mixed record of success in aiding wartime propaganda with a pro-equality bent.[21]

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[18] Jonathan Bell, *The Liberal State on Trial: The Cold War and American Politics in the Truman Years* (Columbia University Press, 2004).
[19] Garth E. Pauley, "Harry Truman and the NAACP: A Case Study in Presidential Persuasion on Civil Rights," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 235.
[20] Gilbert Jonas, *Freedom's Sword: The NAACP and the Struggle Against Racism in America, 1909-1969* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2005), http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=134868&site=ehost-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_iv.
[21] Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, "Constructing G.I. Joe Louis: Cultural Solutions to the 'Negro Problem' during World War II," *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 3 (December 2002): 958–83.

Additionally, some existing scholarship aptly captures the relationship between the NAACP and Randolph, as well as its implications for civil rights advocacy. One such work, written by John Bracey, Jr., and August Meier, recounts the dynamic in a nuanced and relevant way.[22] At the same time, the article's chronological terrain ends in the immediate aftermath of President Roosevelt's order to establish the Fair Employment Practices Commission. This thesis seeks to expand such a mode of analysis beyond the initial March on Washington lobbying to the 1948 election, when one of its primary proposals was finally enacted. This delineation (which forms the basis for the span of the thesis) is more natural and better-suited to the patterns of civil rights advocacy than simply dividing it into wartime and postwar relations. Many of the same actors, such as Randolph and Nash, remained involved and homed in on military integration as a primary goal throughout the period.

Finally, this thesis builds on "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution" by Richard M. Dalfiume. In his essay, Dalfiume notes the importance of early-1940s Black activism in shaping the successes of later eras.[23] Drawing largely upon internal debates over American involvement in World War II, Dalfiume's characterization of organized Black power fits neatly with this thesis' argument that activists' most feasible demands throughout the decade often included military desegregation. A recent study of wartime race relations establishes the relevance of the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) of the Roosevelt era, as well as its leader A. Phillip Randolph's proposal to end segregationist practices via executive order.[24] Matthew Delmont's book also offers anecdotes from Black veterans' return from combat and the political landscape they encountered

[22] John H. Bracey Jr. and August Meier, "Allies or Adversaries?: The NAACP, A. Philip Randolph and the 1941 March on Washington," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 1–17.
[23] Richard Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution," *The Journal of American History* 55, no. 1 (June 1968): 90–106.
[24] Matthew Delmont, *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad*, 1st ed. (Viking, 2022).

when seeking legal equality. Richard Gergel explores these themes by connecting the horrific attack on a Black veteran to the eventual establishment of the President's Committee on Civil Rights and subsequent executive order mandating integration.[25]

Although scholars have published thorough examinations of the relationship between the military and race in this decade, this thesis will tie Executive Order 9981 to the slow debate over, and contestation to, integration within the U.S. Armed Forces. Michael Cullen Green aptly argues that military integration is a crucial case study, as the institution underwent complete desegregation in a fraction of the time it took to achieve equality in education, housing, or employment.[26] However, this thesis offers a more comprehensive analysis of military leadership's mixed, but slowly evolving, attitude on integration between Japanese surrender and Truman's order. The military's approach to segregation was not monolithic, and events highlighted in this thesis underscore tensions that arose from these differences. This lack of unanimity within the military appears in Margarita Aragon's work on the role of psychological examinations on different leaders' impressions of Black soldiers.[27] Aragon displays the two primary schools of thought: one group that believed disparities in military readiness stemmed from inherent racial differences and another that considered them products of societal inequities. Though she does not mention Executive Order 9981, this debate has clear implications for the possibility of integrating the armed forces at a later date. This thesis applies that concept to military integration.

Partisan politics illuminates a key aspect of Black activists' successful strategy: they were untethered to the Democratic or Republican Party. Black voters outside of the Jim Crow South had

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[25] Richard Gergel, *Unexampled Courage: The Blinding of Sgt. Isaac Woodard and the Awakening of America*, 1st ed. (New York, New York: Picador, 2019).
[26] Michael Cullen Green, Black *Yanks in the Pacific: Race in the Making of American Military Empire after World War II (The United States in the World)* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2010).
[27] Margarita Aragon, "'Deep-Seated Abnormality': Military Psychiatry, Segregation, and Discourses of Black 'Unfitness' in World War II," *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 2 (2017): 216–35, https://doi-org.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/10.1177/1097184X17703156.

historically voted staunchly Republican due to the legacy of Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction, but the Roosevelt years saw the group shift away from the GOP. With the 1946 midterm elections revealing a backsliding of that progress for the Democratic Party, Black leadership enjoyed a uniquely strong electoral focus heading into the 1948 campaign. Demographic patterns enabled this shift. The Great Migration, the widespread movement of Black Southerners to northern cities, resulted in disproportionate Black numbers in the population centers of major swing states. Historian Isabel Wilkerson's research into this broader trend reveals, at an anecdotal level, the importance of the Great Migration in changing Black America's relationship with the Democratic Party.[28] While this transformation did not happen overnight, evidence from the 1940s shows that the Great Migration bolstered the sense of urgency with which Democratic presidential campaigns approached Black civil rights issues.

Additionally, this thesis adds to Truman literature by addressing two overlooked phenomena. First, an incident involving Black troops on the USS *Croatan* in December 1945, as well as the subsequent public outrage, provide an early glimpse into the dynamics of racial politics in the postwar military.[29] Soldiers serving in Europe were refused accommodations on the ship supposed to bring them home. Staffer Philleo Nash's files repeatedly cover this event, but it remains almost entirely missing from secondary literature. The controversy's aftermath show that civil rights advocates were unsure about whether the new president would be an ally in the White House.[30] Black newspapers expressed dismay with the administration, covering the incident as a major story that could forebode future discrimination in the armed forces. The event also revealed

[28] Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, First (New York, New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 301.
[29] "Forrestal Prods Navy on Jim Crow Violation," *New York Post*, December 13, 1945, Philleo Nash Papers Box 57, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[30] Venice Spraggs, "Forrestal Order Rebukes Flattop Chief," *Chicago Defender*, December 22, 1945, Philleo Nash Papers Box 57, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

the cleavage between military branches on racial issues, with the Army seen as more resistant to change. Separately, this study provides nuance to the existing popular and scholarly consensus that the incumbent president was a dramatic underdog throughout his reelection bid. In fact, Republican victories in the 1946 midterms and early polling numbers were ominous signs, but by mid-to-late 1948, polls and national media coverage had presented a mixed bag; some pundits were certain of a Dewey victory while others saw a tight race.[31] Such an understanding is relevant to a study of Truman's civil rights platform because it dampens the possibility that it was primarily a last-ditch effort to reach for any votes possible.

Primary documents available at the Truman Library demonstrate a gradual if inconsistent shift within parts of the military towards accepting integration. These memoranda, speeches, surveys, and articles were catalogued by Philleo Nash.[32] Nash had served as a special assistant for domestic operations and a special consultant to the Secretary of War under President Roosevelt. Under Truman, he was a special assistant to the president for minority-related problems. In all of these positions, Nash was keenly interested in the racial aspects of military service and kept tabs on news, data, and policies in that field. This thesis draws upon his files at the Truman Library. Secondary literature provides historical context into Nash and highlights his commitment to racial issues in the military.[33]

This thesis also draws extensively from the official records of the President's Committee on Civil Rights, primarily its correspondence with the NAACP. These letters and memoranda

[31] David Lawrence, "Republicans' Chances To Win '48 Election Seen Less Than Even," *The Daily Evening Star*, November 7, 1947, Clark M. Clifford Papers Box 20, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[32] Karl Marks, "Reactions of Negro and White Soldiers to the Film, 'The Negro Soldier'" (Washington, D.C.: Army Service Forces, Morale Services Division, April 17, 1944), Philleo Nash Papers Box 53, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[33] David H. Price, "Crusading Liberals Advocating for Racial Justice: Philleo Nash and Ashley Montagu," in *Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI's Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists* (Duke University Press, 2004), 263–83.

demonstrate a cooperative relationship between the two groups, but one in which Black activists still felt compelled to verify the committee's progress consistently.[34] Although the thesis does not encompass any primary documents from NAACP archives, it includes the perspectives of Walter White and A. Philip Randolph through correspondence with the executive branch. These documents include some sources from online databases outside of the Truman Library.

[34] Walter White to Robert K. Carr, October 2, 1947, President's Committee on Civil Rights, Records, 1946-1947 Box 12, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

Chapter One: World War Two, a Partial Victory, and a New President

1940 to 1946

Introduction

Sergeant Isaac Woodard (1919-1992), a young Black American and veteran of the Second World War's Pacific theater, boarded a bus to return to his home in North Carolina in 1946.[1] After risking his life for the Allied cause, the 26-year-old soldier encountered the harsh reality of racial segregation in the American South. At a stop in Batesburg, South Carolina, the driver asked local police officers to remove Woodard from the bus, ostensibly to address an earlier altercation.[2] Though the exact details are unclear, the officers struck Woodard's face with a variety of instruments; when Woodard woke up the following morning, he was unable to see anything at all.[3]

In the aftermath of this racist attack, the federal government's approach to civil rights politics shifted. As this chapter will explain in more detail, the severity of the crime shocked a nation complacent with regard to antiblack violence. Over the next two years, the sitting president, Harry S. Truman, would dramatically shift the relationship between the government and Black civil rights. Ultimately, labor organizer A. Philip Randolph, longtime NAACP head Walter White, administration official Philleo Nash, political strategist Clark Clifford, and select military personnel set into motion the conditions to enable Executive Order 9981, which banned segregation in the U.S. Armed Forces.

The Woodard case is an extreme but fair representation of the way race and military service intersected to boost the civil rights movement after World War II. This chapter will examine how Black military contributions and political maneuvering from 1940 to 1946 laid the groundwork for the ultimate desegregation order in 1948. These strategies revolved primarily around appeals to patriotism, adept framing of a burgeoning rights-based world order, and changing electoral

[1] Richard Gergel, *Unexampled Courage: The Blinding of Sgt. Isaac Woodard and the Awakening of America*, 1st ed. (New York, New York: Picador, 2019), 14.
[2] Gergel, 15.
[3] Gergel, 19.

incentives. Relying on administration correspondence, political communications, contemporary newspaper coverage, and established secondary literature, the chapter demonstrates that Truman's military integration was the culmination of a years-long political strategy by Randolph and White, reinforced by geopolitical shifts. Domestically, the Great Migration and post-Roosevelt partisan dynamics increased Black electoral power. Globally articulated Cold War-era American values helped convince policymaking elites that racial reform was pragmatic. Similarly, the chapter emphasizes the origins of the two-front civil rights lobbying effort, personified by Randolph of the MOWM and White of the NAACP, that would encourage the Truman administration to desegregate the armed forces in 1948. Ultimately, this chapter shows Black leaders opting to operate within the realm of the possible in a time of profound change and explains why the early to mid-1940s made the military the appropriate venue for a civil rights stand.

This chapter highlights the mechanisms through which state actors and grassroots activists each chose paths that put military integration on the table. President Roosevelt's wartime leadership on race relations, the 1946 midterm elections, and the early Truman administration's responses to high-profile incidents (such as discrimination aboard the USS *Croatan* and the blinding of Isaac Woodard) demonstrate this trend through the chapter's top-down, executive branch-heavy analysis. Additionally, the Cold War's early influence on racial politics adds to the importance of elites in this period. At the activist level, the varied approaches of Randolph and White (and their respective organizations) add nuance to the political battle but leave no doubt that military integration was a deeply held aspiration. In that sense, this chapter synthesizes two sources of emphasis in terms of political power and changemaking. While this thesis intersects with both presidential and social movement history, this chapter in particular engages the political history of the U.S. Armed Forces.

Black America Goes to War

The conventional argument that Black Americans' military service during World War II, combined with wartime rhetorical commitments to human equality, catalyzed the civil rights movement's success in the following decades is mostly correct. The case for legal equality between races became more powerful and more difficult to ignore upon the return of Black men from the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific. The inclusion of the racial minority in a national accomplishment on the world stage made arguments in defense of their subjugation less convincing to the international community as it reassessed the United States' role in global human rights affairs. Furthermore, it highlighted the imbalance caused by unequal treatment at the hands of the U.S. government: Black Americans had dutifully served their country but did not receive the same level of treatment in return. Uncle Sam offered them fewer (and worse) opportunities than their white counterparts while serving and effectively excluded them from postwar veterans' benefits associated with the GI Bill.[4] Additionally, the very cause these troops were asked to defeat, Nazism, was wholly racist. Thus, a country trumpeting its commitment to freedom and equality using a racially segregated fighting force to defeat a racist ideology did not seem coherent in principle.

However, this popular understanding omits a key factor in WWII racial politics. Not all Black Americans unequivocally and unanimously decided to fully invest their community's resources and risk their lives for the war effort. At the outbreak of the conflict in Europe, strategic debates among Black advocates and writers centered on both moral correctness and political

[4] Quil Lawrence, "Black Vets Were Excluded from GI Bill Benefits — a Bill in Congress Aims to Fix That," *National Public Radio*, October 18, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/10/18/1129735948/black-vets-were-excluded-from-gi-bill-benefits-a-bill-in-congress-aims-to-fix-th.

salience for a group ultimately aiming for legal and social equality. The answer was not obvious to actors at the time, and historians must not gloss over this period of strife and strategic debate.

As the war began in Europe and Americans split over their obligations in the conflict, one understandable impulse from Black writers was to point out the blatant hypocrisy of white Americans who wanted to use the military as a force for democracy and universal human rights. The official NAACP publication, *The Crisis*, stated that it was "sorry for the brutality, blood, and death among the peoples of Europe, just as we were sorry for China and Ethiopia. But the hysterical cries of the preachers of democracy for Europe leave us cold. We want democracy in Alabama and Arkansas, in Mississippi and Michigan."[5] Some Black Americans posited that the violence in Europe was not just irrelevant, but rather a positive gain for people of color around the world, as colonial powers would no longer direct their might against Africans and Asians.[6] This mindset also underscores a discursive inconsistency over whether to engage in war. The debates largely treated Germany as the presumed foe, with Adolf Hitler and Nazism as proposed enemies-to-be. However, discussions of Japanese imperialism and brutality did not resonate as much in Black publications. One potential explanation is that European fascism was more inextricably tied to violent racism and notions of ethnic supremacy. Black Americans in 1941 would be very familiar with this form of evil. Alternatively, Black opponents of the war effort may have sought to utilize Europeans' mostly white racial status to decrease the perceived threat that Nazism posed. After all, many Black Americans could not participate in democracy, so convincing them to risk their lives to defend white Europeans' rights would have been a difficult selling point. Thus, peace advocates may have played off of this racial disparity by focusing mostly on the conflict in Europe.

[5] "Lynching and Liberty," *The Crisis*, July 1940. Cited in Richard Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution," *The Journal of American History* 55, no. 1 (June 1968): 94.
[6] Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution," 93.

Once the U.S. joined the conflict, the NAACP sought to synthesize the government's understanding of fighting Nazism and prejudice abroad with integration efforts in domestic politics. In 1943, Walter White wrote directly to Elmer Davis, a reporter within the Office of War Information.[7] His letter focused primarily on antisemitism in military and civilian life; his proposed remedy was that Roosevelt organize a national address to highlight that "Italians form X% of the men in the armed services as contrasted with being Y% of the population; and giving similar figures for Catholics, Jews, persons of German descent, Negroes, etc."[8] White wanted the nation to be reminded of the military's diversity, even if those serving were segregated by race.

Black Americans' exclusion from political power in domestic affairs inspired some to make a distinction between their interests and those of the U.S. government. For instance, some interpreted the attack on Pearl Harbor as a declaration of war against "white folks," and Black soldiers in uniform were occasionally harassed by Black civilians on the grounds that they were serving a white government.[9]

Additionally, many Black Americans were still influenced by the historical memory of World War I, which occurred just over two decades earlier. Black author and influential activist W.E.B. Du Bois had completely committed himself to that war effort, circulating *The Crisis* with consistent pro-war messaging.[10] Du Bois publicly struggled with similar challenges that Black Americans would face at the outset of World War II. He in no way made excuses for or minimized the plight of Black soldiers due to racism, but he simultaneously appreciated Woodrow Wilson's articulated stance in favor of a war for "democracy."[11] Du Bois believed that supporting the war

[7] Walter White to Elmer Davis, May 6, 1943, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[8] White to Davis, 2.
[9] Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution," 95.
[10] Chad Williams, "World War I in the Historical Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois," *Modern American History* 1, no. 1 (March 2018): 9.
[11] Williams, 8.

effort as a community could lead to improved treatment within the armed forces and, eventually, transform domestic society with a newfound commitment to democratic ideals. After the war, Du Bois almost immediately expressed discontent that his aims had not come to fruition, criticizing the United States for its hypocrisy and labeling World War I "an awful example of its pitfalls and failures."[12] While historian Chad Williams argues that some of this disappointment reflected his personal dissatisfaction with a failed attempt to receive recognition from the military, the change of heart typified by Du Bois was common. Faced with another impending global conflict and familiar-sounding promises to improve democracy in the early 1940s, skepticism among activists was unsurprisingly pervasive.

