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By

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Abstract

This study explores the history of black workers in Washington, D.C.’s federal sector from World War II (WWII) to the early 1980s. Many blacks viewed government employment as a welcome alternative to the limited job prospects and career trajectories available in the hostile and discriminatory private sector. As their numbers in the public sector in Washington increased, African-Americans gained a measure of economic security, elevated their social standing, and increased their political participation, primarily through public sector unions and such civil rights groups as the National Urban League (NUL) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

However, the growth of racial liberalism in the post-war era did not do away with discrimination in federal employment. In contrast to their white colleagues, black federal workers consistently faced lower wages and slower promotion rates, despite presidential commissions and laws intended to eliminate racial inequities in the workplace. Gradually, black workers improved their status through collective and individual activism, within a context of official support for their rights.

To tell this story, the study draws upon many previously untapped resources. Federal grievance hearings, records from several government commissions and correspondence between federal officials bring to light efforts to acknowledge and address racial frictions within the
federal workplace. The papers of such local activists as Julius Hobson and such organizations as the NAACP and the Urban League document black efforts to compel the federal government to uphold its Constitutional responsibility for fair play. Both black and “white” newspapers along with black trade union newsletters and black magazines illustrate the narrative.

Public employment is an understudied source of African American, labor and institutional history; many blacks used it to escape economic oppression in the South. With a heavy concentration of both black workers and federal agencies, Washington, D.C is an excellent site for a monograph on this subject. Moreover, the tensions between the stated, anti-racist policies of the government and the continuance of discriminatory patterns has implications for other urban areas in which African-Americans moved in large numbers during and after WWII.
The research and writing of this dissertation is dedicated to everyone who helped along the way.

But two require special mention.

To the woman who gave me life and love – now I give to your legacy.

And to the woman who gives me love and life, I gave my word for eternity.

Peace, providence & prosperity to all.

Many thanks,
Frederick W. Gooding, Jr.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACT Association of Community Teams
AFGE American Federation of Government Employees
APWU American Postal Workers Union
BIG Blacks in Government
CORE Congress of Racial Equality
CRA Civil Rights Act
CSC Civil Service Commission
EEOC Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
FEPC Fair Employment Practices Committee
HSTL Harry S. Truman Library
LC Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
NAACP National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NAPE National Alliance of Postal Employees
NAPFE National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees
NACP National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
NARA National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, College Park, MD
NCSNC National Committee against Segregation in the Nation’s Capital
NPU National Postal Union
NUL National Urban League
OPA Office of Price Control
PCEEO President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity
PCCR President’s Committee on Civil Rights
RNAPFE Records of the National Alliance for Postal and Federal Employees, NAPFE National Headquarters, Washington, D.C.
RBIG Records of Blacks in Government, BIG National Headquarters, Washington, D.C.
RNAACP Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
RNUL Records of the National Urban League, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
RPCCR Records of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, MO
WUL Washington Urban League
FAMILIAR FACES, NEW STORY

The history of black public sector workers remains largely untold. In exploring the collective experience of black federal workers in Washington, D.C. from World War II (WWII) through 1981, this dissertation explores the intersection of public sector labor and black labor in contrast to existing studies that deal with the two separately. My dissertation is the first study to exclusively examine the work-lives of black federal employees and their efforts to improve their status during the era from World War II to the 1980s. Existing narratives of public employees, black workers, and postwar black progress cannot be understood without taking this group and its history into account.

This study focuses on three themes. First, starting with WWII, federal employment benefitted countless black families whose breadwinners earned stable salaries outside of the agricultural and service sectors in which African-Americans had toiled. As E. Franklin Frazier wrote in 1957, due to the “large numbers of Negroes employed in the federal government, Negroes in the nation’s capital had incomes far above those in other parts of the country,” enabling them to “engage in forms of consumption and entertainment that established [federal employment’s] pre-eminence among American Negroes.”1 Government work also served as an entrée to clerical and sub-professional ranks for blacks otherwise lacking high school diplomas

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or college degrees.\textsuperscript{2} While such workers routinely suffered exclusion from comparable higher-paying, professionally ranked jobs in the private sector, the federal government provided broader access to clerical, semi-professional, and in some cases, professional ones. In the mid-1960s, the significance of such access prompted Gloster Current, a former top NAACP official, to call the federal government “the largest civil rights organization” in the country.\textsuperscript{3}

Second, after making the entry into federal employment, black employees never stopped trying to ensure equitable treatment. Up until and after the black freedom movement culminated with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s (EEOC) creation in the 1960s, many black federal workers were in constant negotiation to maximize existing regulations or use new policies to advance their careers. After WWII, the world had changed and overt racial discrimination became less common and acceptable over time. Yet, black federal workers continued advocating for better conditions since they suffered inferior treatment on the job relative to their white counterparts in more subtle and sophisticated ways. Despite an overall improvement in social status, black federal employees suffered devaluation primarily through lower wages and slower promotion rates. The creation and accumulation of government data exposed these discriminatory patterns not immediately discernible given the surge of black employment upwards from a sparse presence before WWII.

Finally, I argue that federal government was an ambiguous ally in the struggle for racial equality. The collective stories of black federal employees suggest a more ambivalent reading of

\footnote{Black workers suffered preemption from higher-paying, professional jobs even when they had education; college educated Pullman Porters are but one example. “A union official informed social scientists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton in the early 1940s that seventy-two of the ninety black red caps in his Chicago station were college graduates.” Eric Arnesen, \textit{Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 155.}

the post-WWII era as a period of steady improvement for blacks in government. The start of the Cold War forced U.S. officials to oppose racism and Jim Crow customs domestically rather than risk key international alliances by contradicting their rhetoric about global democracy. Black public workers understood this tension and after WWII, the federal government responded to black workers’ lowered tolerance for racial disparities at the workplace. While often imperfect in execution, the federal government did try to live up to its Constitutional responsibility to insure equal protection within the workplace by broadening the options available to employees victimized by informal segregation and discrimination.

Ironically, the more the government improved its ability to process racial grievances, the more black workers confronted internal, federal opponents who sought every delay and appeal imaginable. Additionally, the more blacks gained in formal rights during the postwar era, the more doubts they faced from whites who wondered what grievances they could have in a supposedly non-racist, post-civil-rights-movement era. Despite the stubborn persistence of pay and promotion disparities within numerous individual federal agencies, overall the federal government never shied away from its leading role in challenging racial inequities within its own agency system. The openness of the federal employment structure (the General Schedule or GS system) provides a unique record for scholars and activists; similar information is typically unavailable for jobs in the private sector.

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**CAPITAL GAINS**

My dissertation adds depth and complexity to an existing historiographical conversation about the gains and limits made by black workers in the period from World War II through the early 1980s. Contemporary scholars acknowledge the role of federal government in building a stable black middle class. However, my local study provides insight on the limitations of such newfound status. Historian Thomas Sugrue correctly argues in *Sweet Land of Liberty* that federal employment became “one of the most important avenues for minority opportunity” with some of the largest gains coming in “personnel offices that deal with state and federal agencies that enforce antidiscrimination laws.”

Yet, federal employment was hardly a solution to all racial ills. Sugrue further notes, “the opening of employment, especially in the public sector” was not “solely or primarily the result of a shift in white attitudes. Rather, they were a result of decades of activism and policy making – boycotts, pickets, agitation, riots, lobbying, litigation, and legislation.” In short, Sugrue hints at the continued struggle endured by black federal employees despite their slow progress in the federal system. By studying black workers in the nation’s capital, my research further complicates conventional definitions of black progress since blacks in Washington, D.C. benefitted from a virtually recession-proof industry, given the growth of the size of the federal government up until the early 1980s. More than any other city, Washington embodied the nation’s Constitutional pledge to insure equality under the law. The long struggle by black

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6 Ibid., 540.
federal employees to fulfill this promise illuminates an aspect of labor and public sector history that other types of studies cannot match.

At the same time, Washington, D.C. in the middle decades of the twentieth century represented a phenomenon common to other metropolitan areas at the time. The representative function of Washington D.C. as the nation’s capital meant that the extent to which blacks were successful in federal jobs had an outsized significance for blacks nationwide. The city had no manufacturing industries like Chicago, Pittsburgh, New York and other cities to which blacks moved during the Great Migrations from 1915 into the 1950s, but black newcomers did find jobs within a burgeoning public sector. While smaller in absolute size, Washington D.C. had a higher proportion of blacks than metropolises such as New York, Detroit, Pittsburgh or Philadelphia during the postwar era. By 1950, blacks composed a third of the population in Washington and would reach a majority over 70 percent two decades later.

Historian Nancy MacLean introduces job discrimination as the key battleground for the civil rights movement. Since one’s occupation heavily influences his or her household income and social status, employment discrimination laws and policies protecting equal occupation opportunities are vital to the maintenance of an equitable society. Since opportunities for black Americans were drastically limited through lower incomes, equal employment access became every bit as important to the black freedom movement as access to better housing or schools.

MacLean’s analysis, while useful, is largely limited to circumstances surrounding passage of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. MacLean also takes time to analyze women

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8 Ibid.
and Mexican Americans as protected groups in the quest for more equitable working conditions. MacLean’s work touches upon the plight of black workers, but my scholarship is more specific and focused upon black federal workers as a cohesive group over four decades’ time in one single locality. My dissertation fleshes out the struggles of black federal workers against hiring employment discrimination both before and after passage of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. My research shows how institutional resistance set the stage for black federal employees’ grass roots efforts to continue striving for improved working conditions.

This dissertation also builds upon themes adroitly laid out by Joseph Slater who, in *Public Workers: Government Employment Unions, the Law, and the State, 1900-62*, showed that the public sector moved from peripheral to primary importance within the American labor movement. A study of Washington, D.C. allows one to detail specific challenges facing black federal workers as they fought for recognition and respect among their white peers as the larger mass of public sector workers pushed generally for improved working conditions and pay on par with private sector workers. Slater showed that after World War II government employees became just as important to the American political economy as private sector workers; I argue that black government workers also played a vital role in creating a strong and stable black working class. The federal government provided a relatively smooth transition for those black employees who had already served in the armed forces or who had temporary war jobs and were looking for stability in peacetime, rather than return to the impoverished, racial battlegrounds of the South.9

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9 “Military surveys revealed that a disproportionately large ratio of Negro veterans, 75 per cent of whom were from the South, did not desire to return to their places of former residence.” Ira A. Reid, “Special Problems of Negro Migration during the War,” *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Jul., 1947): 289.
Several push and pull factors contributed to the groundswell of black labor in Washington, D.C. One major push came from the increasing mechanization of Southern agriculture. More machinery meant less labor was required to work the lands, which translated into fewer jobs available for blacks.\textsuperscript{10} A significant pull factor was the promise of an improved lifestyle outside of the South. Under the Jim Crow order, a white superior did not feel pressure to pay a black worker his or her fair market value, making them perpetually vulnerable to exploitation. Additional factors pulling black laborers away from the South included the fervent pace of increased economic activity taking place in major northern urban centers as industrial mobilization hit full stride during WWII. Such an exodus was widely supported through organs such as \textit{The Chicago Defender} and others with the message that anywhere but the South held out the promise of a better life.

Little history has been written about the federal workforce and even less focuses on blacks employed by the government. A recent exception is Eric S. Yellin’s \textit{Racism in the Nation’s Service: Government Workers and the Color Line in Woodrow Wilson’s America}.\textsuperscript{11} Yellin argues that the Wilson administration’s decision to segregate blacks within two key cabinet departments meant that no safe haven existed for black employment in the wake of Reconstruction. For instance, at an April 11, 1913 Cabinet meeting, President Woodrow Wilson, made no objection to Postmaster Alfred Burleson’s recommendation to segregate the federal workforce. While many federal agencies declined to do so, several prominent agencies such as the Treasury Department and Bureau of Engraving and Printing followed the segregationist lead

of the Post Office. Burleson wanted all rail line and local postal service window positions made “lily white.” Burleson wasted little time in advancing his segregationist agenda; President Wilson was President scarcely one month when inaugurated on March 4, 1913.

With rare exceptions, few blacks had enough political, economic or social leverage to launch an effective opposition to Wilson’s decree. Consequently, up until WWII, blacks and whites often worked within the same federal agencies but with drastically different experiences as segregated colleagues. Beyond the normal emotional and psychological consequences wrought by physical separation, black workers limited to the lowest paying jobs had limited opportunities for fraternization and career advancement resulting in longer-term economic and social consequences.