However, the most persuasive argument, the appeal that would later become a common refrain in civil rights historiography, was that Black Americans could reap the rewards of the conflict by supporting the military throughout the war. This argument rested on three main prongs. First, some argued that any large-scale reshuffling of the world order should seem favorable to those currently being oppressed. Alternatively, some activists saw the white establishment's focus on worldwide democracy and equality as a positive development, even if they were yet to be implemented in domestic policy. Lastly, and perhaps most aptly, Black advocates believed they could rhetorically intertwine the white America's crusade against Nazism with their own campaigns against racist segregation in the South.

A Domestic Strategy Put in Play

In the early stages of World War II, Black leaders forged a blueprint for a successful lobbying campaign with a reluctant president. The March on Washington Movement (MOWM), spearheaded by A. Philip Randolph, threatened to deploy 50,000 citizens to the nation's capital to

[12] Williams, 15.

march for Black civil rights and ultimately provoked Executive Order 8802, which expanded equal opportunity within the defense industry. Crucial to this study, this success took the form of an executive order, providing a blueprint for military integration in 1948. Randolph's background in labor politics led him to see employment opportunities as inextricably tied with race.[13] In fact, biographer Cornelius L. Bynum argues that an appropriate understanding of his activism focuses primarily on the intersection of race and class and deemphasizes his later political activism.[14] Regardless, Randolph himself embodies the change in heart within organized Black leadership during the early part of World War II. He initially opposed any American involvement, arguing that England and France were unworthy of the nation's assistance due to their colonialist backgrounds.[15] However, he would later serve on President Franklin Roosevelt's Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies and would become particularly committed to defending the British.[16] The MOWM tactfully cloaked most of its early rhetoric in patriotic terms, mentioning loyalty[17] and constitutional rights.[18] MOWM's Randolph, the NAACP's Walter White, and the National Urban League's T. Arnold Hill met directly with Roosevelt and his secretaries of the Army and Navy; in this meeting, they specifically requested an executive order to end all segregation in the military.[19] In response, Roosevelt stated that military segregation would continue, misled the public into believing the advocates had supported that idea, and used demeaning language to describe Black recruits.[20] This interaction exemplifies the type of

[13] Cornelius L. Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (University of Illinois Press, 2010), 158.
[14] Bynum, xi.
[15] Matthew Delmont, *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad*, 1st ed. (Viking, 2022), 49.
[16] Delmont, 49.
[17] Delmont, 50.
[18] Delmont, 53.
[19] Delmont, 55.
[20] Delmont, 56.

relationship Black activists had with the executive branch and military brass, which helps explain why such activists would later require President Truman to buttress his rhetoric with tangible policy reforms.

The partnership between Randolph and White in this meeting represented a monumental step for 1940s civil rights advocacy. One scholar, John H. Bracey, Jr., writes that the decade featured "a complicated and ambivalent pattern of alternating periods of cooperation and intense rivalry" between Randolph and the NAACP.[21] The cooperation began after White himself witnessed the extent to which Black employees were discriminated against in the defense industry as the federal government ramped up its level of spending on security.[22] Randolph had been among the Black leaders consulted by White as the latter formulated his proposals for an executive order banning such discrimination and a congressional investigation into the issue. Notably, White's request was understood to be undermined by another group, the Committee for Participation of Negroes in the National Defense Program.[23] Whereas White preferred a special committee with hand-picked senators sympathetic to civil rights, this group lobbied for the issue to be added to the docket of the widely followed Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program. This idea dismayed White, and the preexisting senatorial committee never conducted an investigation into discrimination in the arms industry. The chairman of the latter committee would benefit from a boost in name recognition from leading it and ride this increased profile to the White House, where he would ban all segregation in the military in 1948. His name was Senator Harry Truman.

[21] John H. Bracey Jr. and August Meier, "Allies or Adversaries?: The NAACP, A. Philip Randolph and the 1941 March on Washington," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 1.
[22] Bracey Jr. and Meier, 5.
[23] Bracey Jr. and Meier, 6.

Originally, Randolph's call for a march in the nation's capital to awaken policymakers' conscience on racial issues received a mixed response from the NAACP. White agreed with Randolph that "only a mass demonstration [would] have any effect on the situation in Washington."[24] However, he was reluctant to simply follow Randolph's lead and sought to influence the planning of the march to increase its effectiveness. Eventually, the NAACP's position on the proposed march switched to "officially and emphatically supporting" it.[25]

By the time White and Randolph partnered to meet with major officials in Washington and New York, they took the position that "unless something definite, tangible, concrete [is] done in the interest of jobs for Negroes in national defense, it [is] folly to make recourse to the old technique of a conference and abandon what [is] recognized as an effective weapon."[26] The NAACP is largely seen as taking an incrementalistic, litigation-centered approach to civil rights that contrasts starkly with that of the "militant socialist" Randolph.[27] Nonetheless, the shared mission of creating equal employment opportunities in the defense industry united the two.

The MOWM was a partial success because it provoked an executive order from Roosevelt that created the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practices. The outcome vindicated Randolph's strategy to threaten a mass mobilization. For this reason, scholars including Bracey and Meier argue, White began "distancing himself from the activities of the charismatic architect" of this limited political success.[28] Although Bracy and Meier end their analysis with the aftermath of Roosevelt's executive order, it is crucial to note that this dynamic (in which White and Randolph chose separate methods for pressuring the executive branch after initial collaboration) would

[24] Bracey Jr. and Meier, 8.
[25] Bracey Jr. and Meier, 10.
[26] Bracey Jr. and Meier, 11.
[27] Bracey Jr. and Meier, 2.
[28] Bracey Jr. and Meier, 17.

contribute to the multifaceted lobbying effort in the Truman era. Roosevelt's refusal to succumb to the advocates' pressure on other achievable goals, such as military integration, was nonetheless a disappointment. The mere request, however, demonstrates that this was an issue at the forefront of Black Americans' civil rights advocacy as early as the summer of 1941, even before Pearl Harbor would increase the salience of military-related issues for all Americans. It also shows that Randolph recognized the improbability of passing a comprehensive civil rights passage through Congress. At this time, Southern white Democrats who favored segregationist policies enjoyed outsized influence in the Senate. Targeting an area of reform within the scope of the executive branch was a sound strategy, even if it was only partially successful in 1941. Adding the idea to a racial justice agenda and proposing it to the president helped introduce complete military desegregation to the political conversation.

Perhaps partly due to the limited nature of Roosevelt's 1941 action, or the continuation of racial violence with the sanction of state and local governments throughout the South, the Black community registered low levels of morale during the early parts of the war. Racism within the armed forces tempered the visions of some Black Americans who had vigorously defended the war effort earlier. Though he volunteered to serve even before the attack on Pearl Harbor that brought the U.S. into the conflict, Joseph Haskin likened his experience to "modern-day slavery."[29] White officers viewed the comparison between white-controlled segregated units to slavery as apt, too. One such officer mentioned that Black soldiers' low morale made it difficult to lead them; his solution was to "ride them" like Simon Legree, the brutal villain from the antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.[30] Dalfiume argues that Black Americans, military and civilian, sought an overhaul in race relations and were disappointed that the first year of military engagement had not yielded

[29] Delmont, *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad*, 119.
[30] Delmont, 119.

such progress.[31] In 1942, the federal government collected data to develop a strategy to alleviate these concerns;[32] the following year, civil rights leaders unsuccessfully requested a national committee to broadly examine the state of civil rights.[33] This proposed committee would ultimately be created by President Truman in the aftermath of Sgt. Woodard's blinding later in the decade. That committee, entitled the President's Committee on Civil Rights, would officially recommend the integration of the military about six months before Truman signed Executive Order 9981.

The seeds of military desegregation via executive order would not come to fruition until the summer of 1948, but Black activists planted them in 1941. Arising from contentious debates surrounding American involvement in a global conflict, these advocates identified a strategy for advancing limited but possible change via pressuring the commander-in-chief. While these efforts were not completely (or even mostly) successful at first, they paved the way for the Truman administration's integration stance. These back-and-forth strategic maneuvers indicate that the movement's ultimate success on this front was the product of intentional, difficult decisions.

The Army Grapples with Race Relations

As the level of Black support remained a crucial consideration for top military officials, they debated how Black troops functioned in the segregated Army. In 1945, three Army psychiatrists presented statistics that backed up the idea of Black "abnormality" leading to widespread "maladjustment."[34] The psychiatrists did not specify whether the discrepancies resulted from inherent or environmental factors, but they found half of the Black men evaluated to be psychopaths, an implausibly high figure.[35] The Army's instruction manual for white officers

[31] Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution," 103.
[32] Dalfiume, 102.
[33] Dalfiume, 105.
[34] Margarita Aragon, "'Deep-Seated Abnormality': Military Psychiatry, Segregation, and Discourses of Black 'Unfitness' in World War II," *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 2 (2017): 217, https://doi-org.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/10.1177/1097184X17703156.
[35] Aragon, 217.

responsible for Black troops was entitled "Command of Negro Troops."[36] This document argued that decades of research in psychology and other fields had not uncovered a single piece of evidence that Black Americans were "as a group, mentally or emotionally defective by heredity."[37] It appears that the Army viewed racial differences as the product of societal phenomena, ranging from sexual mores to education levels. This understanding called for instructing white officers to believe that they could correct any "maladjustment" through training. Although measurements of "maladjustment" themselves reflected biases, the fact that white army officials believed they could correct any gaps between races through training insinuates the possibly that there was nothing inherently problematic with elevating Black troops to the level of white ones. The role of Black advocates here is difficult to sort out. Historian Gilbert Jonas credits NAACP lobbying with the creation of the famed Tuskegee Airmen experiment, through which Black pilots fought Germans in Europe and earned significant accolades; Charles Hamilton Houston, a legal mastermind behind much of the civil rights movement, worked in tandem with White to advocate for increased opportunities for Black soldiers.[38] Perhaps some of this type of opportunity would have been unavailable without successful lobbying, with the status quo being to defer to the segregationist mindset outlined in this chapter.

Within Army communications, there was an inconsistent level of clarity about the treatment of Black troops. For instance, Brigadier General R.W. Crawford wrote a memo to Major General Dwight D. Eisenhower about the "Colored Troop Problem."[39] Crawford argued that

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[36] Aragon, 218.
[37] Aragon, 218.
[38] Gilbert Jonas, *Freedom's Sword: The NAACP and the Struggle Against Racism in America, 1909-1969* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2005), 153, http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=134868&site=ehost-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_iv.
[39] Aragon, "'Deep-Seated Abnormality': Military Psychiatry, Segregation, and Discourses of Black 'Unfitness' in World War II," 220.

"segregation as practiced in the army [was] that of physical separation of military units and not that of inferior or superior groups."[40] While this mindset mirrors the then-intact legal precedent of "separate but equal," the reality was that many within the military rejected even the pretense of equality. The aforementioned doctrine, adopted by the Supreme Court a half-century earlier in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), articulated the viewpoint that Black Americans' right to legal equality did not necessitate integrated accommodations as long as segregated ones were of equal caliber. Of course, this precedent fostered entirely unequal public schools, transportation options, recreational facilities, and other accommodations during this period; they were allowed to stand under the pretense that they were "separate but equal." General George Marshall, who would later serve as secretary of state under President Truman, posited, "either through lack of education opportunities or other causes[,] the level of intelligence and occupation skill of the Negro population is considerably below that of the white."[41] Marshall avoided addressing a fundamental question here, whether the gaps in perceived preparedness resulted from an inherent racial hierarchy of intelligence or a difference in educational background. Nonetheless, a powerful military leader who would serve in the Truman administration and guide its foreign policy believed Black troops to be substandard. This suggests that although the early to mid-1940s presented various signs of internal movement on racial segregation, the military's urge to drag its feet on integration was strong.

Walter White, Joe Louis, and the Fight to Control the Black War Narrative

The relationship between patriotic fervor and celebrity culture is a storied one that continues to this day, with the Afghanistan death of former NFL player Pat Tillman boosting

[40] Aragon, 220.
[41] Aragon, 220.

wartime propaganda as a recent example.[42] This trend was similarly relevant in World War II, and both the NAACP and the military were aware of the potency of celebrity. Early in the war, the African American boxer Joe Louis held the heavyweight title, the crowning accomplishment in the sport. Louis defended this title against a man named Buddy Baer, defeating him in the first round.[43] Before the fight, Louis agreed to risk his title for the chance to donate his winnings (approximately 100,000 dollars) to victims of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Walter White, the leader of the NAACP, sought to ensure that this patriotic spectacle resulted in forward progress for equal treatment in the armed forces. White lobbied Senator Arthur Capper to write to *The New York Times* in favor of ending all discrimination in the military, pointing to Louis' boxing victory as an opportunity to move public opinion that required immediate action.[44] The story of a Black sports hero risking his own stature to further the American war effort would, in White's view, raise questions about the military's subpar treatment of Black troops. Laura Rebecca Sklaroff, however, argues persuasively that the War Department (the structure of military branches would be reorganized later under President Truman) maintained a different perspective on Louis' ability.

War Department leaders believed that Louis could help address the racial problems associated with the war effort by enabling the public articulation of egalitarian values while evading controversial questions surrounding discriminatory policies. Milton Starr, a racial adviser for the Office of War Information (OWI), argued that it was "desirable and necessary to de-emphasize our many long standing internal dissensions and to close ranks as much as practicable for the duration."[45] Postponing a full reckoning on racial justice due to pressing national security

[42] Dexter Filkins, "The Good Soldier," *The New York Times*, September 8, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/13/books/review/Filkins-t.html.
[43] Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, "Constructing G.I. Joe Louis: Cultural Solutions to the 'Negro Problem' during World War II," *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 3 (December 2002): 958.
[44] Sklaroff, 958.
[45] Sklaroff, 959.

issues, such as the global threat emanating from the Axis powers, was not an unfamiliar argument. Sklaroff successfully portrays the department's efforts on cultural products, such as sports and entertainment, to be largely symbolic and unrepresentative of substantive equality in the military. She writes, "To the chagrin of Walter White and other black leaders, Louis's baptism as an American hero required that he mute his stance on the most serious problems plaguing black individuals."[46]

Sklaroff contextualizes the War Department's actions on race within the framework of wartime governance, arguing that it exhibited "the most conservative posture" of any branch of the federal government that dealt with racial issues.[47] She writes, "Maintaining segregated training camps, relegating black soldiers to labor or service units, and denying black Americans access to most naval positions, the War Department worked to maintain traditional racial ideologies under the guise of military expedience. Military officials spent more time discussing and lamenting the Negro problem than they did evaluating black soldiers as a valuable manpower asset."[48] In this passage, Sklaroff undersells the various forms of investigation the military undertook to measure the effectiveness of Black troops in World War II. The aforementioned psychological evaluations and surveys commissioned after the release of *The Negro Soldier* constitute examples of an effort to understand the role race played in military cohesion, and consequently, wartime effectiveness.

Joe Louis' image allowed the military to gloss over these complicated issues and increase patriotic sentiment for Black Americans. This public relations effort was largely successful, boosting Black morale and shaping his role as a "symbol of promise."[49] Many Black Americans witnessed his accomplishments and believed that such a future was possible for the community as

[46] Sklaroff, 959.
[47] Sklaroff, 961.
[48] Sklaroff, 961–62.
[49] Sklaroff, 970.

a whole. After enlisting in the Army, Louis was the subject of very intentional assignments, primarily being used for propaganda material.[50] Interestingly, the NAACP's Walter White, and even the more militant Mary McLeod Bethune (a longtime advocate for Black women and adviser to Roosevelt), lauded the move. However, Louis did not publicly take a stand on issues of racial discrimination to any extent.

The success of White's strategy to support the Army's approach to Joe Louis is unclear. Sklaroff argues that Louis was a singularly important propaganda symbol, used effectively as a tool to increase patriotism and morale while avoiding difficult policy reform. However, such a jolt in war fervor may have, in the long run, aided efforts to integrate the armed forces. The more that Black America was known to have participated in the monumental victory, in some sense, the stronger the claim would be to postwar equality. Additionally, the notion of one singular War Department approach to the "Negro Problem" lacks proper nuance, as public statements and internal memos each reveal a disjointed set of views on integration.