My work develops this theme by showing that the segregation of the federal workforce – especially inside the nation’s capital – was a sobering reminder that flagrant discrimination spread well beyond the confines of the South during a postwar period renown for widespread growth. The National Urban League observed about Washington, D.C. that, “the seat of Federal Government is located in an area predominately ‘south’ in attitude, etiquette, customs and conventions…. As elsewhere in the South, repeated efforts over several decades were required

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12 Burleson requested the separation under the auspices of efficiency since white postal railway workers complained about or refused to work in close quarters with their black co-workers, thereby threatening to disrupt mail service. Burleson was particularly bothered that white and black workers shared towels, glasses and bathrooms while working within the tight, enclosed spaces of railway cars. See generally, Kathleen Long, “Woodrow Wilson and Federal Segregation,” Journal of Negro History 44 (April 1959): 161-163.
13 Ibid., 159.
14 Not until 1933 did the Twentieth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution change the Inauguration Day calendar date from March 4 to January 21.
15 For a profile of a vociferous critic of Wilson’s segregation policy, see generally Christine A. Lunardini, “Standing Firm: William Monroe Trotter’s Meetings with Woodrow Wilson, 1913-1914,” Journal of Negro History 64, no. 3 (Summer, 1979): 244-264.
16 National Urban League Staff Report on Racial Relations, circa 1946, Part I: N30, RNUL.
to correct past racial imbalances. My study threads together the varied efforts of numerous
members of a large group of government workers, allowing their agency to tell a history of
continued political struggle.

Joseph McCartin provides an excellent history of one smaller, specific group of
government workers in *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the
Strike that Changed America*. McCartney shows how, by the early 1980s, public sector unionism
weakened considerably from an ill-fated air traffic controllers’ strike that failed to generate broad
labor support. *Collision Course* illustrates how, before that fateful strike, public sector unionism
helped air traffic controllers, nearly all of whom were white, to improve their working
conditions.

Similarly, my study describes the obstacles black federal workers faced in seeking to
advance their careers, but it also examines the difficulty in organizing a larger constituency
unified along more abstract lines of identity. While air traffic controllers experienced plenty of
turbulence in getting their union to a respectable position of power, there was little doubt among
members about their group identity, forged through the shared experiences of rigorous and
stressful training and work. Since the black experience is far from monolithic, my research
shows that organizing black federal workers primarily upon their racial identity was even more
challenging than organizing workers sharing the same job function. Given the broader, muddier
definitions of race, black workers had to create internal consensus as well as gain consensus with
external forces they combated. My dissertation illustrates black agency in wrestling with these

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questions surrounding political identity rather than only show blacks as passive reactors to policy
decisions made by high-profile, white political actors.

**Blacks in D.C.**

As federal agencies based in Washington, D.C. grew in size and number, so did the
presence of black federal government workers. Numbering less than 20,000 before World War I,
their numbers swelled to over 270,000 nationwide during World War II:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Total Negro</th>
<th>% Negro of Total Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>232,000</td>
<td>868</td>
<td>.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>384,088</td>
<td>22,540</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>395,460</td>
<td>19,729</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>917,760</td>
<td>45,000</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>540,867</td>
<td>51,882</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>572,091</td>
<td>53,000</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>861,914</td>
<td>82,000</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>2,295,614</td>
<td>273,971</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Beginning with WWII, the nation’s capital became the center of a burgeoning federal
workforce. In 1946, only the State of California could boast more federal employees (247,600)
than Washington, D.C. (235,100), despite being nearly twelve times larger in population. At
the turn of the century, less than one percent of federal employees were black. But this
percentage rose to 11.9% in 1944, including 41,566 in Washington, D.C. With such a rapid increase in the black population change came a rapid learning curve; blacks and whites separated by many social conventions literally had to work together. As with any new arrangement, there were initial conflicts. In theory, black citizens working for the federal government were entitled to full dignity and respect. In practice, Jim Crow social customs dictated a social hierarchy that placed black dignity and respect under a constant threat. To better understand this conflict between theory and practice as it related to black citizens, President Harry Truman commissioned a Committee on Civil Rights that warned in its 1947 report that for “Negro Americans, Washington is not just the nation’s capital. It is the point at which…the South becomes ‘Jim Crow.’ If he stops in Washington, a Negro may dine like any other man in the Union Station [train station], but as soon as he steps out into the capital, he leaves such democratic practices behind.”

19 National Urban League Staff Report on Racial Relations, circa 1946, Part I: N30, RNUL.
20 President’s Committee on Civil Rights, To Secure These Rights (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1947), 89.
**Bureaucratic Changes**

After WWII, the federal public sector began to outpace the private sector in its effort to eliminate racial discrimination. President Truman first steered the government toward a more egalitarian stance when his administration introduced the Classification Act of 1949, which established the Government Wage Scale system (GS). Congress designed the Classification Act to reduce and eliminate some of the pay rate inconsistencies experienced by federal workers across different agencies while establishing a consistent and transparent system of worker expectation and compensation.

Before 1949, four different service categories of federal workers had existed, each with different grades of responsibility, with each separate grade having up to seven promotional levels. This wide latitude for classifying workers lent itself to vast disparities among workers’ pay and the 1949 GS scale helped normalize salaries by simplifying the service, rank and promotion categories in order to best provide pay equalization. While not expressly created to curb racial disparities in pay, many black federal workers benefitted from the 1949 Classification Act since they now had a concrete tool to measure their market worth. The GS scale allowed black workers to assess their value relative to other white workers performing similar tasks or working within the same pay grade. But the Government Wage Scale also underscored the marginalization plaguing black federal workers in Washington, D.C. in the postwar era; whatever their education, placement or rank, they still received less pay with fewer opportunities for advancement.