A New President

On April 12, 1945, Franklin Roosevelt died, passing the presidency to his new vice president, Harry S. Truman. The Roosevelt-Truman ticket had defeated New York Governor Thomas Dewey in the 1944 election; however, it did so with weaker Black support than previous Roosevelt campaigns.[51] In his first press conference, the Southerner with a then-ambiguous stance on civil rights was asked about the issue; Truman responded by telling reporters to examine his Senate voting record.[52] Privately, he wrote to Walter White, "I shall strive to attain the ideals for

[50] Sklaroff, 973.
[51] William C. Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (Ohio State University Press, 1970), 22.
[52] Berman, 23.

which [Roosevelt] fought and am strengthened by the assurance of your support in that effort."[53] This communication does not constitute a specific commitment to any policy, but rather an attempt to assuage fears that the new Truman administration would turn sharply away from Roosevelt's limited marks of progress in wartime race relations. His record, as Donald McCoy and Gerald Ruetten explain, did not provide all of the necessary answers for those interested in civil rights policy: "No one can precisely say what motivated him or what would […] Truman was a complex of ideas and impulses, prejudices and principles. Most important was that he was an honest man who was proud of his record and intended to do the best he could constitutionally by all men."[54] Truman boosted this sense of uncertainty by nominating James Byrnes, a staunch racist from South Carolina, to serve as his secretary of state; according to 1945 law, this meant Byrnes was first in the presidential line of succession because the vice presidency was vacant.[55] This rhetoric and action typifies the early part of Truman's presidency: platitudes about equality, a working relationship with the NAACP, and the continuing power of segregationist Southerners on federal policy.

Philleo Nash's Research

Already in 1943, a racial adviser for the Office of War Information (OWI) and son of a politically-engaged Wisconsin family, Philleo Nash pleaded that changes needed to be made within the armed forces: "Negroes are agitating for, demand, and expect, much fuller participation than at present in industry, the armed forces, and civilian defense."[56] Nash compiled records and conducted investigations into the role of race in the military, advocating for its integration

[53] Berman, 24.
[54] Donald R. McCoy and Richard T. Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration* (The University Press of Kansas, 1973), 16.
[55] McCoy and Ruetten, 24.
[56] Sklaroff, "Constructing G.I. Joe Louis: Cultural Solutions to the 'Negro Problem' during World War II," 963.

throughout the 1940s. He would later serve as a key adviser on the issue to President Truman. Among the arguments made to his higher-ups during the war, Nash pointed out that Black Americans could combine their manpower with a newfound electoral prowess to advocate for increased equality on economic issues.[57] Nash understood the political realities that would one day help convince a president to integrate the armed forces. Nash also urged War Department leadership to consider Black America's memory of World War I; support for that war effort in Europe was followed with a backsliding in legal and social equality that included race riots. At the same time, Philleo Nash's writings must not be understood as rogue and counter to the entire direction of the OWI. An official OWI study from early in the war revealed that Black citizens in Memphis and New York were not lukewarm on the war effort due to ideological reasons, but rather practical ones: "The poor morale they manifest at present does not stem from [a] lack of patriotism, isolationist sentiment or any lack of enthusiasm for democratic values. It is a direct result of the frustrations they experience in their daily lives."[58]

Although Nash's official communications reveal certain dynamics regarding racial attitudes in the government, and his file at the Truman library contributes significantly to this thesis, one must not overlook his alleged writings that expose even more. Essentially, federal law enforcement believed that Nash was the writer behind the pseudonym "Charley Cherokee," who authored columns in a Black newspaper with a particular focus on racial issues in the military.[59] The FBI was interested in investigating the columns because of their critiques of anticommunist rhetoric and actions. David H. Prices writes that "Charley Cherokee" was a staunch supporter of

[57] Sklaroff, 963.
[58] Sklaroff, 963.
[59] David H. Price, "Crusading Liberals Advocating for Racial Justice: Philleo Nash and Ashley Montagu," in *Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI's Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists* (Duke University Press, 2004), 264.

equality in the military, including the following argument: "If Army rules are so damned hard and fast, why aren't white privates compelled to salute Negro officers? Rules say all privates salute all officers, and until they do, and until a lot of things change, Charley will continue to put ants in the shiny pant seats."[60] The columns consistently aligned with Nash's area of expertise in the White House, including criticisms of New York Governor Thomas Dewey, the 1944 Republican nominee for president. Ultimately, the FBI would never conclude whether or not Nash was the author of the columns, but his knowledge of the inner-workings of the Roosevelt administration, race relations in the military, and cities with race riots make him a likely suspect.[61]

Price argues that Nash positioned himself in the middle of the Democratic Party, where he identified a path to effective advocacy: "Nash's progressive activism was moderated by his practical commitment to work within existing power structures. His general political approach can be seen in his postwar support for the Americans for Democratic Action, which tried to find middle ground for the schism within the Democratic Party" between those loyal to Truman and those who would go on to support his far-left 1948 challenger Henry Wallace.[62] Price's portrayal of Philleo Nash centers on his academic-like focus on race relations in the military and his desire to work within government to advocate for possible goals. These characteristics would be undeniably present in his work with Truman, contributing to Executive Order 9981.

In fact, "Charley Cherokee" expressed frustration that conservative white Americans considered all advocates for racial equality to be communists. As Nash wanted to be seen as a moderate force who could work with political players throughout the party, such a misconception would damage his prospects. He would later become a frequent target of Senator Joe McCarthy,

[60] Price, 264.
[61] Price, 266.
[62] Price, 266.

including in speeches from the Senate floor.[63] Nash denied any involvement with the Communist Party and would be cleared by the White House.

Truman's Early Test

World War II dramatically increased the size and power of the U.S. Armed Forces, both in terms of raw numbers and presence in American civilian life. Of course, there was no magical logistical solution to demobilization after the Japanese surrender to end World War II, which was announced on August 15, 1945. Troops needed to be, for the most part, returned to American soil from both the European and Pacific Theatres. At this time, Black soldiers and sailors had served for years but, due to Roosevelt's partial action, had no official guarantee of nondiscriminatory treatment. In December 1945, a group of 123 Black servicemen was denied access to the USS *Croatan*, which was supposed to bring them from France to New York.[64] These soldiers were refused on the grounds that the ship did not have "suitable accommodations" for African Americans, which effectively meant it could not transport the men while adhering to Jim Crow segregation rules.[65]

Existing secondary literature on the Truman era and civil rights largely ignores the *Croatan* incident.[66] This event, and the public reaction to it, however, offer a lens into how the Truman administration treated a public-facing racial discrimination controversy immediately following the war. When evaluating the gradual process that culminated with Executive Order 9981, this moment

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[63] Price, 265.
[64] Venice Spraggs, "Forrestal Order Rebukes Flattop Chief," *Chicago Defender*, December 22, 1945, Philleo Nash Papers Box 57, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[65] "Navy Taking Combat Vessels Off Troop Run So Sailors With High Points Can Be Released," *Washington Post*, January 3, 1946, Philleo Nash Papers Box 57, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[66] Desmond King, *Separate and Unequal: Black Americans and the US Federal Government* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 136. King offers a brief summary of the event, portraying it as a natural consequence of racist attacks on black soldiers in Europe at the end of the war. King's only reference to its aftermath relates to a semantic non-answer from an administration official that said the denial was merely a "preference" on the part of the commanding officer.

is a data point that measures the Black writers' understanding of the civil rights outlook, too. The refusal of the *Croatan* to transport Black soldiers is consistent with the scholarly consensus that they were severely mistreated in the months after they secured victory. The public relations battle that followed the incident also highlighted interbranch rivalries on racial issues, which would also become relevant later in the decade.

The overarching response to this incident, from the highest levels of military brass to activists on the ground in New York City, was one of outright condemnation. Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal issued a public rebuke of the ship's actions and sought to clarify an antidiscrimination policy for the branch as a whole: "In their attitude and day to day conduct of affairs, naval officers and enlisted men shall adhere rigidly and impartially to the naval regulation in which no distinction is made between individuals wearing the naval uniform or the uniform of any of the armed services of the U.S., because of race or color."[67] Civil rights advocates picked up on the denial, possibly as a proxy battle for postwar race relations in the military as a whole. When the ship docked in New York, it was greeted by protesters from the Veterans League of America who held signs that read "Negroes on the Fighting Line, Why Not on the C[r]oatan?" and "Jim Crow is Treason, Court-Martial Navy Officers."[68] The issue of court-martialing the officers responsible for the discriminatory act also received support from the Black establishment, as Black newspapers across the country came out in full force. Norfolk's *Journal and Guide* wrote to Forrestal, expressing the very viewpoints articulated by Black leaders in 1941: "This action is the very spirit of that Nazism which these removed veterans fought to defeat. Responsible officers deserve court martial for conduct unbecoming so called defenders of democracy. Hitler must be

[67] "Forrestal Prods Navy on Jim Crow Violation," *New York Post*, December 13, 1945, Philleo Nash Papers Box 57, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[68] Spraggs, "Forrestal Order Rebukes Flattop Chief."

awfully disappointed he cannot be around to give them the Iron Cross."[69] These harsh words provoked a response from the Navy, which essentially promoted Forrestal's public statement but stated that he would wait until the ship arrived back on U.S. soil to comment further.[70] The Black paper in Kansas City, not far from Truman's hometown of Independence, Missouri, published a similar message to the navy secretary, arguing that the soldiers' "homeland now uses against them the same tactics Hitler used against minorities."[71]

Notably, neither of these protest letters mention President Truman by name, and both are addressed to Forrestal. Perhaps this reflects a realistic understanding that day-to-day military operations mostly fell outside of Truman's purview, but it could also indicate that Black writers viewed the new president as weak or a mere figurehead. Truman had consistently supported anti-lynching and anti-poll tax legislation, even while representing Missouri in the Senate as a Democrat, but biographer David McCullough notes that these stances went largely unnoticed at the time.[72] Regardless of the internal justification, it is apparent that Truman was not universally seen as a receptive listener to Black groups seeking to advance civil rights. These groups may have underestimated his commitment to the eventual implementation of integration policies; however, a more likely explanation is that these advocates understood these types of large-scale, institutional changes do not generally happen in an instant from the top down. Alternatively, refraining from mentioning Truman by name may have been tactical; writers may not have wanted to alienate the new president by appearing to blame him for the deeply rooted problem of discrimination. Forrestal's unequivocal statement and specific response to the Norfolk paper demonstrate that

[69] P. Bernard Young, Jr., "Removal Of Soldiers From Navy Ship Is Court-Martial Offense, Guide Tells Navy," *Journal and Guide*, December 15, 1945, Philleo Nash Papers Box 57, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[70] "Navy Warns Against Bias Aboard Ships: Navy Secretary Answers GUIDE Protest In Letter," *Journal and Guide*, December 22, 1945, Philleo Nash Papers Box 57, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[71] "THE CALL Protests To Sec. Forrestal," *The Call*, December 14, 1945, Philleo Nash Papers Box 57, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[72] David McCullough, *Truman* (New York, New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1992), 234.

activists captured some level of attention in the aftermath of the *Croatan* incident. Although skeptics may deride this statement as mere public relations, it nonetheless showed that the leadership of a branch of the U.S. military wanted to, at a minimum, be viewed as an institution that furthered equal opportunity.

The Foreign Policy Establishment's Cold War Urgency

Of course, U.S. policymakers were not merely tied to the public opinion of their constituents and the press. The primary foreign policy concern of Truman's first term was the aftermath of the Second World War and the accompanying global threat of communism. The Cold War, which began in this period, featured a battle between the U.S. and the USSR for support from neutral countries around the globe. As the U.S. attempted to install a world order ostensibly grounded in human rights, the deprivation of basic liberties for an entire race made for a glaring contradiction. This hypocrisy was fertile ground for exploitation in Soviet propaganda and could pose a threat to efforts to persuade nations to align with the U.S.

These threats to American geopolitical strengths were expressed point-blank by Acting Secretary of State Dean Acheson, speaking generally about racial injustice's detriment on U.S. relations with neutral countries: "An atmosphere of suspicion and resentment in a country over the way a minority is being treated in the United States is a formidable obstacle to the development of mutual understanding and trust between the two countries. We will have better international relations when these reasons for suspicion and resentment have been removed."[73] Acheson was not alone. Throughout the postwar period, American diplomats and anticommunist strategists were keenly aware of the effectiveness of Soviet propaganda efforts with regard to race relation. Though they often expressed frustration that the harm from Jim Crow laws was allegedly exaggerated, they

[73] Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 80.

cited these concerns as a reason to advance civil rights reform. Mary Dudziak argues that Cold War positioning was a primary catalyst for much of the civil rights movement's success, beginning with the Truman administration. Although this thesis focuses more on domestic actors, there is veracity to the claim that State Department officials kept tabs on racial incidents in the South for this purpose. In fact, much of the documentation stored in the official file of the President's Committee on Civil Rights at the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum is a compilation of international news coverage of American race relations. The category of events that these bureaucrats sought to address would be considered "more or less accurate descriptions of civil rights limitations with adverse comments," such as a July 1947 massacre of Black prisoners in Georgia.[74] These types of reports were a constant throughout this presidential term. On other issues, such as foreign aid to Greece or official recognition of Israel, Truman exhibited a willingness to risk domestic popularity in favor of what he viewed as the optimal foreign policy decision. It is also very plausible that the Cold War impacted Black advocacy towards Truman in another way in strengthening the authority of Black groups in assessing the problems with segregation. A prominent example of this would be the NAACP's 1947 *An Appeal to the* World, which sought United Nations action on domestic race relations. Although the appeal did not directly amount to international legal action, U.S. Attorney General Tom Clark expressed embarrassment that "there could be the slightest foundation for such a petition."[75] Because American civil rights disputes had a worldwide audience, those in that policy enjoyed an increased level of relevance, at least in the eyes of those who aimed to improve the nation's image abroad. In fact, Clark's response to the petition was not one of anger at the NAACP, but rather regret that

[74] L.K. White, "Foreign Radio Comment on American Civil Rights (16 June-30 July 1947)" (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Group, August 5, 1947), RG 220: Pres. Committee on Civil Rights Box 7, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[75] McCoy and Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration*, 67.

its leadership found no "hope of redress" in the American political system.[76] That the top law enforcement officer in the United States trusted the NAACP's judgement on the path to undoing racial discrimination shows the importance of turning the eyes of the world towards American racial problems.

The Military's Slow Opening Towards Integration

In the four years leading up to Executive Order 9981, various military officials expressed limited but episodic interest in eventually integrating. Philleo Nash compiled reports and publications on the subject throughout the decade. In the waning months of the war, a Black man named Truman K. Gibson was serving as the Chief Civilian Advisor to the Secretary of War. In an April 1945 press conference, he referenced an officer in Europe who "reported that the Negro soldiers fought as well as any others and that the mistakes they made were the same as those made by other troops lacking battle experience."[77] He concluded his statement with the following:

> As a result of my trip to the Mediterranean and European Theaters I am impressed that such differences as exist between soldiers are not due to racial characteristics but to such factors as training, motivation, and environment. The fact that the Commands in these theaters believe this is encouraging. Certainly the record being made by Negro soldiers gives the lie to any charge that Negroes cannot and will not fight.[78]

Of course, self-evaluations are not reliable forms of evidence in terms of measuring the progress of race relations in the military. However, these types of initiatives, including a pro-Black War Department propaganda film that Gibson consulted on, demonstrate the military's interest in strengthening its position among Black Americans. If the secretary of war had been attempting to placate segregationist Southerners, he would not have promoted this in an official capacity.

[76] McCoy and Ruetten, 67.
[77] Truman Gibson, "Statement of Truman K. Gibson, Jr., Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War at Press Conference," April 9, 1945, Philleo Nash Papers Box 55, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[78] Gibson.

Notably, only four percent of white soldiers who viewed the film, *The Negro Soldier*, said they disliked its content.[79]

At the same time, it is crucial to understand these pro-civil rights leanings as qualified and limited. Even if they did not belittle the battlefield capabilities of Black soldiers, white World War II veterans were certainly not leading the charge for integration upon arriving home. White soldiers taunted their Black counterparts in Italy with chants of "We want Bilbo," an endorsement of the vile segregationist senator from Mississippi, Theodore Bilbo, whose hatred towards Black people was so incendiary that he garnered the disavowal of some Southern Democrats and nearly lost his 1946 reelection bid.[80] For Black G.I.s to hear this unequivocally racist chant from their fellow soldiers was surely disheartening, as they should have recognized their sacrifice in Europe. The white American public was similarly disinterested in an overhaul of society on the heels of war, with two-thirds of those polled in 1945 responding affirmatively that the country should be "pretty much the way it was before the war."[81] Of course, this does not come close to confirmation that the public opposed military integration, and that polling question could have been interpreted as an inquiry into foreign policy or economic preferences. Nonetheless, it is clear that many white Americans were apathetic or opposed to improving civil rights in the armed forces. A stated goal of Black supporters of the war effort, namely inspiring a complete shake-up of domestic race relations, had stalled in the short term.