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21 The four service categories were Clerical, Administrative, Fiscal Service (CAF); Custodial (which included all mechanical positions, CU); Professional/Scientific (P); and Sub-Professional/Sub-Scientific (SP).
The irony of blacks experiencing fewer opportunities for advancement is that the federal government created several opportunities for federal agencies and their employees to uphold their Constitutional responsibility for equal access. From 1941 to 1981, every President except Gerald Ford issued an executive order to directly address racial discrimination at the workplace.\textsuperscript{22} At least three federal commissions studied the matter intently, gathering data and making recommendations for change in addition to individual agencies that investigated their own inner workings. Nearly every administration also introduced new or refined grievance measures.\textsuperscript{23} A major legal effort to eradicate workplace discrimination came with Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). In 1972, the EEOC obtained authorized to levy sanctions in the federal sector as well as the private one.

However, the impact of the EEOC was more limited than its architects cared to admit. New anti-discrimination policies and procedures required implementation by employees and administrators who were not inclined to change their habits quickly, if at all. While no longer barred from specific jobs explicitly reserved for whites, many blacks still encountered the more subtle racism of lower wages and slower promotions.\textsuperscript{24}

As black federal workers learned the extent of their plight, they began to organize and resist. They did so both through local branches of organizations like the Urban League, the NAACP, various labor unions and through individual challenges to agency officials. Many black federal workers showed great pride in their work and in the government they hired them to serve.

\textsuperscript{22} See Table 4.1, infra.
\textsuperscript{23} Presidential Committee on Civil Rights, Civil Service Commission, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.
\textsuperscript{24} See generally, Harvard Sitkoff, \textit{A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: The Depression Decade} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
They often risked their livelihoods and spent years of their lives fighting for equal opportunities, to gain dignity and respect.

**CHAPTER OVERVIEW**

This persistent condition that many black federal employees experienced – lower wages and slower promotion rates despite improved education and increased experience on the job – is the main theme of this dissertation. I use the term “black-collar workers” to describe those federal employees whose opportunities were limited by their race. Just as Thomas Sugrue asserts that the battle for civil rights in the North was complex because of the gap between rhetoric and reality, the term “black-collar worker” captures the condition of federal employees who took advantage of a growing civil rights consciousness and yet still faced nearly constant racial discrimination on the job. Langston Hughes artfully expressed the kinds of frustrations endured by many black-collar workers in his famous poem:

**DREAM DEFERRED**

*What happens to a dream deferred?*

*Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?*

*Or fester like a sore – And then run?*

*Does it stink like rotten meat?*

*Or crust and sugar over – like a syrupy sweet?*

*Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.*

*Or does it explode?*
To understand and evoke the nuanced struggle of black federal workers in Washington, D.C., this study loosely follows the chronology that Hughes unwittingly suggested. In the first chapter, “Raisin in the Sun,” I establish the importance of Washington, D.C. as a growing city during WWII that attracted the attention of many blacks looking for work. The U.S. government achieved unprecedented levels of production during WWII, which would not have been possible without the contribution of an increased number of black workers. However, the federal government maintained mostly segregated workspaces for the new black workers it “welcomed” and needed on the job. This chapter focuses on how even an unusually progressive agency, the Office of Price Administration (OPA), struggled with overcoming entrenched customs of segregation. During this time, there is little official record of black resistance to such treatment, likely because workers had few official outlets on the job to address such grievances.

In Chapter Two, “And Then Run?” I look at the federal government’s first steps, just after the war ended, to eliminate discrimination on the job. In 1946, President Harry Truman commissioned a federal panel that investigated racial discrimination and published recommendations to combat it. The report marked a federal shift towards one of concern and study in the face of ongoing discrimination and received assistance from the prodding of small but vocal public sector unions, Cold War pressures and an evolving liberal agenda. This chapter details how the Presidential Commission on Civil Rights provided legislators with concrete data that would later prove influential in changing federal policy. I include the question mark in the title “And then Run?” to underscore the government’s uncertainty in wading into new territory. Despite a strong mandate from the President, action was far from uniform as many heads of
federal agencies denied racial problems existed, while others failed to realize how their standard
hiring practices harmed the career prospects of black workers.

In the third chapter, “Stinks like Rotten Meat,” I analyze white resistance to increased
pressure to bring about racial equality in the federal workplace. From 1948 to 1959, with the
inception of the Fair Employment Board, the government continued to move away from
structural discrimination within the federal workplace and for the first time, mandated low-level
dispute resolution procedures to recognize the grievances of black federal employees. Blacks in
Washington, D.C. continued to draw benefits from federal employment in contrast to existing
private sector jobs but still had to contend with the deeply ingrained and habitual practice of
racial harassment on the job.

While racial discrimination increasingly became less permissible publicly, federal
agencies, their supervisors and many white employees still practiced it out of custom, habit, or
spite. Accordingly, individual black federal workers protested and advocated for change through
local chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and
the National Urban League (NUL). New workplace protocols – such as the use of independent
arbiters – emboldened many black workers who pushed their federal agencies to take a harder
stance against discrimination. Others went outside the workplace and used the NAACP and NUL
to amass data and file lawsuits.

Chapter Four, “Like a Syrupy Sweet,” focuses on the political gains enjoyed by black
federal workers from 1960 to 1969. The 1964 Civil Rights Act included provisions that
represented the strongest stand the federal government had ever taken to do away with workplace
discrimination. Emboldened by the black freedom movement, many black federal workers
sought to take advantage of both the new Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the protections offered by Title VII of the 1964 Act. This occurred at the same time as the government, for the first time, recognized limited collective bargaining rights for all federal workers. This intersection of black workers’ rights with the increased legitimacy of public sector unionism initially was a boon to black federal workers.

Chapter Four also details the efforts of Julius Hobson, a former federal employee turned community activist, to maintain pressure on the federal government for workplace equality. Hobson used data collection, pamphleteering, petitions, case law and Title VII of the CRA. Still, racial disparities persisted through more covert means.

Chapter Five, “Maybe it Just Sags,” a case study of black postal workers from 1969 – 1971, illustrates that federal workplace discrimination continued into the seventies – despite advances that these and other black workers had made in gaining higher pay and more secure jobs than their predecessors. Although all postal workers gained collective bargaining rights during a controversial wildcat strike against the federal government, not all black postal workers benefitted from them.

Finally, in Chapter Six, “Like a Heavy Load,” I explain why and how many black federal workers formed a non-union, professional advocacy organization of their own – Blacks in Government (BIG) – in 1975. Blacks in Government was a direct response to the shortcomings of past federal mechanisms that failed to effectively solve nagging problems of lower wages and slower promotion rates for black federal workers. BIG’s search for practical solutions led to the organization, in 1979, of a conference in Washington which was designed to tutor, train and inform black federal employees on how to best prepare for career advancement. No longer
content to wait for the government to make equality a reality, members and supporters of BIG decided to help themselves.

By the late 1970s, while more blacks had acquired supervisory positions with larger incomes across varied federal agencies, few obtained the new Senior Executive Service (SES) positions created for the most elite federal workers. As a result, at the beginning of the Reagan era, it was still as uncommon as it had been forty years earlier for any black federal worker to supervise large numbers of white employees.

* * *

Ultimately, my research shows how black government workers continued to believe in the promise of the American Dream and struggled in different ways to achieve it during a period known for increasing racial liberalism. The public sector offered an improvement over a more openly hostile and discriminatory private sector, and in addition to greater economic security, many blacks increased their levels of political participation through membership in public sector unions. Yet, black federal workers still had to remain vigilant, both outside and inside the workplace, to secure not just fair compensation while on the job, but also dignity and respect.
CHAPTER ONE

“RAISIN IN THE SUN”: BLACK OPPORTUNITY IN THE NATION’S CAPITAL, 1941-1944

BLACK WORKERS GO NORTH TO WASHINGTON

School of Social Work student Dorothy M. Boggess came to Washington, D.C. from Atlanta, Georgia in the spring of 1941 to obtain a job as a federal typist. Although Boggess could have secured employment in Atlanta, the federal salary of $1,440 a year caught her eye since this salary was unprecedented for a black female worker in the South. The average Georgia stenographer, without an advanced education, made only $1,000 annually at the time. Boggess took a qualifying typing exam at her local post office to see if migrating north was a viable option. After receiving a favorable test score, she postponed her social work studies and left for the nation’s capital to join the ranks as a “Government Girl” or “G-Girl” at the War Department. In contrast to many migrating blacks moving to the Washington, D.C. area, Boggess immediately began to earn a steady and secure income. Yet, it was still less than what the average Northern white worker earned performing the same type of work in Washington, D.C.

25 Less than 1% of female stenographers, typists or secretaries commanded $1,000 or greater during the same period both throughout the State of Georgia and within the city of Atlanta. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1940 National Census, Table 16, Wage or Salary Income Received in 1939 by all Experienced Persons in the Labor Force (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1940), 754. This salary still placed Boggess towards the bottom of the federal pay scale since $1,440 was comparable to a CAF-2 rating (CAF = Clerical, Administrative and Fiscal Service). See Joseph Young, “U.S. Pay Increases Since ’41 Nearly Equal Living Cost Rise,” Washington Star, May 21, 1946.
Boggess’ migration to Washington, D.C. fit within a broader pattern; as many as 300 G-Girls arrived daily throughout the early 1940s.26 “G-Girl” soon became the catchall designation to describe young, upwardly mobile women who flocked to Washington, D.C. in search of stable government work. Yet, during an age when racial segregation was legally enforced, black workers remained segregated from the mainstream in ways that their white co-workers were not – especially at the federal workplace.

The federal government had practiced segregation for nearly three decades before Boggess arrived in Washington. Physically separating federal workers into separate workspaces by race began with President Woodrow Wilson’s April 11, 1913 decree. Only when black federal workers joined the workforce in large numbers during WWII did this practice change. Then, the war changed the employment landscape for many American workers; women as well as blacks found unprecedented opportunities as white servicemen departed. G-Girls in particular, fully exploited the window of opportunity created by war’s social upheaval. In addition to having a military plane christened in their name, the G-girl experience was fodder for at least one Hollywood movie.27

Further capitalizing on G-girl popularity, the Washington Times-Herald published a recurring feature entitled Jane’s Journal, which chronicled the daily experiences of one Jane Meredith, “a small-town girl who came to Washington to join the swelling ranks of Government


27 Bert Kemmerer, “15,000 Help Send Two War Planes on Way to the Fighting Fronts,” Washington Post, May 10, 1943. Government Girl is a 1943 comedic movie about a secretary who finds life (and love) made complicated when she receives a new boss; directed by Dudley Nichols starring Olivia de Havilland, Sonny Tufts, Agnes Moorehead and Anne Shirley.
workers,” thereby underscoring the universality of the white G-Girl experience. Curiously, none of *Jane’s Journal* installments contained any overt hints of what Washington, D.C. historian Constance McLaughlin Green termed “the secret city,” or the growing number of black citizens that grew to a third of the city’s population by the end of the 1940s. In none of the accompanying photographs for *Jane’s Journal*, which included depictions of Jane boarding the trolley or waiting listlessly in a cafeteria line, is she seen with or next to anyone of color. Although a growing number of black women served the federal government just as faithfully, the euphemism “G-Girl” was primarily reserved for white women. Nonetheless, given the dearth of options for black women outside of domestic work, working as a G-Girl provided migrating black women the possibility for increased social standing and financial autonomy. Yet, in addition to navigating the generic G-Girl struggles that Jane Meredith faced in an unfamiliar urban environment, black workers like Boggess contended with the additional reality of racial discrimination. In the 1940s, people knew the

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28 *Washington Times-Herald*, “Jane’s Journal,” October 19, 1942. The series started on September 14, 1942 and ran at least until December 31, 1942. The journal was “told to” Sylvia Altman. While earlier entries were more detailed about the travails of stabilizing and securing her survival (e.g., income, shelter, food, clothing, etc.), later entries centered around Jane’s frustrating attempts to find a stable and secure love life. It is unclear how much of Jane’s journal entries were contrived, prompted or suggested by the editorial staff to maximize interest and sales. Nonetheless, weekly installments of Jane’s diary encouraged readers to follow along.  
30 In only one instance was race directly acknowledged, and this was when Jane reflected upon an exhibition at a War Fair “showing too, that on our side everybody sticks together. The troubles of one are the troubles of all – whether it’s a child orphaned by bombs in far away China or a Negro family hungry and sick in some slum here in Washington.” *Washington Times-Herald*, “Jane’s Journal,” October 28, 1942.  
31 *Good Housekeeping* magazine featured several white G-Girls in a fashion spread in January 1942: “There’s a new army on the Potomac – the bright-eyed, fresh-faced young Americans who have poured into Washington from remote farms, sleepy little towns, and the confusion of cities, to work for the government in a time of national emergency. Every morning they flow, like bright rivers, into the maws of the great buildings.” Not only were black women visually absent, but general description also presumed black exclusion given the heavy use of the distinguishing adjective “Negro” during the Jim Crow era (i.e., “negro government girl”). Rosenfeld, “Government Girls.”  
nation’s capital as a “sleepy, southern town,” hence, black Southern migrants likely found Washington, D.C. more familiar than Chicago or New York.\(^\text{33}\) Notwithstanding Washington’s southern pace and feel, many other blacks besides Bogess began to view federal employment in the nation’s capital as a promising avenue for economic and social advancement. As black War Manpower Commission employee Lucia M. Pitts noted in 1942: “Negroes, like other American citizens, helped build America, love America, want to defend America, but they must have their rightful share not only of woe and tribulation and sacrifice, but of economic opportunity and faith in America.”\(^\text{34}\)