At a luncheon for the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association on March 1, 1946, both the sitting secretary of war and assistant secretary of war spoke about their department's efforts to

[79] Karl Marks, "Reactions of Negro and White Soldiers to the Film, 'The Negro Soldier'" (Washington, D.C.: Army Service Forces, Morale Services Division, April 17, 1944), Philleo Nash Papers Box 53, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[80] Delmont, *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad*, 241.
[81] Delmont, 265.

address racial injustices and the future of Black troops. While they could not publicly commit to anything drastic, their mere presence indicates some degree of cooperation. However, the lower-ranking speaker, Howard C. Petersen, told the group, "Segregation of Negroes into separate units will not be required as a matter of policy, although it is anticipated that for some time most Negroes will be used in Negro units, often constituting part of larger white or composite units. There should be far more frequent assignment of individual Negroes with special skills to over-head and special units without regard to race."[82] While this cannot be interpreted as a promise to officially integrate the military, it indicates a level of understanding that at some point in the future, the armed forces would become less segregated for exceptionally skilled candidates. Yet again, this statement reflects a limited willingness to move forward on race.

The Failure of Platitudes in the 1946 Midterm Elections

In the 1946 midterm elections, Truman's Democratic Party faced steep challenges. After the party dominated congressional elections for over a decade, there had been a slip towards the Republicans in 1944, and commentators correctly expected brutal losses in the first national election without the charismatic Franklin Roosevelt leading the party. In the months preceding the midterms, the president followed the advice of cabinet officials Robert E. Hannegan and James Forrestal in offering extensive civil rights claims to the Urban League: "If the civil rights of even one citizen are abused, government has failed to discharge one of its primary responsibilities… We must, however, go beyond the mere checking of such intimidation and violence, and work actively for an enduring understanding and cooperation among citizens of all religious and racial

[82] Howard Petersen, "Remarks of Howard C. Petersen, the Assistant Secretary of War, at Luncheon for Negro Newspaper Publishers Association," March 1, 1946, Philleo Nash Papers Box 55, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

backgrounds."[83] Similarly, Truman endorsed the primary opponent of an incumbent Democrat from his hometown of Kansas City, Roger Slaughter, as retribution for Slaugher's opposition to the Fair Employment Practices Committee.[84] However, the scholar Jonathan Bell notes that most Black Americans "wanted a remedy stronger than presidential prose."[85] This understanding would be reflected soon by the results of the midterms. Black voters at this time did not generally vote as a bloc and were consequently seen by politicos as a group whose support was up for grabs and depended on a candidates' civil rights and economic positions. Though these voters did not express outright animosity towards the Truman administration in 1946, they were largely disappointed in its ability to convert friendly platitudes into tangible policy outcomes and contributed to the Republican victories.[86] These losses, especially given that they coincided with the aforementioned sense of Black disillusionment, likely increased the White House's understanding of what needed to be accomplished on the civil rights front to win Black support in 1948.

Gilbert Jonas highlights a unique dynamic in postwar Black politics. Much attention is paid to the political leanings of white Americans on race relations after World War II, but Jonas argues that the Black veterans had an increased level of interest in politics.[87] Perhaps the act of serving their country meant they believed they could influence its political future. This also helps explain why military integration would be a major arena for Black advocacy; those in the community with a significant increase in political conscientiousness had deep ties to the armed forces. This avenue towards change also did not require congressional approval, as the military is under the command of the president.

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[83] Jonathan Bell, *The Liberal State on Trial: The Cold War and American Politics in the Truman Years* (Columbia University Press, 2004), 47.
[84] Bell, 51.
[85] Bell, 47.
[86] Bell, 51.
[87] Jonas, *Freedom's Sword: The NAACP and the Struggle Against Racism in America, 1909-1969*, 154.

Executive Order 9808 and the President's Committee on Civil Rights

After the aforementioned blinding of Sgt. Isaac Woodard, nationwide outrage reached President Truman's desk, who was personally struck by the event. The president wrote to Attorney General Tom C. Clark on September 20, 1946, expressing how he was "very much alarmed at the increased racial feeling all over the country.[88] His letter continued by offering a remedy: a presidential committee on civil rights that would handle issues of prejudice comprehensively.[89] Although this proposal was feasible, it nonetheless shocked many attorneys within the Department of Justice. Like many Black Americans, these government lawyers had grown accustomed to politicians paying lip service to civil rights while declining to take tangible action.

Public memory was ripe with examples of racial bigotry aimed at Black veterans in the aftermath of the war. Black paper *The Pittsburgh Courier* had argued, "Everywhere our Armed forces go they carry their color hate and prejudice and disseminate them among the people."[90] Similarly, a D-Day veteran shared that his battalion was not welcomed with open arms upon its return to Georgia: "The first words we heard was, 'Here comes that nigger group. Got all them medals over there in France. We're gonna make sure that we take care of them while they're down here.'"[91] While the creation of a committee may appear like a disingenuous way to avoid policymaking responsibility for the time being, those inside the Justice Department knew this request meant that presidential action was on its way. Crucially, Truman's letter acknowledged that prosecuting individual lynching cases would be insufficient (albeit an improvement, as federal prosecutors were yet to charge anyone in such a case). Instead, he argued that structural change would be necessary. This shift in tone suggests the Woodard case, or the public reaction to it,

[88] Gergel, *Unexampled Courage: The Blinding of Sgt. Isaac Woodard and the Awakening of America*, 73.
[89] Gergel, 74.
[90] Delmont, *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad*, 242.
[91] Delmont, 242.

provoked a new train of thought in Truman's head with regard to integration. Instead of addressing racism, for instance, on a ship-by-ship basis (as his administration had done in December 1945), he may now push for broader policy changes to prevent discrimination in the first place.

In December 1946, Truman would sign Executive Order 9808, which officially established the President's Committee on Civil Rights. Tasked with investigating, and proposing remedies to, racial and religious prejudice throughout American society, this committee's eventual report would constitute the bulk of the president's civil rights platform in the 1948 election. This moment, though it arrived in the fashion of an executive order, was the result of a long line of advocacy from Black newspapers and organizations, gradual institutional shifts within the federal government, and a singularly provocative event. One key fact that exemplifies this relationship is that the day before Truman wrote his letter to Tom Clark, he met with the nation's most powerful civil rights leaders. At one point in the meeting, NAACP head Walter White took a break from technical policy discussions to simply relay the gruesome details of the attack on Woodard.[92] White had a relatively close relationship with the president and likely understood that he would find this persuasive; Richard Gergel argues that this moment is what tipped the scale towards bold action in Truman's mind. This anecdote speaks to both the advocacy strategy of the Black establishment and the president's decision-making process. The NAACP relied on building goodwill with politicians who could have easily been seen as adversaries, mainly to have its perspective heard. Truman, on the other hand, gained a reputation for being swayed by the personal touch of aides or advocates.

An Evolving Calculus Moving Forward

[92] Gergel, *Unexampled Courage: The Blinding of Sgt. Isaac Woodard and the Awakening of America*, 73.

The calendar turned to 1947, the President's Committee on Civil Rights began its investigation, and Black Americans apprehensively watched the Truman administration claim to step forward on civil rights. The 1948 presidential election would become a significant political consideration and weapon as the Republican Party took control of both chambers of Congress. Violence and discrimination plagued the nation's civil rights record, both on moral and international fronts. In the midst of these challenges stood fundamental questions of belonging to the American experiment and how far exactly the executive branch could, or should, reach to advance civil liberties.

Chapter Two: The Making of a Hesitant Champion

1947

Introduction

A quarter century before Harry Truman's administration corresponded with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to produce a seemingly unprecedented civil rights document, he met with a very different interest group: the Ku Klux Klan.[1] The young Truman was seeking political office for the first time in Independence, Missouri, and he faced challenges on multiple fronts. First of all, his region of the country was dominated politically by the Democratic Party, and the (true) accusation that he had voted for a Republican candidate in 1920 damaged his prospects.[2] After diffusing that controversy with an appeal to his record as a World War I veteran, Truman then confronted the fact that the Klan supported two of his primary opponents but remained neutral as to his candidacy.[3] At the advice of close friend Edgar Hinde, he paid a ten-dollar membership fee and attended a meeting, where he was dismayed by the Klan's demand that he promise to abstain from hiring Catholics if elected as judge.[4] Truman immediately lost interest, recouped the initial fee, and subsequently endured political attacks that combined antiblack racism, antisemitism, and anti-Catholic bigotry.[5] Nonetheless, he won the Democratic primary, which was effectively the entire election, sparking a decades-long career in electoral politics. As president, Executive Order 9981 would similarly endanger Truman's support among racist white Democrats but also not doom his prospects at the ballot box.

Civil rights advocates crossed the finish line on their push to desegregate the military under a president who flirted with Klan membership. In fact, this feat was accomplished via executive order in 1948. As the previous chapter demonstrates, this effort spanned over seven years and

[1] David McCullough, *Truman* (New York, New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1992), 164.
[2] McCullough, 164.
[3] McCullough, 164.
[4] McCullough, 164.
[5] McCullough, 165.

ultimately succeeded on the foundation of political dynamics that were strategically implemented by Black leaders beginning in 1941. Both A. Philip Randolph and Walter White understood that executive action was a viable route to policy success. Additionally, the increasing electoral importance of Black voters, as well as the newly attentive eyes of the international community, boosted the advocates' lobbying prowess. This chapter establishes the national political landscape in which the NAACP and others lobbied the administration to boldly defend civil rights in rhetoric and, eventually, policy decree. It utilizes select moments from 1947 to highlight the interests of various stakeholders relevant to Truman's decision making. The chapter analyzes the president's historic June 29 address to the NAACP, as well as its aftermath, as a lens into the relationship between the executive branch and Black writers and advocates. Drawing from a variety of primary documents, mostly contemporary newspapers and correspondence, this chapter shows that the Black civil rights strategy of encouraging strong rhetoric but incentivizing tangible action was effective. Harry Truman began the year as an incumbent seeking to shore up support with a key voting demographic by offering monumental promises; by the end of 1947, Truman's genuinely strong civil rights platform came into focus as a crucial part of his campaign.

A Historic Address

For the first half of 1947, American race relations continued along the turbulent path they had undergone since the end of World War II. Violence against Black citizens ravaged the South, with some high-profile cases qualifying for national and international news coverage. On April 15, Jackie Robinson integrated Major League Baseball, a massive symbolic step towards including Black people in the country's national self-image. Of course, this set of developments must not have surprised Black Americans; token commitments to inclusion accompanied by detrimental policies and violence had become a common experience for that community.

Still politically vulnerable on the heels of the 1946 electoral bloodbath, Truman took a large step towards strengthening his relationship with Black voters. He agreed to address the NAACP in person, which made him the first sitting president to do so. The speech was highly anticipated, with significant excitement from NAACP members but low expectations from White House staff.[6] Truman would use the occasion not to outline specific policies, but rather to align himself rhetorically with the cause of civil rights. Historian Garth E. Pauley notes that the president merely appearing to speak was viewed as a major step forward in the aftermath of Roosevelt's relative silence.[7] In the address, the Southern Democrat told the group, "When I say all Americans, I mean all Americans."[8] He affirmed his own responsibility to ensure basic rights: "The extension of civil rights today means, not protection of the people against Government, but protection of the people by the Government. We must make the Federal Government a friendly, vigilant defender of the rights and equalities of all Americans."[9] He harkened back to the Roosevelt era, citing a desire to strengthen democracy and expand rights protections, while also touting the United Nations' efforts on universal rights that included Eleanor Roosevelt.[10] The speech was largely powerful, boiler-plate language, and the only real promise was that he would prioritize civil rights as president.

Truman's historic address to the NAACP shifted the racial politics of his administration and the 1948 presidential campaign. In an electoral effort that was clearly bound to be more strenuous than recent Democratic campaigns under Roosevelt, the former vice president certainly lacked the personal charisma and cult of personality of his predecessor. Though a veto of the

[6] Garth E. Pauley, "Harry Truman and the NAACP: A Case Study in Presidential Persuasion on Civil Rights," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 223.
[7] Pauley, 223.
[8] Harry Truman, "President Truman's Address Before the NAACP" (Truman Library Institute, June 29, 1947), https://www.trumanlibraryinstitute.org/historic-speeches-naacp/.
[9] Truman.
[10] Truman.

unpopular Taft-Hartley Act (a bill advanced by the GOP to weaken labor protections) and other high-profile conflicts with the Republican-led Congress established a firmer political brand for Truman, the president was relatively uncommitted on civil rights issues. Of course, he had long supported anti-lynching measures and offered platitudes regarding American values, but political observers could not be blamed for expecting his civil rights agenda to remain a mere set of talking points. After all, administrative committees are a common Washington method of side-stepping politically toxic issues; the President's Committee on Civil Rights, which had been formed the previous December through Executive Order 9808, had not produced its report at the time of the NAACP address.

A Mixed Public Response

Sympathetic portrayals of the address were often heavily qualified. In Massachusetts, newspaper coverage lauded the aspirational language of the speech on issues of race but expressed skepticism that government could effectively usher in an era of racial equality.[11] Additionally, this article panned Truman for neglecting to advance sufficient labor and economic protections as part of his speech: "It is significant that while Mr. Truman assented the right of a man to a worthwhile job, he did not recognize the right of that man to work at a job without risk of molestation." Thus, even among liberal New Englanders, Truman needed to avoid the common mistake of politicians who advance racial justice reform: appearing to neglect poverty and the cost of living in favor of lofty civil rights goals unlikely to come to fruition. Issues of U.S. regional divides and early Cold War posturing also became relevant to the public's reaction. A writer in Maine lamented the fact that the audience for the speech was likely limited to NAACP members instead of "the people who

[11] "Mr. Truman's 'Rights,'" *The Standard-Times*, July 1, 1947, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

most needed to hear Mr. Truman," those in the South.[12] Northerners sympathetic to the civil rights movement understood Southern states to be the primary roadblock to legal equality on the basis of race, drawing this conclusion largely from the congressional actions of Southern Democrats. That a lifelong Democrat from a small town in Missouri would be viewed as the appropriate mouthpiece for a vision of equality is relevant to the public perception of later civil rights actions, such as Executive Order 9981.

However, the Maine paper precisely identified the sticking point between major interpretations of the speech, offering two possibilities. First, the address could help counter Soviet propaganda related to antiblack attitudes and laws in the U.S., particularly publications that bolstered anti-American sentiment in China. Alternatively, however, "the chances are that it will merely add to the mass of literature that calls for action to guarantee civil rights to all our citizens without bringing action itself." Needless to say, these reactions were not limited to Northern liberals or international observers; as shown by the NAACP's advocacy over the course of the next year, Black Americans were similarly concerned that Truman's grandiose rhetoric would not result in tangible policy changes. This fear informed the organization's excitement over the recommendations in the report, as well as its ultimate support for the desegregation of the armed forces.

Even if Truman chose to invest political capital into pushing strong civil rights legislation, his critics argued, it could be ineffective because the principles he articulated in the speech were so general. A *New York Herald Tribune* piece suggested that a federal anti-discrimination law similar to its state's would be a step in the right direction, but that "prejudice cannot be dissolved

[12] "Race Hatred Must Go," *The Portland Press Herald*, July 2, 1947, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

by fiat."[13] This sort of criticism offers a valuable lens into why, after a year of national discourse about the topic, Truman settled on desegregation of the armed forces as his primary civil rights accomplishment. To persuade Congress to prohibit employment discrimination would likely have been a more monumental change to everyday civilian life, but he could not do so by decree. However, as the aforementioned criticism fails to note, the chief executive can initiate the end of state discrimination in some realms.

Gaining Black Trust through Rhetoric

Philleo Nash, the Truman aide keenly interested in military segregation, kept close watch on Black writers' responses to the speech. His files at the Truman Library feature clippings from Black newspapers from throughout the country. The political relevance of such publications to the civil rights movement, in fact, had increased due to World War II. [14] Some Black papers covered the address enthusiastically and without much reservation at all. For instance, the *Atlanta Daily World* implored readers to view the speech as "the work of a man, utterly sincere in his desire and determination to make America take her rightful place of leadership and democracy and human decency over the world."[15] One must note the rhetorical combination of "democracy and human decency," which lends credence to the notion that the nation's international ambitions fueled a sense of urgency in domestic concerns. A Black publication in California rejected the criticism that Truman's speech was heard by a narrow audience, pointing out that it was broadcast on all four major radio networks.[16] The same article explicitly mentioned the address's significance

[13] "The Case for Freedom," *New York Herald Tribune*, July 2, 1947, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[14] Charlotte G. O'Kelly, "Black Newspapers and the Black Protest Movement: Their Historical Relationship, 1827-1945," *Phylon* 43, no. 1 (Qtr 1982): 12.
[15] "Truman's Civil Rights Speech," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 1, 1947, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[16] "Truman Tells The World," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 3, 1947, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

coming from a sitting president and offered a succinct summary of the Black establishment's advocacy pitch to Truman during this campaign season: "We liked your words, Mr. President. We hope that in the period immediately ahead you will use the full power of your high office to see that those words are translated into legislation which will make it possible for Negroes in the United States to enjoy the fruit of that democracy for which so many of them sacrificed their happiness and their lives in two world wars." Service in and support of the war effort had been a sincere topic of debate in the Black community earlier in the decade; one persuasive argument was that Black Americans would boost their chances at domestic racial equality by serving. Black writers and advocates were sure to avoid giving Truman full-throated endorsements without enacting legal changes. Especially given the then-undisclosed nature of the committee's findings, this reaction to the address aligns with the overarching strategy. This newspaper clipping, which was located in the personal papers of Democratic researcher and adviser Philleo Nash at the Truman Library, suggests success on its own terms. The message was intended to reach the White House, and it did.

Bipartisan Skepticism Towards the Civil Rights Address

At the same time, objections to the speech on substantive grounds were published throughout the country. Writers in Arizona and Virginia decried the speech's focus on economic rights, such as a job and a home, alongside the inalienable constitutional rights that comprised much of his civil rights platform.[17] Thus, a national survey of journalistic responses to the speech reveals a difficult dilemma for Truman and his strategists. The public was uninterested in a presidential campaign dealing solely with racial issues and overlooking broader economic

[17] "One Element Missing," *Arizona Daily Star*, July 1, 1947, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum; "Careless Words," July 2, 1947, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

concerns. However, it also rejected the necessary framing that would tie together civil rights reform and the legacy of New Deal economics.

Partisan politics, and the public's awkward perception of a Southern Democrat supporting civil rights, stoked even more skepticism that Truman would act on his stated goals. These dynamics were further complicated by the relatively impressive civil rights record of his likely general election opponent, New York Governor Thomas A. Dewey. A pro-Dewey piece in Albany's *Knickerbocker News* reminded readers that Truman had "previously given lip service" to the implementation of sweeping protections in employment law but was yet to fulfill this promise.[18] The notion that Truman would continue to issue forceful statements in defense of civil rights but fail to back them up with policy changes was not unfounded. In fact, the manner in which he proceeded for the remainder of 1947 and the first portion of 1948 suggest that this was precisely his strategy. Similarly, his membership in the Democratic Party dampened any sense of optimism among some Americans. In the *Indianapolis Star*, one writer noted that "his own party" had utilized the filibuster and other legislative maneuvers to block anti-poll tax and anti-lynching measures in Congress, including as recently as 1946. This piece, however, blamed the lack of progress on "a few Democrats from the South."[19] The clear delineation between Southern Democrats and the rest of the party was most evident in the Senate due to the region's disproportionate representation in the chamber. It also suggests the public was keenly aware of the challenge Truman faced of uniting drastically different groups to defeat a mainstream Republican opponent. The article's request for "party action and discipline" against segregationist Democrats reveals a level of apprehension at the rhetoric on its own. The notion that Truman had the capacity

[18] "Mr. Truman's Pledge," *Knickerbocker News*, July 1, 1947, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[19] "Truman's Own Party To Blame," *Indianapolis Star*, July 2, 1947, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

to damage segregationist power but declined to do so for intraparty political reasons at that time was pervasive but likely inaccurate; if Truman were able to ram through an official Democratic National Committee censure of Theodore Bilbo and Strom Thurmond, that would solely divide the party and fail to deliver any legal results.

Dixie Responds to Truman

The overwhelming nature of Democratic strength in the South as of June 1947 cannot be overstated. Due in large part to the Democratic Party's historical support for Jim Crow laws, as well as the widespread inability of Black Southerners to vote, many states were governed with almost no minority party involvement. A Democratic president, such as Truman, relied on Southern Democrats to interpret any pro-civil rights message in such a way that it would not damage support among white segregationists. A column in *The Birmingham Age-Herald* endorsed Truman's speech despite offering a peace branch towards attitudes common among Southern racists.[20] The article complains that America's "mistakes at home are publicized and exaggerated" and commends Truman for trying to address that perception. It continues to, rather optimistically, describe the address as "especially welcome in the South," primarily because the president avoided using condescending language towards Southern whites. This tactical use of racist-adjacent rhetoric to encourage minimal but evident steps on civil rights was also employed in North Carolina, where a writer used the occasion of the address to advance the view that "[n]o Federal law on lynching is needed—if the States do their duty."[21] Evaluating this sort of rhetoric in historical context may sound disturbing, but federal anti-lynching laws were very much the source of spirited debate throughout the 1940s. That a Southern "states' rights"-style argument was

[20] "On Human Rights," *The Birmingham Age-Herald*, July 1, 1947, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[21] "Remains To Be Seen," *The News & Observer*, June 30, 1947, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

presented as a middle-ground approach to the horror of lynching is shocking in its own right. At the same time, it illuminates the sense of embarrassment with which Southern whites discussed such civil rights abuses; a primary goal during political debate was to avoid the feeling of shame or condescension.

Of course, it is not difficult to identify Southern voices who did not welcome the message of the speech. For example, an Arkansas paper published a categorical denunciation of anti-discrimination government actions of any kind.[22] After arguing that any such initiatives would be counterproductive, the author insinuated that Truman was a hypocrite due to his previous beneficiary relationship with a segregationist Democratic political machine in Kansas City. This author typified the response that national Democratic politicians before Truman feared and thus caused them to avoid endorsing sweeping civil rights reform.

A Unique Intraparty Challenge Emerges

Before 1948, the Democratic coalition consisted of a vastly diverse group of voters: western farmers, Southern white segregationists, northern urban laborers, and an increasing number of Black Americans. Far-left Americans, though certainly outside of the mainstream postwar consensus on foreign policy issues, were nonetheless a notable subset of the voting bloc who would be expected to align with Truman. After a high-profile spat with Henry Wallace over the direction of Cold War policy and the Marshall Plan, the threat of a third-party candidacy from the left loomed over Truman's political decision-making. Truman could not afford to appeal to this small group of voters at the expense of the majority of Americans who remained hostile to the Soviet Union. However, a Communist Party publication called the *Daily Worker* offered qualified support for the NAACP address, stating that Truman was "right" when he summarized his beliefs

[22] "Beyond the Law and Beyond the Realities.," *Arkansas Gazette*, July 1, 1947, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

on equality but implied that he would need to follow through with policy actions in order to be successful.[23] In this sense, left-wing Americans can be viewed as attempting a similar advocacy strategy to that of the NAACP: make the group's support seem attainable to the sitting president but predicate it on legislation that they favor. For both of these groups, the decision to back their agenda would come at some political cost among other demographics. Truman eventually decided to explicitly appeal to Black organizations and voters (even with the understanding that it would hurt him among Southern whites) while disregarding the foreign policy and economic views of the extreme left. This discrepancy suggests that the Black voting bloc may have been more well-organized or more electorally advantageous in terms of geography; additionally, the net effect of alienating racist voters in Southern states that could not vote Republican was minimal, but capitulating to Wallace on a global policy could have damaged Truman's chances among moderates of all political identifications. It also suggests that Truman's personal leanings played a role in which interests he chose to prioritize.

A Changing Tide on Race

Within weeks, positive headlines regarding Truman's approach to race relations boosted the public's memory of the address. A federal judge in South Carolina made national news when he cited the speech in a decision striking down the state's white-only primary election.[24] A Black newspaper in Los Angeles credited Truman for issuing an appropriate condemnation of obstructionist senators from the South while blaming the status quo on a lack of effort from "the progressive sections of the Democratic and Republican parties."[25] A cursory view of some

[23] "The President's Pledge," *Daily Worker*, July 1, 1947, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[24] "Judge Takes State Down a Peg; Quotes Truman's NAACP Talk," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 26, 1947, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[25] "More Than Words," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 17, 1947, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

Southern white press outlets, even, found the speech to be received positively, with an Alabama paper proclaiming that Truman was "at his best" while offering an almost complete endorsement of the speech's content.[26] All three of these articles were stored in the personal files of Truman staff; however, the appearance of a pro-Truman skew in this sampling may be no more than a mirage, as White House officials often catalogued damaging news pieces in order to offer a realistic assessment of the national political environment.

A Nuanced Revision to an Underdog Story

The political adviser most commonly credited with Truman's 1948 success is Clark M. Clifford. Records show that in the months following the speech, Clifford compiled public opinion data revealing a presidential campaign that was close if not leaning in Truman's favor. For instance, a July 1947 poll showed Truman with a lead of over 23 percentage points over hypothetical Republican opponent Robert A. Taft.[27] An August poll showed Truman 2 points behind Dewey, a sharp contrast from his 22-point deficit five months earlier.[28] Headlines along the lines of "Belief In G.O.P Victory Slumps" and "Republicans' Chances To Win in '48 Election Seen Less Than Even" abounded.[29] These articles cast doubt upon the popular narrative that Truman's 1948 campaign was a come-from-behind, underdog effort. Even though most pundits would later consider Dewey to be the favorite, publicly available information in 1947 indicates that observers expected a close election. It was in this environment that the Truman administration

[26] "Benefits Seen From Truman Rights Speech," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, July 17, 1947, Philleo Nash Papers Box 58, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[27] Elmo Roper, "What People Are Thinking: Poll Shows Truman Increasing Lead Over Taft," *New York Herald Tribune*, September 11, 1947, Clark M. Clifford Papers Box 20, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[28] "'Fortune' Poll Shows Strong Swing to Truman," *The Nation*, August 29, 1947, Clark M. Clifford Papers Box 20, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[29] George Gallup, "Belief In G.O.P. Victory Slumps: Support In Poll Almost Halved Since December," *The Courier-Journal*, September 3, 1947, Clark M. Clifford Papers Box 20, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum; David Lawrence, "Republicans' Chances To Win '48 Election Seen Less Than Even," *The Daily Evening Star*, November 7, 1947, Clark M. Clifford Papers Box 20, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

took many crucial steps in its civil rights stand, such as releasing its committee report and articulating a campaign strategy of endorsing racial reform. If Truman and his advisers viewed advocating for civil rights as a hail-Mary strategy, it is unlikely that it would have been adopted under such conditions.

There is no doubt that the political world viewed the incumbent as weak after the devastating Democratic losses of the 1946 midterms; many assumed that was the beginning of a post-Roosevelt trend towards the G.O.P. However, these sources suggest that Truman staffers, including one as influential as Clark Clifford, had a vastly different understanding of the outlook as early as the summer of 1947. It is possible that political polling's relative infancy in 1947 led observers to cast doubt upon this evidence, but the prominent columns of pollster George Gallup in papers nationwide tell a different story. Evidently, the Truman White House was closely watching public opinion data and thus did not feel desperate to make drastic and sudden policy changes at this time. The secondary literature in the Truman field often points to the narrative, without qualification, that he was widely expected to lose throughout the election cycle. Of course, this lack of nuance has significant implications when evaluating the causes of executive actions during the time frame of the election cycle. Because Truman officials understood the election to be a close contest, any slight expansion (or strategic reconfiguration) of his coalition would be crucial. Ultimately, his victory would be credited to Black voters in the three closest swing states. Yet assuming that the administration acted out of desperation on domestic issues for almost two years can lead to overly broad explanations for what inspired Executive Order 9981.

Truman's Committee Meets the Cold War

Although contemporary publications can provide a glimpse into the internal machinations of the Truman White House, private correspondence is perhaps more revealing of what occupied

the minds of key administration officials. As detailed in the previous chapter, the President's Committee on Civil Rights was established via executive order in late 1946 and would ultimately issue its monumental report in 1947. The formulation of that report, and the research that went into it, included almost continuous communication with the NAACP, which appears cautiously optimistic throughout the documentation. The committee's secretary, Robert K. Carr, saved much of his personal correspondence with leading advocates; this allows for direct research into the administration's interactions with civil rights leaders. Naturally, these archives also highlight the myriad factors that impacted the committee's process, including foreign affairs and administrative concerns.

The fear of propaganda, particularly pro-communist propaganda, that highlighted American hypocrisy on issues of race and democracy permeated the committee's study. Carr received a short memo in July 1947 (two weeks after the NAACP address) that summarized the potential downside to ignoring these concerns by reminding him that propaganda about perceived injustices at Versailles had boosted the rise of Nazism in Germany.[30] The memorandum's author, J.W. Halderman, succinctly instructed the committee, "The United States should not, therefore, take a passive attitude toward its own problems in the field of civil liberties."[31] Notably, the hypocrisy outlined in the memo is mostly condemned due to its potential for damaging America's claim to moral legitimacy on the world stage. If the U.S. government cannot protect civil rights in its own states, Halderman suggested, other countries would roll their eyes when American diplomats instruct them to adopt equitable policies. Dean Rusk, a State Department official who would later serve as a cabinet official in the Kennedy administration, wrote to Carr in late July

[30] J.W. Halderman to Robert Carr, "Motivation of Propaganda on Civil Liberties," July 15, 1947, 1, RG 220: Pres. Committee on Civil Rights Box 7, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[31] Halderman to Carr, 2.

with two reports, both detailing foreign press coverage of American racial discrimination.[32] Surveilling international press was a cumbersome endeavor, but the State Department was so acutely focused on understanding Soviet propaganda that it compiled regular reports on anything related to American race relations. Carr's response to Rusk was frank and risked alienating officials who viewed racial discrimination as purely an issue of propaganda. On behalf of the committee, Carr wrote, "The Committee believes that there is much distortion in foreign propaganda but it also believes that the American record is in many ways a bad one and the Committee is not attempting in its report to minimize this condition."[33] Carr continued to outline what he viewed as the optimal message from the State Department that could be included in the committee's report. He emphasized the argument that foreign exaggerations of racial injustices should not preclude the U.S. government from conducting an honest investigation into its own shortcomings. Closing with the idea that a unified domestic polity would increase the nation's moral persuasiveness, Carr implored the department to endorse civil rights reform more wholeheartedly on the grounds that it would help its image internationally. This correspondence throws into question the causal assumptions sometimes made about the relationship between foreign relations and domestic civil rights pushes. If professional diplomats independently concluded that tangible civil rights protections were needed to counteract Soviet propaganda (as some did), one could expect there to be less of a need for the committee to convince the department to endorse such actions. In fact, one may assume that the persuasion would work in the opposite direction; a cursory analysis could lead an observer to believe that the State Department would beg the domestically-oriented committee to push for broadly enforceable legislation.

[32] Dean Rusk to Robert Carr, July 29, 1947, RG 220: Pres. Committee on Civil Rights Box 7, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[33] Robert Carr to Dean Rusk, August 11, 1947, 1, RG 220: Pres. Committee on Civil Rights Box 7, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

Intelligence official L.K. White's August report on foreign radio comment offers a crucial lens into the federal bureaucracy's understanding of worldwide opinion on American race relations. In a letter to the committee, he wrote that such propaganda could generally be divided into three categories: accurate depictions of injustice with negative commentary, misleading or false criticisms, and miscellaneous coverage. White ensured that the committee, via recipient Milton B. Stewart, understood that no foreign radio stations had positively remarked on any civil rights efforts in the U.S. as of July 30 (one month after the NAACP address).[34] To what extent this realization was a source of frustration for administration officials is a matter of speculation, but it dents the certainty with which one can assert that future civil rights actions were primarily driven by the goal of garnering positive news coverage abroad. If seemingly comprehensive intelligence found no public relations benefit to Truman's NAACP address, there may have been less of an incentive to issue additional similar statements from a purely Cold War-oriented perspective. An alternative explanation is that the address failed to receive international press attention because the rhetoric was alike in form to previous American political platitudes and yielded no direct policy changes. The foreign press, as shown in the report, did not entirely ignore the speech; an English-language publication from the Soviets highlighted Truman's public admission that millions of American citizens were denied their basic rights.[35] The effectiveness of criticizing a world leader for identifying a problem in his home country is questionable, but it is evident that Soviet propagandists kept close tabs on U.S. racial politics. In the 1948 election, a confusing dynamic emerged in which partisans from both sides would come to sincerely believe that the Soviet Union would benefit from their opponent's success and would thus not hesitate to meddle in the election

[34] L.K. White, "Foreign Radio Comment on American Civil Rights (16 June-30 July 1947)" (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Group, August 5, 1947), RG 220: Pres. Committee on Civil Rights Box 7, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[35] White, 3.

on their behalf. The report shared by White mostly shows foreign adversaries' interest in stirring discontent within the U.S. and highlighting it throughout the world. Carr's assessment that simply pointing out a lack of nuance in this propaganda would be unpersuasive was correct; the fundamental truth was that racial discrimination was pervasive, and the administration had nothing to gain domestically by glossing over it in the committee's report.