The federal government, which had employed less than 1,000 blacks at the turn of the century, employed more than a quarter of a million black workers nationwide by 1944 (Table 1.1). Within Washington, D.C., the National Urban League, a black civic organization focused on equity within the workplace and economic advancement of the black community, reported that “there were less than 10,000 Negro workers in the Federal government in 1938; in 1944, there were 41,566.”\(^\text{35}\) Only a torrid hiring rate that peaked at 4,000 new workers monthly made these high employment levels possible.\(^\text{36}\)

\(^{33}\) Barbara Franco, “The Challenge of a City Museum for Washington, D.C.,” \textit{Washington History} 15, no. 1 (Spring/Summer, 2003): 6; see also National Urban League Staff Report on Racial Relations, RNUL. “That the seat of Federal Government is located in an area predominately ‘south’ in attitude, etiquette, customs and conventions…. Primarily, however, whites and Negroes in the District work separately, attend separate schools and other institutions, and are ignorant of each other.”


Commenting on a similar development during the Civil War, historian Timothy C. Dowling noted that many blacks saw WWII work as an “opportunity to prove that blacks were solid, skilled, proud, contributing members of American society and thus deserved the full benefits of U.S. citizenship,” just as many blacks “proved” their loyalty by volunteering for Union or Confederate forces.37 Lucia Pitts made this connection between her employer and the ideals she was working for when she observed, “America cannot win a war if thirteen million of her citizens are left out of it.”38

While many federal agencies felt compelled to relax their traditional hiring patterns and hire more black workers, many agencies such as the Treasury Department and Bureau of Engraving and Printing held steadfast to segregationist policies. The contentious circumstances

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38 Pitts, “The Federal Diary.”
surrounding the federal government’s embrace of black federal workers are significant because they provide insight into black employees’ sustained treatment as “black collar workers.”

“BLACK COLLAR” WORKERS

As black workers took advantage of war labor shortages to secure employment within the federal government, they quickly learned that the government operated differently from most other employers. Unlike the less-regulated and more openly discriminatory private sector, the federal government, to comply with regulations it imposed on private companies, was more obligated to treat its employees fairly. Yet, the transition of the federal government from segregation to equal opportunity was gradual and conflicted. Up until this point, proponents of integration based their arguments on the need for an efficient workplace – the urgent need for manpower during wartime prevented the government from discriminating extensively. Yet, once agencies actually hired black employees in larger numbers, Jim Crow custom trumped federal ideals, and black employees were consistently limited to “black collar jobs,” or lower wages and slower raises relative to their white co-workers. While part of the federal service, it was common to see black employees performing janitorial duties at the Federal Security Agency

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39 Section 1 of Public Law 426-62, signed into law on March 4, 1913 created the Department of Labor. Section 1 states in part: “The purpose of the Department of Labor shall be to foster, promote, and develop the welfare of the wage earners of the United States, to improve their working conditions, and to advance their opportunities for profitable employment.” United States Department of Labor, *The Organic Act of the Department of Labor*, www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/organact.htm#.UKptwxB5mSM (accessed November 19, 2012).
40 Similarly, CIO founder and labor leader Sidney Hillman called “employers’ attention to the wastefulness of importing labor from distant areas or raiding the employment rolls of competitive firms when unused Negro labor remained available.” Lester B. Granger, “Barriers to Negro War Employment,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 223, (Sep., 1942): 77.
or cutting lawns for the Department of Interior; in other words, many blacks held manual and menial job functions similar to those jobs limited to blacks within the private sector.

To wit, the local chapter of the Urban League noted in 1940 that, “the majority of [black federal] workers here as elsewhere, are in the lower occupational brackets, and therefore generally poorly paid.” Accordingly, official data on occupational groupings for black federal workers in Washington, D.C. in 1940 revealed a “disproportionate concentration of Negro workers in the lower grades,” with few black workers within the upper-level professional or managerial ranks (Table 1.2). The number of black federal workers in Washington, D.C. in 1940 was quite small but grew quickly from that point:

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41 Washington Urban League First Annual Report, 1939-1940, Race Relations in the Nation’s Capital. 1940, Part I: N30, RNUL. The WUL was the District of Columbia’s local chapter of the national organization, the NUL. Founded in 1910, the NUL shared many goals as other national civic organizations such as the NAACP, yet the NUL was not as racially integrated as the NAACP and focused more on workplace equity, as symbolized by their logo of a lone equal sign enclosed by a circle and by their mission to “enable African Americans to secure economic self-reliance, parity, power and civil rights.” See Washington Urban League Newsletter I, no. 1 (March-April 1956): 1.