Given how much the U.S. government cared about foreign press coverage of domestic race relations, the NAACP clearly understood it had a new tool at its disposal: international outrage. The United Nations offered the perfect platform for arousing the world's anger at racial injustice. Thus, the organization submitted a petition entitled "An Appeal to the World," written predominantly by none other than W.E.B. Du Bois.[36] The document focused on democratic principles, lambasting the U.S. for failing to live up to its promises of equality. Even more embarrassing, the NAACP specifically mentioned Southern Democrats Theodore Bilbo and John Rankin as greater threats to American liberty than the USSR.[37] As previously mentioned, Attorney General Tom Clark publicly expressed his anger and vowed to change living conditions for Black Americans.[38] Though the petition was certainly not helpful to the administration, its central claims were not significantly different from those advanced by the President's Committee on Civil Rights. As William C. Berman notes, "The NAACP's claim that widespread discrimination was indeed a basic fact of life in the United States was reinforced" by the committee's report released later in 1947.[39] Though the UN Commission on Human Rights rejected the subsequent Soviet attempt to

[36] Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 44.
[37] Dudziak, 44.
[38] William C. Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (Ohio State University Press, 1970), 66.
[39] Berman, 66–67.

launch an investigation into the report's merits, the press portrayed the appeal as a success because it drew attention to the organization's cause.[40]

Black Organizations Continue to Push

Correspondence between Robert K. Carr, the executive secretary of the President's Committee on Civil Rights, and Black leaders illustrate a back-and-forth working relationship in which the advocates eagerly sought to shape and keep tabs on the committee's work. Notably, NAACP officials Walter White and Thurgood Marshall were directly involved in this effort. Carr would serve as the primary author of the committee's report in late 1947, so any lobbying in his direction in the months prior could be instructive as to an effective advocacy strategy.

On March 25, 1947, the editor and publisher of the *Chicago Defender*, John H. Sengstacke, replied to a request from Carr seeking advice on how the committee could collect information about discriminatory practices. The first point Sengstacke raised in his note was that existing laws were not fully enforced, so "any program for strengthening civil rights legislation must logically take into account ways and means of enforcement."[41] For Black Americans who had endured decades of legalized discrimination, there was no time for unenforceable decrees; the government needed to take action in a realm over which it maintained control. Sengstacke offered the following six areas as fields with vast discrimination: jobs, education, politics, public services, restrictive covenants, and civil liberties.[42] The military integration mandated by Executive Order 9981 the following year would probably fall under the employment category, but this note illustrates a larger conversation within the civil rights community. Segregation was a pervasive ill that harmed Black Americans in a number of different fields, so the decision as to which discriminatory barriers to

[40] Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 45.
[41] John H. Sengstacke to Robert K. Carr, March 25, 1947, 1, President's Committee on Civil Rights, Records, 1946-1947 Box 11, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[42] Sengstacke to Carr, 2.

address first was crucial. In other fields that required cooperation from multiple branches, and multiple levels, of government, integration was a debilitatingly slow process. Almost a half century after *Brown v. Board of Education* nominally ended the legal segregation of public schools, in 2003, the Dallas Independent School District's racial desegregation process was finally completed.[43] Similarly, many American cities still display aspects of effective housing segregation, and the language of racially restrictive covenants can be found in some land deeds. That the military would be the realm of choice in the Truman era follows Sengstacke's overarching emphasis on enforceability of whatever legal progress would be made.

Similarly, the NAACP continued its tactful advocacy efforts under the new framework of the committee. Walter White, the organization's leader who was arguably responsible for the creation of the committee, received a memorandum from an NAACP attorney in March 1947. Robert L. Carter drafted a document proposing, among other things, sweeping civil rights legislation including an anti-lynching statute, a ban on poll taxes, an effective ban on all-white primary elections, and a statute for the Fair Employment Practices Committee.[44] Of Carter's eight-pronged proposal for committee activities, the shortest and least specific section concerned the military: "It is also suggested that it study the problem of discrimination and segregation in the Armed Forces and in the National Guard Units."[45] Perhaps Carter focused more on civilian issues because the day-to-day experience of most Black Americans was more inhibited by housing discrimination that by segregated military units. However, military integration was a demand of

[43] Joel Anderson, "Judge Ends School Desegregation at Dallas School District," *Plainview Herald*, June 4, 2003, https://www.myplainview.com/news/article/Judge-ends-school-desegregation-at-Dallas-school-8764912.php.
[44] Robert L. Carter to Walter White, "Memorandum to Mr. White from Robert L. Carter," March 12, 1947, 1, President's Committee on Civil Rights, Records, 1946-1947 Box 12, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[45] Carter to White, 2.

Black leadership dating back to at least 1941, and this document shows that NAACP attorneys still considered it a priority, albeit not the top one.

From July through October 1947, Walter White and Thurgood Marshall, then a top lawyer at the NAACP, were in regular communication with Robert K. Carr and the committee. Some of the correspondence was informative, such as a letter that provided details about a killing involving a police officer in Mason County, Alabama, and its legal implications.[46] The committee's records at the Truman Library indicate a functional relationship in which Carr could request input from the organization, and Marshall or White would reply, usually with helpful detail. In October, the letters shifted, with White constantly checking in on the timing of the report's release. White wrote a note to Carr on October 2 that simply asked, "Can you tell me when the report of the Committee is to be completed and made public?"[47] Carr replied, promising to send White "one of the first available copies."[48] The following week, White asked if he could receive an advance copy of the report,[49] to which Carr answered with a promise that he would be sent one "at the earliest possible moment," even before it would be submitted to President Truman.[50] These communications reflect a sense of anticipation, at least at the top of the NAACP. White had high hopes for what could come of the President's Committee on Civil Rights, and his organization had devoted significant energy into aiding its investigation and proposals. Carr was responsive to White, likely signaling the administration's desire to be seen as an ally to the Black community in the federal government.

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[46] Thurgood Marshall to Theron L. Caudle, July 3, 1947, President's Committee on Civil Rights, Records, 1946-1947 Box 12, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[47] Walter White to Robert K. Carr, October 2, 1947, 1, President's Committee on Civil Rights, Records, 1946-1947 Box 12, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[48] Robert K. Carr to Walter White, October 3, 1947, President's Committee on Civil Rights, Records, 1946-1947 Box 12, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[49] Walter White to Robert K. Carr, October 6, 1947, President's Committee on Civil Rights, Records, 1946-1947 Box 12, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[50] Robert K. Carr to Walter White, October 10, 1947, President's Committee on Civil Rights, Records, 1946-1947 Box 12, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

The history of mistrust, including Roosevelt's dishonest behavior earlier in the decade, underlies this priority.

After the report's release, White frantically contacted Carr, asking him for a thousand copies and explaining that he was encouraging local NAACP chapters to purchase and distribute copies on a wide scale.[51] As for the report's content, he told Carr, "Congratulations on a superb job."[52] Carr was evidently relieved at White's assessment: "Needless to say, I am delighted with your statement that we have done a superb job. We have done our best and I am quite pleased with the result. My one hope is that the report receives the attention and circulation it deserves. Thank you again for your kind cooperation with us from the start to the finish of our undertaking."[53] Compared to all prior correspondence, this can be read as a jubilant celebration on the part of Carr. His reaction advances our understanding of the NAACP's role with the committee in two ways. First, it confirms that the organization was closely involved in supplying the committee with ideas for the ultimate report. More importantly, however, it demonstrates the Truman administration's broader desire to gain the support of Black leadership. The fact that many Black Americans had supported the Republicans in 1946 probably informed this goal.

"To Secure These Rights" and Increased Expectations

In the committee's assessment of military segregation, it both commended instances of pro-equality rhetoric and condemned present practices that limited opportunities for Black servicemen. The first mention of this issue came with an acknowledgement that "officers high in the ranks of the armed forces have shown a heartening recognition of the need to make the Army,

[51] Walter White to Robert K. Carr, Telegram, October 28, 1947, President's Committee on Civil Rights, Records, 1946-1947 Box 12, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[52] White to Carr.
[53] Robert K. Carr to Walter White, October 29, 1947, President's Committee on Civil Rights, Records, 1946-1947 Box 12, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

Navy, Air Forces, and the Coast Guard more representative of the democracy whose defense they are [responsible for]."[54] The report repeated its appeal to national unity as a justification for integration: "The war experience brought to our attention a laboratory in which we may prove that the majority and minorities of our population can train and work and fight side by side in cooperation and harmony. We should not hesitate to take full advantage of this opportunity."[55] The committee presented a detailed picture of what the various branches were doing differently with regard to race. The report then made the case that military was particularly ripe for desegregation because its "policies are completely determined by the federal government. That government has the power, the opportunity, and the duty to see that discrimination and prejudice are completely eliminated from the armed services, and that the American soldier or sailor enjoys as full a measure of civil liberty as is commensurate with military service."[56] This observation is essential to understanding Executive Order 9981. The committee's report was comprehensive and addressed many areas of life that could not be overhauled by the federal government. Thus, it should be unsurprising that President Truman, for whom this document was ostensibly prepared, would see military reform as the correct first avenue towards legal equality.

Lastly, the report formally recommended that Congress adopt what A. Philip Randolph had called for over six years earlier: an immediate end to military segregation. Under the category of defending the citizenship rights of minority Americans, the committee endorsed the "enactment by Congress of legislation, followed by appropriate administrative action, to end immediately all discrimination and segregation based on race, color, creed, or national origin, in the organization

[54] "To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights" (Washington, D.C., 1947), 19, https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/to-secure-these-rights.
[55] "To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights," 47.
[56] "To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights," 102.

and activities of all branches of the Armed Services."[57] A reader in hindsight may be confused as to why the recommendation asked for congressional action when the policy change was so clearly within the realm of executive authority. It is important to note that almost all of the report's recommendations concerned legislative actions or broader systemic changes in American society. The only tasks assigned to the executive branch were relatively distant from associations with the White House, such as the establishment of an FBI unit to hone in on civil rights issues via criminal justice.[58] It is likely that the Truman administration wanted to avoid recommending too many items to itself; if a proposal turned out to be politically unfeasible but was assigned to another branch, there would be a convenient excuse. After all, the fact that the committee report suggested that Congress write the mandate would not legally inhibit the president from acting.

Clifford's Memo and an Evolving Racial Strategy

As the President's Committee on Civil Rights wrapped up its report in November 1947, the national political landscape shifted towards the 1948 presidential election, now less than a year away. Truman, though certainly not an overwhelming favorite, was not understood to be doomed, at least in the eyes of trusted adviser Clark Clifford. Clifford sent Truman a memo outlining a reelection strategy that, in decades since, has been credited with the campaign's success. From the outset, Clifford's memo bucked the status quo in Democratic politics, which had been to placate Southern segregationists on race relations: "The *only* pragmatic reason for conciliating the South in normal times is because of its tremendous strength in Congress. Since the Congress is Republican and the Democratic President has, therefore, no real chance to get his own program approved by it, particularly in an election year, he has no real necessity for 'getting along' with

[57] "To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights," 162.
[58] "To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights," 153.

the Southern conservatives."[59] Most importantly, the Clifford memo clearly articulated the importance of Black voters in the northern swing states such as Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan.[60] Additionally, the memo recounted the political shift of the previous few years: Democratic candidates could no longer stand on Franklin Roosevelt's record of economic improvement as a persuasive message because of the increased cost of living and voters' fatigue with that talking point.[61] To counteract this, Clifford asserted, the administration needed to make a bold stand on civil rights: "Unless there are new and real efforts (as distinguished from mere political gestures which are today thoroughly understood and strongly resented by sophisticated Negro leaders), the Negro bloc, which, certainly in Illinois and probably in New York and Ohio, *does* hold the balance of power, will go Republican."[62]

Interestingly enough, the memo itself (from which much of Clifford's political credibility moving forward would stem) became the subject of a plagiarism controversy in the resulting decades. James Rowe, a Democratic operative who had drafted an original version of the document, objected to Clifford's claims that he wrote the memorandum in 1968.[63] Clifford continued to downplay Rowe's role for years,[64] but Clifford biographer John Acacia concluded, "Overall, Clifford could be better described as an editor rather than an author of the resulting memo. He revised the ranking of the key issues identified by Rowe and cut several paragraphs and a few sentences."[65] The "few sentences" that actually were Clifford's work were the set of

[59] Clark Clifford to Harry Truman, "Memorandum for the President," Memorandum, November 19, 1947, 3, The 1948 Election Campaign - Political File, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/memo-clark-clifford-harry-s-truman?documentid=NA&pagenumber=1.
[60] Clifford to Truman, 11.
[61] Clifford to Truman, 12.
[62] Clifford to Truman, 12–13.
[63] John Acacia, *Clark Clifford: The Wise Man of Washington* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 121.
[64] Acacia, 123.
[65] Acacia, 126.

paragraphs regarding civil rights.[66] Ultimately, the original innovator behind Truman's 1948 civil rights push is irrelevant for the sake of identifying successful lobbying techniques from Black activists and the political consequences of Executive Order 9981. It is nonetheless instructive that political operatives and journalists would come to view recommending civil rights reform in 1948 as such a genius revelation that its origin would be argued over for decades (Clifford finally conceded most of the truth in his 1991 memoirs).[67]

Conclusion

Consider the documents that landed on Harry Truman's desk in the late fall of 1947. One publicly presented an itemized list of the challenges the United States faced with racist laws and discriminatory practices, along with a set of recommendations. Among these proposals was a major policy change he could effectuate without congressional support. The other document convinced him that he could win his bid for reelection if he followed a few key steps, chief among them the pursuit of tangible civil rights reform.

A year later, Truman would prove victorious in Ohio, Illinois, and California by less than one percent each. These three states comprised the difference between winning and losing in the electoral college that year, so expectations of a close presidential election were certainly appropriate. As the following chapter will demonstrate, Truman's 1948 approach to civil rights reached its high-water mark with Executive Order 9981 to integrate the armed forces. Though causation is difficult to prove in a complicated national election, the impact of Black swing voters must not be overlooked. Truman and his advisers did not overlook it, which was the product of successful political positioning by Black leaders over the years preceding 1948.

[66] Acacia, 126.
[67] Acacia, 124.

Chapter Three: A Gamble, a Threat, and a Step for Racial Progress

1948

Introduction

The week before Harry Truman's second inauguration in January 1949, the chief architect of his reelection campaign, Clark Clifford, received a short message from Helen Gahagan Douglas, a congresswoman and actress. The entirety of the letter read, "Thought the enclosed report would be of interest to you on the election in California's 21st and 22nd [assembly districts]."[1] Douglas attached a report from the Council for Civic Unity of San Francisco that highlighted election results from those districts, parsing out their precincts with over half Black residents. The findings were decisive. In each district, Truman's margin in the majority-Black precincts was at least 48 percentage points better than in the district as a whole compared to his opponent, Republican Thomas A. Dewey.[2] His gains relative to the vote totals received in the presidential primary were also concentrated in these areas, suggesting late movement in the president's favor. Clifford's reply summarized over a year of campaign strategy and built on the work of civil rights advocates throughout the decade: "It is very interesting to note that this corroborates the position that you and I have taken."[3] Although somewhat subdued, this sentence must be read as confirmation that the Truman White House felt its stand on civil rights had been vindicated by election results.

In the year leading up to this letter, Black leaders engaged with the electoral realm to push Truman towards enforceable civil rights action. This chapter will demonstrate the political calculations that led the president to understand his reelection hinged more on Black support than on unanimous Southern white backing. More importantly, though, is that Truman's attempts at earning the trust of Black voters with strong rhetoric was mostly fruitless, and the message that

[1] Helen Gahagan Douglas to Clark Clifford, January 13, 1949, Clark M. Clifford Papers Box 22, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[2] Council for Civic Unity of San Francisco to Helen Gahagan Douglas, Report, December 30, 1948, Clark M. Clifford Papers Box 22, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[3] Clark Clifford to Helen Gahagan Douglas, January 31, 1949, Clark M. Clifford Papers Box 22, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

they would withhold support until policies were changed was crucial. Political commentators in 1948 were divided as to the electoral wisdom of Truman's civil rights plans, but one thing was for certain: he felt more comfortable risking failure among Southern white segregationists than among Black voters in northern swing states. This calculation would have been improbable a decade earlier, and much of this shift can be attributed to political positioning by Black advocates. In fact, the role of A. Philip Randolph as an immediate catalyst for Roosevelt's Executive Order 8801 is essentially a consensus view: as one historian writes, "The importance of the Randolph campaign in helping to swing administration opinion cannot be denied."[4] Another scholar concurs: "Executive Order 9981 was also designed to reduce the possibility of an immediate confrontation between the administration and A. Philip Randolph."[5] Contemporary observers understood Randolph's role as significant, with a segregationist senator labeling the action "articles of unconditional surrender […] to the treasonable civil disobedience campaign organized by the Negroes, by A. Philip Randolph and [Randolph's associate] Grant Reynolds."[6] Thus, it is crucial to evaluate the short-term mechanisms Randolph employed to cross the finish line in 1948.

This chapter will draw upon personal correspondence, contemporary newspaper coverage, campaign materials, and context from secondary literature to illustrate the way the 1948 election presented civil rights leaders with an opportunity to bargain for a tangible integration policy, at least with regard to the armed services. Additionally, documents from the Truman Library emphasize the regionality of the civil rights debate,[7] which combined with the Great Migration to

[4] Paula E. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, 1st ed. (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 146.
[5] William C. Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (Ohio State University Press, 1970), 117.
[6] Berman, 119.
[7] Harry Truman, "President's Address," *The Boston Post*, October 20, 1948, Clark M. Clifford Papers Box 20, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

result in increased sway for Black voters.[8] At the same time, this chapter does not attempt to theorize on the innerworkings of the president's mind and instead relies on available documentation.