42 National Urban League Staff Report on Racial Relations, RNUL.
As Table 1.2 illustrates, whereas the majority of white workers ranked as clerical or higher, most black workers were in lower grade positions performing maintenance, custodial, janitorial or landscaping work inside of federal buildings or upon federal lands. The jobs of most black federal workers were thus similar to those they held in the private sector. For example, a survey of fourteen federal departments in April 1942 found that out of a total of 171,103 personnel, 9.1 per cent were black, of whom a mere 2.3 per cent were in positions other than

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>White Male</th>
<th>White Female</th>
<th>Negro Male</th>
<th>Negro Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>39,918</td>
<td>34,535</td>
<td>5,428</td>
<td>2,376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and Semiprofessional</td>
<td>8,222</td>
<td>1,775</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proprietors, managers and officials</td>
<td>3,128</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical, sales and kindred workers</td>
<td>18,675</td>
<td>28,964</td>
<td>1,989</td>
<td>471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craftsmen, foremen and kindred workers</td>
<td>2,176</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operatives and kindred workers</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>1,613</td>
<td>724</td>
<td>440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective service workers</td>
<td>3,109</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service workers, except protective</td>
<td>757</td>
<td>1,496</td>
<td>569</td>
<td>1,281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laborers, incl. farm</td>
<td>2,100</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>1,734</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aside from an increase in pay above standard domestic or agricultural work, it was unclear how else blacks benefitted from federal employment; the jobs they possessed did not challenge the predominant social narrative that saw urban blacks as employable primarily within service positions.44

_A Qualified Improvement_

Still, given the alternative, such public sector opportunities were attractive. Most black workers considered federal jobs to be good jobs; they allowed for a measure of long-term stability, something rare in the Jim Crow private sector. In addition to higher pay, the perception that the hiring process in the federal sector was relatively transparent and fair also made those jobs “good.” Boggess’ blind typing exam suggested that her ability rather than her skin color would determine the trajectory of her future career.45

As early as 1940, the black publication, _Washington Tribune_, noted that rules of transparency aided many blacks in taking and qualifying for civil service examinations. Yet, once blacks started working, equal opportunity was inconsistent at best. As a result, the _Tribune_ noted that black applicants “have been subject to every trick of discrimination which the

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43 Memo from Fair Employment Practices Commission to Heads of Governmental Departments and Independent Establishments, August 10, 1942; Part 20, Papers of Philleo Nash; Folder Official Documents; Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, MO.


prejudiced [federal] appointing officers have been able to devise."46 Despite the growing presence of agency protocols that discouraged racial discrimination, it nonetheless persisted. Evaluating black collar jobs presents a complex task since these newfound positions were simultaneously fruitful and frustrating for black federal employees. While a black professional class existed in nearly every city, South or North, however small, federal positions in Washington, D.C. proved more inviting to a larger number of migrating blacks looking for work. Federal employment was the solution that provided stable, secure, and competitive pay within an environment freer from conventional types of discrimination. Yet, many of these same workers soon learned that racism was still operative. They rarely enjoyed salaries or careers that matched those of their white co-workers, even for the same jobs. By 1947, 89.4% of black federal workers in D.C. had salaries less than the median average for whites.47

Farm Security Association (FSA) employee Ella Watson provided one example of these divergent experiences by race. Watson was the subject of the iconic 1942 Gordon Parks photograph “American Gothic,” which depicts her holding upright both a broom and mop in front of a large American flag inside of the FSA offices she cleaned.48 The photograph was a poignant reimagining of the 1930 work of the same name by Grant Wood that depicted a stoic farmer holding a pitchfork standing next to his unmarried daughter, looking equally stolid in

47 89.4% of nonwhite individuals, not in families earned $2,499 or less with 55.7% earning $1,499 or less. U.S. Department of Commerce, Current Population Reports, Percent Distribution of Families and Individuals by Total Money Income Level, by Color of Head, for the Washington (D.C.) Metropolitan District: 1947, Series P-60, no. 4 (Washington, DC, 1948), 14.
48 Gordon Parks, Voices in the Mirror: An Autobiography, (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 84. Parks himself broke the color barrier when he first started working for the Farm Security Administration in 1942. Displeased with Washington, D.C.’s “shocking level of bigotry in a city that contained the symbols of American democracy. He soon realized that “photographing bigotry was very difficult,” and so he focused on “the evil of its effect...discernible in the black faces of the oppressed and their blighted neighborhood lying within the shadows of the Capitol.”
front of their white Iowan farmhouse. Parks thus challenged the conventional definition of the “average American” by showing a black American who worked just as hard, but had less to show for it. The missing buttons on Watson’s dress, along with her blank stare and solitude, contrasted with the 1930 Wood interpretation of resolve in the face of the Great Depression. In addition to her worn dress, Watson’s face was worn as well; she was a twenty-five year government charwoman (i.e., janitor) who started work at 5:30pm – a time when most G-Girls were leaving to go home or out on the town.

Watson, the daughter of a man killed by a lynch mob in the South, received an annual salary of $1,080. She was also raising her deceased daughters’ three kids, one of who was a paraplegic. At work, Watson had to clean the office of a white female manager who began federal employment at the same time as Watson with the same level of experience. Watson received a lower salary than her white “colleague” despite receiving a higher initial performance rating. Her position thus encapsulated the frustration of black collar workers who suffered the indignity of knowing that the only logical explanation for their social and economic plight was the illogical nature of racism.

It was a pity that Dorothy Boggess, unlike Jane Meredith, had no publisher for her journal to chronicle life as being among the first African-American employees ever employed at the War Department. Boggess noted that her presence “caused quite a stir. The messengers and maintenance workers would peek in the door to see if the unit actually existed.”

Before Dorothy Boggess joined the federal government, her enrollment in social work studies already

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signaled her desire to escape the domestic labor track that ensnared so many black women. In 1940, nearly 60% of all black women laborers nationwide worked as private household workers. Conversely, for Ella Watson, the unfortunate irony was that after finding employment with the federal government outside of the south, she still found herself working odd hours cleaning up after others.

**STAYING IN D.C.**

With hundreds of new workers arriving daily in Washington, D.C., both black and white government workers had another problem besides finding equitable, gainful employment. They had to secure adequate housing, and, given the large demand and small supply, this task proved difficult. The nation’s capital was teeming with incoming workers to the point that one white G-Girl remarked: “going to work on street cars and buses is like being packed in slave ships.” Housing options were especially limited for blacks within an openly segregated city.