A Continued Strategy

A fundamental question posed by the timing of Executive Order 9981 is why the effort to desegregate the military, which had been a demand of some advocates for the entire decade, finally succeeded in 1948. Naturally, a democracy with regular elections will see issues come to a head during presidential years, but that explanation would not fully account for the 1946 midterms, the Democratic Party's coalition, and the NAACP's strategy for navigating partisan elections.

As Harvard Sitkoff has argued, Truman's initial electoral strategy on civil rights was to largely offer rhetorical platitudes to draw in Black supporters and avoid scaring away virulent Southern racists with sweeping reforms. Democratic Party publications from early 1948 evince a mostly symbolic support for racial equality. A newsletter entitled *Capital Comment* from the Democratic National Committee highlighted the accomplishments of the Truman administration and the failures of the Republican-controlled Congress during the latter part of Truman's first term. In other words, it mailed partisan talking points to D.C. insiders and others with interest in the party. That the publication presented the party line, even when Democratic leadership's political future looked dire, to those most likely to repeat it is relevant when assessing an issue from early January 1948. While quoting the State of the Union address on various issues, the publication reserved only a miniscule two sentences for civil rights; these remarks essentially stated that the report from the President's Committee on Civil Rights was helpful, and that Truman would be

[8] Keneshia N. Grant, "GREAT MIGRATION POLITICS: The Impact of The Great Migration on Democratic Presidential Election Campaigns from 1948-1960," *Du Bois Review* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 37–61, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X19000109.

sending a message to Congress at some point in the future.[9] This document is representative of the broader top-down approach to civil rights at the beginning of this election season. Civil rights were a very minor aspect of the party's message, and at this point there would not be a concerted effort to effectuate any change on these issues. Statements in favor of equality would be left vague enough to allow white Southerners to maintain their understanding that electing Democrats would not jeopardize their monopoly on power and resources at home.

The aforementioned state of affairs was essentially the status quo in racial politics from 1940 to 1948. Walter White, the executive secretary of the NAACP who would ultimately draft the executive order to integrate the armed forces, had been publicly chided by Senator Wayne Morse over a year earlier for "making good propaganda for the Democratic Party."[10] That a mostly progressive Republican senator would levy this criticism provides an insight into the dilemma faced by the NAACP when it came to partisan politics. Abstaining from commenting on any elections was not viable, as the victories of some candidates were bound to be better for civil rights legislation than others. The Democratic Party, which had lost control of Congress in 1946 and seemed to be declining, still held the White House. The extent to which White could cooperate with and support the Truman administration was a difficult question, especially since the broadest and most powerful civil rights bills were stalled indefinitely in the Senate by Democrats representing Southern states. Republicans who favored such proposals and opposed Truman had reason to be frustrated with any perception that voting for Democrats was necessary to advance civil rights. After White worked closely with Truman's committee by providing resources and

[9] "Capital Comment" (Democratic National Committee, January 10, 1948), Clark M. Clifford Papers Box 20, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[10] "Walter White's Pro-Democratic Article Draws Fire From Senator Wayne Morse," *Cleveland Call and Post*, November 2, 1946, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, https://www.proquest.com/docview/184127772/654AA312621447E7PQ/260.

lauding its recommendations, he had a long-term political interest in helping prevent a political collapse. If a president lost reelection because of even minimal or symbolic support for civil rights (or was perceived to have lost for this reason), that would significantly damage the willingness of future politicians to through their lot in with the NAACP.

A Message for Congress

After the President's Committee on Civil Rights finalized its report, "To Secure These Rights," in December 1947, the proposed remedies for racial injustice lingered for a couple of months before Truman would actually send them to Congress. Although the president initially tried to avoid proposing anything concrete directly to the legislative branch on the grounds that he knew senators did not appreciate being told what to do, he was eventually compelled to deliver them in a rare special message on February 2, 1948. He reached this decision, however, only after concluding that the most viable course for expanding his electoral coalition was to offer Black Americans significant rhetorical and symbolic olive branches but avoid any firm policy changes that would endanger his Southern white support.[11] Political strategist George Elsey was the chief architect behind the speech, and other staffers Charlie Murphy and Charlie Ross were less than supportive of the plan.[12]

In his speech to Congress, Truman mentioned a list of "specific objectives" that he supported, such as strengthening voting rights, ending lynching, and possibly establishing a Civil Rights Division in the Department of Justice.[13] None of these action items could be accomplished via executive order. Essentially, Truman believed that publicly endorsing civil rights ideas that

[11] Harvard Sitkoff, "Harry Truman and the Election of 1948: The Coming of Age of Civil Rights in American Politics," *The Journal of Southern History* 37, no. 4 (November 1971): 600, https://doi.org/10.2307/2206548.
[12] A.J. Baime, *Dewey Defeats Truman: The 1948 Election and the Battle for America's Soul* (New York, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020), 99–100.
[13] Harry Truman, "Special Message to the Congress on Civil Rights," February 2, 1948, https://glc.yale.edu/special-message-congress-civil-rights.

were doomed in Congress posed little risk. Black Americans and their white liberal allies might be inspired by the fact that he was making this stand in an election year; at the same time, Southern segregationists would be unbothered due to the understanding that none of the plans would come to fruition any time soon. The South still maintained disproportionate power in the Senate, particularly in the Democratic Party. However, the doomed nature of some of Truman's proposals did not significantly dampen the overall Black reaction, which was mostly positive (while some Black observers questioned its sincerity or even argued that the speech went too far).[14]

While the focus of the speech was certainly on unfeasible legislative items, one crucial aspect of the speech has been underemphasized by scholars such as Harvard Sitkoff: the president strongly hinted at an executive order to combat military segregation. He promised, "Under the authority of existing law, the Executive branch is taking every possible action to improve the enforcement of the civil rights statutes and to eliminate discrimination in Federal employment, in providing Federal services and facilities, and in the armed forces."[15] As the bulk of the address focused on specific proposals within Congress's authority (such as anti-lynching laws, poll tax abolition, and increased autonomy for the District of Columbia), this line was not the most important takeaway for Black voters.[16] However, this speech provides evidence that Truman already understood military integration as an issue on which he could both make a direct impact and change an aspect of society that would not affect many civilians. This sentence, however, raises a broader question: whether or not the White House had already decided, in early February, to issue a decree like Executive Order 9981. As this chapter documents, the five months that followed would feature Black activists increasing the pressure on the White House, demanding a

[14] Donald R. McCoy and Richard T. Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration* (The University Press of Kansas, 1973), 100–101.
[15] Truman, "Special Message to the Congress on Civil Rights."
[16] McCoy and Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration*, 100.

tangible push towards integration. Additionally, the fact that Southern segregationists would defect from Truman's coalition after the speech actually freed the president from being tied to their hard-lined approach. If Truman had already made this decision, it would suggest that White House strategists foresaw these developments and simply wanted to time the proclamation closer to the party conventions, keep it in public memory more strongly for the November election or for some other political consideration. Alternatively, and more likely based on the overall trend of the administration's civil rights record (a willingness to support it rhetorically while avoiding "overt" political conflict), this sentence can be interpreted as a plea to the legislative branch and state governments to do more on racial issues.[17] Truman may not have been foreshadowing later executive actions per se, but rather claiming that the administration was already doing the maximum it was able to. If that was the aim, the argument was unpersuasive, as Black leaders would continue to push for the executive order throughout the spring. If Truman was touting existing actions, perhaps he was talking about the steady, albeit slow and uncoordinated, pre-1948 military effort to set the stage for eventual integration.

The Southern Revolt: Part One

President Truman's understanding of how Southerners would respond to the proposals was, in many ways, mistaken. Sitkoff points out that the Southern Governors Conference, led by eventual election opponent Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, eschewed its scheduled agenda to unanimously condemn the proposal as an insult to the Southern way of life.[18] Southern senators vowed the ideas were dead on arrival, and a poll showed Truman's popularity decline in the South.[19] As Clifford's memo had predicted months earlier, this dramatic response did not

[17] Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration*, 77.
[18] Sitkoff, "Harry Truman and the Election of 1948: The Coming of Age of Civil Rights in American Politics," 602.
[19] Sitkoff, 602.

necessarily portend electoral doom in the general election, the main concern became receiving the Democratic nomination. Southern whites, after all, had been the group that pushed Truman across the finish line to be nominated as Roosevelt's running mate in 1944. They did so, in part, because he was perceived as "safe" to the Jim Crow establishment.[20] Although he had supported anti-lynching bills in the Senate, there was nothing in his track record to suggest he would ever stake his reelection on a series of minority rights proposals. Hence, the strategy outlined by the memo from Clifford, particularly the part about changing racial policy, had a real impact on his 1948 actions. This strategy would not have been viable if it were not for the savvy moves of Black advocates throughout the decade to shift Truman's political incentives or the Great Migration. Isabel Wilkerson's authoritative book on this demographic shift, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, features the story of a Black migrant who accessed a democratic election for the first time in her life.[21] Her volume aptly summarizes the partisan ramifications of the Great Migration in the 1940s: "To the Democrats in the North, each new arrival from the South was a potential new vote in their column. It was in the Democrats' best interest to mobilize these people, who, now given the chance to vote, might go Republican."[22] Thus, a new geographical alignment was in play, evincing itself in the aftermath of Truman's address.

The *Washington Post* described the Southern backlash to the speech: "These [Southerners] say the South has been 'ignored and kicked around' by the party's Northern leadership long enough, and that the President's civil rights' message was the last straw."[23] This coverage

[20] Sitkoff, 604.
[21] Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, First (New York, New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 302.
[22] Wilkerson, 302.
[23] Robert C. Albright, "Timing Turned Routine Dixie 'Grouse' Into Revolt," *Washington Post*, February 20, 1948, Clark M. Clifford Papers Box 22, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

elucidates an important point in civil rights historiography. Racist segregationists were a political interest group prone to emotional outbursts and thus required their fellow members of the Democratic Party to appear to understand their legislative priorities. General elections in the South were not competitive at this time, as the former Confederacy was yet to elect a Republican senator in the twentieth century; in 1946, no such elections were close.[24] This article also made a popular but incorrect assumption about the trajectory of the general election, arguing that arranging for an anti-Truman candidate from a third party would make a Republican victory "the virtual certainty."[25] This would not be the worst scenario for segregationists, as "forever they could cite 1948 as a historic example of what happens to national party leaders who fail to meet Southern terms."[26] This hypothetical hints at a larger dynamic in play in the 1948 election: the sense that history would judge its outcome and base future decisions off of it. Once Truman, albeit hesitantly, claimed the mantle of civil rights champion, an electoral defeat for him could have set back progress for a generation. After all, politicians usually respond to incentives; this thesis argues that the main accomplishment of Black organizations was in growing the incentive for President Truman to enact a civil rights policy.

Political pundit Frank R. Kent initially argued that Truman's actions in early 1948 constituted a mere continuation of Franklin Roosevelt's approach to racial issues. In a column entitled "South Sees Truman Playing Both Ends Against Middle for 1948 Vote," Kent called Truman the "titular head" of the Democratic Party and suggested that he had no choice but to make the Southern Democrats look like "the prize political boobs in history."[27] In other words, Truman

[24] William Graf and John Andrews, eds., "Statistics of the Congressional Election of November 5, 1946" (United States Government Printing Office, 1947), https://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electioninfo/1946election.pdf.
[25] Albright, "Timing Turned Routine Dixie 'Grouse' Into Revolt."
[26] Albright.
[27] Frank R. Kent, "South Sees Truman Playing Both Ends Against Middle for 1948 Vote," *Evening Star*, February 27, 1948, sec. The Great Game of Politics, Clark M. Clifford Papers Box 20, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

could be forced to embarrass the group as fools on the national stage. The impression that Truman was primarily dedicated to, or even controlled by, the party apparatus was widespread and contributed to the narrative that he was bound to lose reelection. The understanding that he would continue the status quo on federal segregation while offering platitudes to the Black community (and managing a tight balance in not offending too many Southern conservatives) would only be undone by concrete, wide-ranging policy change.

Many of the recommendations in Truman's address to Congress required state government actions. For instance, strengthening the right to vote for Southern Blacks would require changes to voter registration practices. The question of "states' rights," or the balance of power between the levels of government, was raised by mainstream national publications in addition to the virulent Southern racists. For instance, an article in *The New York Times* stated that "the issue seethe[d] with politics" and that although many Southerners agreed with the principle of racial equality, they opposed the proposal out of fear of a "federal force act."[28] This dubious claim was employed in many federal antidiscrimination debates dating back to the Civil War; Truman's civil rights platform would be no exception.

However, evidence from later in Truman's life suggests that he shared this view himself. In a mid-1960s television series about his administration, the then-former president outlined his understanding of racial bigotry in the U.S., adamantly claiming that "the southerners are not bigots" and that they "understand" Black Americans better than northerners.[29] In this clip, the older Truman said that he would explain to a foreigner that northerners were "always sticking their noses in some place where they're not wanted."[30] Truman's upbringing in western Missouri in a

[28] Sitkoff, "Harry Truman and the Election of 1948: The Coming of Age of Civil Rights in American Politics."
[29] *MP2002-78 Former President Truman Discusses Civil Rights*, Decision: The Conflicts of Harry S. Truman, accessed January 29, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddtViwF7Va0.
[30] *MP2002-78 Former President Truman Discusses Civil Rights*.

staunchly Democratic family certainly informed these views. However, the interview offers some credence to the notion that his election year push for equality was predominantly a political strategy. That he likely agreed with at least one objection to his legislative proposals could explain the hesitancy with which he sent them to Congress. Harvard Sitkoff has argued that Truman's hesitancy to officially send a massive civil rights package to the legislative branch was part of his attempt to "dampen" civil rights' prevalence in the election.[31] However, this recording raises another possibility: Truman may have sincerely believed that the federal government's power was limited on antidiscrimination issues. This could explain why his main civil rights accomplishment, Executive Order 9981, dealt with a realm of power squarely within the executive's reach. Regardless, context from President Truman's life indicates the difficult barrier Black advocates would need to overcome in convincing him to stake his reputation on a narrow yet controversial move towards equality.

Randolph and White Continue to Push

While political pundits and Southern politicians focused on the theatrical fracture within the Democratic Party, Black leaders continued working to pressure the administration to ban military segregation. A. Philip Randolph had organized the original March on Washington Movement earlier in the decade; this group achieved a partial success in convincing President Roosevelt to establish the Fair Employment Practice Committee. Crucially, though, Randolph's 1941 success had been stopped short of its full list of demands. Notable among these proposals was a complete desegregation of the armed forces. Naturally, Randolph returned to this issue in a targeted fashion in 1947, serving as the national treasurer for new Committee Against JimCrow in Military Service and Training.

[31] Sitkoff, "Harry Truman and the Election of 1948: The Coming of Age of Civil Rights in American Politics," 609.

This recently formed organization, by 1948, was Randolph's primary lobbying vehicle. Under this umbrella, Randolph enlisted the support of a Black Republican and former Army chaplain from World War II, Grant Reynolds, to increase its perceived legitimacy.[32] Randolph biographer Paula Pfeffer details the pair's unsuccessful efforts to cooperate with Truman in early 1948 and argues that deception from the Democratic National Committee led the JimCrow committee to increase its hostility.[33] Scholar Jervis Anderson, alternatively, argues that the sense of urgency resulted from the Truman administration's recent proposal for universal military service, also referred to as a peacetime draft; segregation would only become more entrenched if this law was adopted without a meaningful step towards integration.[34] Regardless, A. Philip Randolph's new organization would once again diverge from the NAACP's strategy and achieve an executive order.

After the Truman White House had rebuffed Randolph's requests for meetings in December 1947 and early January 1948, Randolph followed up on January 12, writing directly to the president.[35] He complained, "It is difficult to believe that there can be matters before you at this time which in urgency exceed the just concern and long-accumulated grievances of one-tenth of our population."[36] The letter continued, "Might I remind you, on the other hand, that the success of many internal and foreign programs finally depends on a healthy state of the body politic. Such a state requires the elimination of, rather than the extension of, segregation and discrimination in military training and the armed forces."[37] The juxtaposition between the tone of this letter and that

[32] Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, 137.
[33] Pfeffer, 137.
[34] Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait*, vol. 1st (New York, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972), 274.
[35] Philip A. Randolph to Harry Truman, January 12, 1948, Alexander Street Press, http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4391986?account_id=14816&usage_group_id=95246.
[36] Randolph to Truman.
[37] Randolph to Truman.

of earlier correspondence between the NAACP and the President's Committee on Civil Rights is striking. It is not difficult to comprehend why the White House preferred to work with the more amicable and established organization of the two. However, Randolph's implied threat could not be ignored, as it cut at the heart of multiple leading concerns of the Truman administration. First, a reference to the government's massive undertaking in European affairs echoed Soviet propaganda that condemned American hypocrisy on racial issues at the beginning of the Cold War. The notion that Black Americans could undermine the country's standing in the international community even further (after the NAACP issued its "Appeal to the World" calling for United Nations action) was something the administration would take seriously.[38] Additionally, Randolph mentioned Truman's consideration of the universal military training bill. Suggesting that potential Black soldiers would be unwilling to serve in a segregated branch of service would be both a political embarrassment and a geopolitical threat, as American military might would become a crucial facet of U.S. credibility in the Cold War.

In this election season, Walter White of the NAACP approached relations with Truman in a markedly different way than Randolph. Historian Kenneth Robert Janken explains, "White had concluded that backing a winner and preserving the NAACP was more valuable than supporting the principled Henry Wallace and exposing the association to the punishing defeat that would almost certainly be the left's measure following the election."[39] Wallace, Truman's challenger from the left, vehemently opposed the administration's anticommunist foreign policy. Thus, to align himself more closely with the president, White began endorsing the Cold War-era liberal

[38] W.E.B. Dubois to United Nations, "An Appeal to the World: A Statement of Denial of Human Rights to Minorities," October 23, 1947, https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/primary-documents-global-african-history/1947-w-e-b-dubois-appeal-world-statement-denial-human-rights-minorities-case-citizens-n/.
[39] Kenneth Robert Janken, *Walter White: Mr. NAACP* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 315.

values embodied by Truman's active international approach.[40] This decision garnered condemnation from fellow NAACP titans W.E.B. Du Bois and Charles Hamilton Houston, with the former even accusing White of complicity in "reactionary, war-mongering colonial imperialism."[41] White recognized that a Truman loss after multiple high-profile civil rights addresses and the President's Committee on Civil Rights could dissuade future presidents from taking similar stances. White's calculated support for Truman demonstrated his willingness to sacrifice his own popularity within the NAACP for the long-term strength of the civil rights movement. The flexibility to support Truman in the 1948 cycle without pledging permanent allegiance to the Democratic Party was extremely helpful, as well. As a 1948 book review shared between Democratic National Committee official William L. Batt and Philleo Nash states, "The Negro vote today is tied to no political party; it cannot be counted in advance. The Negroe's recent experiences have convinced him that his greatest hope for continued and accelerated progress lies in independent political action subject to the domination and control of no political party."[42] That Truman launched an early assault on white supremacy to fend off the threat of Henry Wallace and outdo Thomas Dewey's record confirms this analysis.

A Blunt White House Meeting

A key moment in the movement for military integration, one that is consistently referenced across numerous monographs in this field, occurred on March 22, 1948.[43] Truman hosted Randolph and Reynolds at the White House to discuss the military issue; by all accounts, the meeting was hostile. Speaking directly, Randolph pulled no punches: "Negroes are in no mood to

[40] Janken, 314–19.
[41] Janken, 316.
[42] William L. Batt to Philleo Nash, "BALANCE OF POWER - THE NEGRO VOTE by Henry Lee Moon," June 8, 1948, 1, Philleo Nash Papers Box 59, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[43] Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait*, 1st:276; Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, 138; McCoy and Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration*, 107; Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration*, 97.

shoulder guns for democracy abroad, while they are denied democracy here at home."[44] After Randolph elaborated by threatening a civil disobedience campaign among Black men, Truman became visibly frustrated by these comments. This is a certain scholarly consensus: *Quest and Response* calls the president "disturbed,"[45] Berman uses the term "not happy,"[46] and Pfeffer "clearly upset."[47] Jervis Anderson adds that Truman matched Randolph's transparency: "I wish you hadn't made that statement. I don't like it at all."[48] After an attempted intervention by NAACP attorney Charles Hamilton Houston (who was also at the meeting), Randolph reiterated his request and the meeting ended abruptly.[49]

Randolph's Final Threat

Months later, as the dynamics of the election became clearer, Randolph and his committee wrote to Truman again.[50] This June 29 letter opened by chiding the president for signing draft-related legislation without requiring a complete desegregation of the armed forces. Randolph once again asked for a meeting to discuss an executive order to that effect, but this letter featured a more explicit threat: "Unless this is done, Negro youth will have no alternative but to resist a law, the inevitable consequence of which would be to expose them to the un-American brutality so familiar during the last war."[51] He closed with a clear articulation of the expectation many Black Americans had of Truman: "Knowing that you have it in your power to prevent this, we are seeking an opportunity to confer with you on implementing this essential part of your civil rights program."[52]

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[44] Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration*, 97.
[45] McCoy and Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration*, 107.
[46] Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration*, 98.
[47] Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, 138.
[48] Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait*, 1st:276.
[49] Anderson, 1st:276.
[50] Philip A. Randolph and Grant Reynolds to Harry Truman, June 29, 1948, Alexander Street Press, http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4391988?account_id=14816&usage_group_id=95246.
[51] Randolph and Reynolds to Truman.
[52] Randolph and Reynolds to Truman.

Unsurprisingly, Walter White distanced himself from this more extreme tactic, stating that the NAACP was not "advising Negroes to refuse to defend their country."[53]

That Truman could sign an executive order by his own volition was ultimately what forced his hand. He could not blame the U.S.'s federalist system or segregationist senators; he could choose whether the military remained segregated or not. Randolph would not let him off the hook for that responsibility. Less than a month after this letter was sent, Truman issued Executive Order 9981. To determine if the chronological relationship between these two events was causal, one must look to the substance of Randolph's threat itself. A July 15 follow-up letter from Randolph and Reynolds to Truman referenced the deadline for draft registration as "a month away," seemingly attaching the same deadline to the civil disobedience threat.[54] Though the expiration date for the activists' patience was not explicit in the first letter, White House officials seem to have surmised that the threat would take effect when more Black men were to be subjected to a segregated fighting force. McCoy and Ruetten point out that "by late June the White House had apparently decided to issue an executive order […] on July 26."[55] William C. Berman also points to a public June 26 announcement in which Randolph set an August 16 deadline for the order.[56]

If Truman's February address truly alluded to a firm plan to integrate the military, the timing of Randolph's June letter may have been pure coincidence. However, if the White House processed this letter at the same time as it watched the electoral threat from Southern whites crystallize even further, an explicit threat from Randolph could have just tipped the scale in favor of urgent action. Regardless of the inner workings of the president's mind, Randolph's advocacy

[53] Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait*, 1st:279.
[54] Grant Reynolds and Philip A. Randolph, July 15, 1948, U.S. National Archives, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/201129.
[55] McCoy and Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration*, 110.
[56] Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration*, 117.

strategy undeniably resulted from his earlier experience with Roosevelt. Attempting a similar tactic to the one he used in 1941, in an effort to lobby a president perceived as approaching civil rights in the same way as Roosevelt, demonstrates the importance of studying the executive order as the product of a decade-long push. Additionally, the contrast between the White House's relationships with the NAACP and the Committee Against JimCrow in Military Service and Training illustrates a fascinating dynamic in political changemaking.

The success of the perceived moderate or pro-incrementalism group can sometimes depend on the existence of a more radical alternative. If the NAACP had been the most extreme racial advocacy group, Truman may have been able to corral Black support while keeping their proposals at bay or leaving his support for them in symbolic terms. Ultimately, the actions of Black organizations and advocates for the entire period, 1940-1948, appear in hindsight to be a textbook lobbying effort despite tumultuous surroundings. An unelected and (temporarily) unpopular Southern Democratic president with personally regressive views on race would sign an executive order to ban segregation in a crucial arm of the federal government. It is not as though the postwar political environment made this easy, as white Americans overwhelmingly wanted "the country pretty much the way it was before the war."[57] This action was the product of Black leaders' strategic decisions dating back to the debate over supporting the war effort. Many factors, including electoral politics, contributed to the timing of the order; the two-flank approach, whether coordinated or not, was among them.

The Southern Revolt: Part Two

A resolution passed by the Alabama Democratic Party and subsequently distributed as a pamphlet read, "One man, Harry Truman, does not make the Democratic Party, and I am not in

[57] Matthew Delmont, *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad*, 1st ed. (Viking, 2022), 265.

favor of ignoring the [convention]. I think we ought to go to the Democratic National Convention, lay our cards on the table, tell the Democrats from other sections of the country what we will have to insist upon, and then if they will not yield to our requests, I am certainly not in favor of being kicked around any further."[58] Although Southern Democrats overestimated their own power, this threat was very legitimate, and it shows that the Truman campaign had reasonably feared triggering this reaction. The alternative interpretation of this document is that these Alabamians were not persuadable voters any longer. They had made up their mind: they were against Truman because of his public statements supporting civil rights. At this point, having lost the support of any Southern whites willing to vote against the Democratic nominee (which would still not be a majority in many states), the president might as well double-down on civil rights reform and ensure he receives gains in the Black community. Harvard Sitkoff argues that the Southern revolt's climax, the States' Rights Democratic (also known as "Dixiecrat") convention, provided the short-term basis for Executive Order 9981 that July.[59] This explanation is plausible if one judges solely off of the timing of the events. On July 17, the Dixiecrats hosted their convention; nine days later, Truman ordered the integration of the armed forces. However, strong Southern resistance had been expected since 1947 and surfaced as early as February 1948. It is more likely that the order's timing was a product of the Democratic Party's convention or the threat from A. Philip Randolph. Considering the eight-year debate over military integration, Southern white segregationists had been outmaneuvered by the NAACP and other black groups. Black Americans bolstered their credibility to presidential candidates by appearing available but untethered and, of course, completed much of the grunt work in terms of policy proposals sent to the President's Committee

[58] Alabama Democratic Party, "Alabama Democrats," 1948, Philleo Nash Papers Box 36, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.
[59] Sitkoff, "Harry Truman and the Election of 1948: The Coming of Age of Civil Rights in American Politics," 612.

on Civil Rights. The most extreme segregationists, on the other hand, emotionally retreated from the arena of nationally viable politics, ultimately depriving themselves of the ability to dissuade Truman from protecting civil rights.

Executive Order 9981 and its Aftermath

On July 26, 1948, Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9981, declaring, "It is hereby to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin. This policy shall be put into effect as rapidly as possible, having due regard to the time required to effectuate any necessary changes without impairing efficiency or morale."[60] The order was accompanied by Executive Order 9980, which sought to similarly ensure equal opportunity across races in federal civil service jobs. Even still, A. Philip Randolph was unsatisfied, vowing to "relentlessly continue [his] struggle."[61] Randolph's concern stemmed from the fact that the word "segregation" did not appear once in the document; in his first reading, this action would fail to meaningfully address discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces. Within a week, Truman surrogate and sitting senator Howard McGrath had met with Randolph and Reynolds; this conversation eased the pair's concern, and they dropped their official campaign against military segregation.[62] An influential Black paper, the *Chicago Defender*, evoked the legacy of Abraham Lincoln and demanded that the American people not "permit Mr. Truman to be crucified on a cross of racial bigotry."[63] The message was clear: the civil rights movement viewed Truman's reelection as critical for its future. Even though his Republican challenger, Thomas A. Dewey, had a relatively successful civil rights

[60] Harry Truman, "Executive Order 9981: Establishing the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services," July 26, 1948, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/executive-orders/9981/executive-order-9981.
[61] Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, 147.
[62] Pfeffer, 148.
[63] McCoy and Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration*, 130.

record, the movement needed to avoid the message that supporting racial equality could cost a president his office. McCoy and Ruetten describe the remaining public reaction as "anticlimactic," probably due to its predictability.[64] Southern papers lambasted Truman for the order,[65] and the left-wing challenger Henry Wallace deemed it an "empty gesture."[66] The following month, Southern white members of Congress killed anti-poll tax legislation via the Senate filibuster.[67] A Truman press conference suggested that integration of the military would be gradual but complete.[68]

Historian Michael Cullen Green argues that this assessment was accurate, explaining that the Korean War just a few years later catalyzed its completion: "Of course, a war was required to effect this revolution in military affairs. General Omar Bradley, among others, granted that Korea hastened integration by more than a decade. Nonetheless, in just over four years one of the nation's most conservative and undemocratic institutions achieved complete desegregation—and ahead of schedule at that—unexpectedly launching itself into the vanguard of civil rights reform."[69] This process was not seamless, as soldiers of diverse backgrounds who grew up under segregation had some difficulty adjusting to the new reality.[70] Nonetheless, the period between July 1948 and the end of Truman's presidency in 1953 featured an extremely fast example of implementing an integration policy, especially compared to later civil rights efforts in education, housing, and civilian employment. Forged in response to the outbreak of World War II, the activist strategy to focus on military issues proved wise.

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[64] McCoy and Ruetten, 131.
[65] Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration*, 128.
[66] McCoy and Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration*, 130.
[67] Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration*, 121–22.
[68] Berman, 120.
[69] Michael Cullen Green, *Black Yanks in the Pacific: Race in the Making of American Military Empire after World War II (The United States in the World)* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2010), 140.
[70] Green, 141.

As the Clifford memo had predicted in the fall of 1947, Black support was crucial to Truman's reelection in November 1948. As previously mentioned, pundits developed a narrative over the following months and decades that the incumbent would have lost without such strong numbers in the Black community. Before the election, an NAACP official claimed that Black Americans would hold the "balance of power" in presidential politics.[71] William C. Berman, a preeminent scholar on Truman's civil rights resume, takes a more measured approach: "He had been elected president of the United States because of the support given to him by labor, farmers, and the various racial and religious minorities."[72] Assigning a racial group its appropriate level of credit for a victory in the complex Electoral College is impossible in hindsight; however, the important result of this narrative was that people thought Truman won because of Black support. That enabled future presidents, such as Lyndon Baines Johnson, to pursue even bolder steps in the generation that followed.

[71] Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration*, 133.
[72] Berman, 135.

Conclusion

In recent years, a popular focus on the history of American race relations has increased the salience of Executive Order 9981 and related issues. Within the past five years, in fact, broader audiences have been exposed to the racial dynamics of the Truman era and the politics surrounding military integration through *Unexampled Courage: The Binding of Sgt. Isaac Woodard and the Awakening of President Harry S. Truman and Judge J. Waties Waring* (2019), *Dewey Defeats Truman: The 1948 Election and the Battle for America's Soul* (2020), and *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad* (2022). While they do not examine these issues as deeply as the scholars of the mid twentieth century who formed the bulk of the scholarship on which this thesis relies, these volumes increase the likelihood that the American people will understand Truman to be a civil rights president. This end has also been buttressed by the Truman Library as a primary promotional and archival focus. The White House's documentation of press clippings (from a variety of sources that include Black newspapers) strengthen the archive's utility for such research. Truman's legacy on racial issues is crucial because it contributes to the overall narrative of a long understanding of the civil rights movement. At the same time, no complete volume has been dedicated solely to the movement for military integration in its own right, examining the activists and policymakers involved throughout the decade. One interesting avenue for future literature would be a biographical analysis of the movement's key contributors (Truman, Philleo Nash, A. Philip Randolph, Walter White, and Clark Clifford) that weaves together the figures as their strategies compound and eventually create Executive Order 9981. This thesis focuses on materials from the Truman Library archives and various online databases, so such a method of analysis is not suitable here.

The lessons available in a study of activists' approach to military integration are applicable to modern-day calls for reform on a variety of issues. Truman's executive order represented a

victory for a movement that was often disjointed and included elements that occasionally went off-script, allowing for opponents to label them as communists or disloyal citizens. Nonetheless, they maintained access to the ear of the country's most powerful man and achieved a key goal in the span of eight years. This process included accepting partial victories along the way, including Franklin Roosevelt's 1941 executive order, but also continuing to push for more. These leaders adapted to tectonic shifts in the geopolitical landscape: a world war, the onset of the Cold War, and the creation of the United Nations. Not only did the focus on integrating the armed forces endure, but tactful strategy allowed the effort to benefit from these developments. Author Cornelius L. Bynum points to Randolph's recognition of executive action as the proper avenue to success.[1] Of course, continual failure in the legislative branch must have been mentally exhausting, but the NAACP and other groups found other paths achieving their policy aims. The legacy of this executive order and its enforcement has ramifications in the twenty-first century. In a glowing essay on Truman's civil rights accomplishments, former U.S. Secretary of State and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell wrote that his "dream did come true, not just because President Truman signed an executive order, but also because after he signed the order, he went about the task of knocking the ears off the Pentagon to make it happen."[2] Lastly, the common retort that "elections have consequences" is demonstrated by the 1948 election's impact on the future of American civil rights policy.

Ultimately, this thesis' primary takeaway for readers should be that military integration was not inevitable, but rather the product of fortunate and strategic boosts for a racial justice movement and a presidential administration. By expanding the window of consideration to span

[1] Cornelius L. Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (University of Illinois Press, 2010), xv.
[2] Colin Powell, "Truman, Desegregation, and a Kid from the South Bronx," in *The Civil Rights Legacy of Harry S. Truman*, ed. Raymond Geselbracht (Kirksville, Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2007), 121.

the entire decade of the 1940s, this study reveals a clearer picture of a continuous push for integration in a symbolically and practically crucial arena of American life.

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