Certain DC neighborhoods were “off-limits” to blacks due to redlining and racial covenants. As late as 1948, the Washington Real Estate Board pronounced that: “No property in a white section should ever be sold, rented, advertised, or offered to colored people. In case of

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55 “Senator Theodore Bilbo bragged to his Alabamian constituents that segregation in the nation’s capital was the rule.” Jonathon Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris, Jr., E. Franklin Frazier and Ralph Bunche* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 50-58.
doubt, advice from the Public Affairs Committee should be obtained.”**56** Historian Francine Cary noted that moving “to the District proved far easier than finding a place to live and earning a decent wage. Segregation in housing allowed blacks only a limited range of housing options.”**57** In 1941, “the black part of town” consisted of three principal areas: 1) the white-dominated Northwest quadrant with a pocket of black middle and upper class residents stretching from U Street to LeDroit Park, 2) the more racially and class-mixed Southeast quadrant, and 3) the black-dominated slums of the Southwest quadrant. In the early 1940s, black residents scarcely penetrated any points west of 16th street or Rock Creek Park in the upper Northwest; the lone exception was a small inkblot of black life dubbed the “Gold Coast,” inhabited by a mostly professional black class north on 16th street, not far from the border with Silver Spring, Maryland.**58**

Once Dorothy Boggess left her northbound train at Union Station, she had to navigate a city highly segregated along residential and commercial lines. Her first residence in DC was the all-black Phyllis Wheatley YWCA off Rhode Island Avenue, named after the first black

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58 Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestics and the Great Migration*, (New York: Kodansha America, 1996), 126. While unable to secure government housing, Boggess was able to avoid the dreaded “black neighborhoods” of Tiber Creek and Swampoodle; two Southwest neighborhoods that constantly suffered from flooding and bad smells. There a garbage disposal at New Jersey and K streets in addition to a garbage crematory at the foot of South Capitol on the corner of T Street that burned coal to incinerate garbage and dead animals daily. Dead bodies were also numerous in Southwest Washington; it was home to the D.C. Morgue for many years. Although built to resemble a chapel to soften its visual presence, complete with a spire and stained glass, its location at 7th and Water streets was specifically due to the frequent drowning of victims in the Potomac nearby. Southwest D.C. also became home to the city’s poorest newcomers who found shelter in D.C. at the expensive proposition of no electricity or running water. Southwest alley dwellers “were employed in farming, governmental jobs from clerks to janitors, and the burgeoning dock work along the waterfront.” These living conditions offered a stark contrast to the idyllic postwar suburban utopias sprouting up in nearby Montgomery County, Maryland or Arlington, Virginia.
published poet. But her stay there was brief; she was fortunate to transfer to a single room inside a private home soon afterwards. Perhaps Boggess’ relatively smooth transition influenced her positive praise of Washington, D.C. as “the place where colored southerners could escape the field or kitchen and work indoors for the government.”

For many black and white federal workers, government housing became a welcome option because it was affordably priced, well maintained, close to work, and often roommate-free. However, only white G-Girls like Jane were eligible to live in Arlington Farms, a large, sprawling government housing complex in the Washington, D.C. suburb of Alexandria, Virginia. With more than 6,000 rooms accommodating more than 8,000 workers, it cost $24.50 a month.

Meanwhile, Negro G-Girls had to live in segregated public housing, which isolated and stigmatized the workers because of their race. The government agreed to build three small

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60 For instance, Lucy D. Slowe Hall was designed by the black architect Hilyard Robinson and was built by the Defense Homes Corporation in 1943, while two other dormitories reserved for segregated housing, Midway and Wake Halls, were constructed by Samuel Plato, a rare black American contractor who built over forty government buildings in his lifetime. Midway, the first residence dormitory for Negro G-Girls, housed 848 girls between Midway and Wake, located at Oklahoma Avenue and Twenty-fourth Street, Northeast. While Midway was opened to 75 new residents and not much else fanfare, Alcott Hall for white G-Girls was opened with a Congressional reception with officials from National Housing Agency attending. *Washington Post,* “Midway Hall, First Negro Government Dormitory, Opens,” May 2, 1943.
61 This type of preferential treatment for whites was not isolated, for Evalyn Walsh McLean (last individual owner of the Hope Diamond) sold her Northwest Tenleytown Road, summer estate “Friendship” property to the federal government for $1,000,000 on Dec 31, 1941. Yet, McLean stipulated converting and developing the residence into temporary – but segregated – housing for white government workers. See Chalmers M. Roberts, “Peace at Last! Cheers Erupt in Washington,” *Washington Post,* July 26, 1995.
dormitories for Negro girls adjacent to the black neighborhood of LeDroit Park and Howard University in Northwest Washington, D.C.\textsuperscript{63}

Blacks remained excluded from the whites-only social clubs and were restricted in taking advantage of the cosmopolitan attractions of downtown Washington, D.C. Many restaurants, department stores, and movie theaters refused to serve black people.\textsuperscript{64} As a result, the Negro dormitories (or rather, the cafeterias and lounges inside them) became cultural resources where black workers and military servicemen alike could eat and socialize. George Green, a former enlisted man, recalled that, “I met my wife [at the black dormitory Lucy D. Slowe Hall] forty-five years ago. I was a military man. Tenth Calvary. We used to ride horses down Pennsylvania Avenue. They used to have dances. A friend of [my wife] introduced me. We used to court right there in the lounge.”\textsuperscript{65}

\textbf{DISCRIMINATION AT THE AGENCY LEVEL: INSIDE THE OPA}

Three dimensions directly shaped the black collar experience within the federal government during World War II – physical, economic, and bureaucratic. The experiences of

\textsuperscript{63} Accordingly, one of the black female dormitories, Lucy D. Slowe Hall, owed its namesake to one of the founders of the oldest black female sorority in the country, Alpha Kappa Alpha. Coincidentally, Alpha Kappa Alpha began at Howard University in 1908. Hall, “Remembering the Wartime Call of the Capital.”

\textsuperscript{64} For example, the “Negro Motorist Travel Guide,” published listings of segregated facilities to prepare the wary black Washington, D.C. visitor, with more than sixty addresses mostly around U Street and Florida Avenue. Jim Crow was alive and well in the nation’s capital; the city, although smaller in size, had just as many segregated listings in the “Travel Guide” than some states in the South. The guidebook’s creator, Victor H. Green, who created the book as a means to spare travelling blacks undue humiliation, was also a federal employee (Harlem postal worker). See J. Freedom du Lacs, “Guidebook that Held Blacks’ Hands during Segregation Reveals a Deeply Altered D.C. and Inspires a Play,” \textit{Washington Post}, September 12, 2010.

\textsuperscript{65} Green is speaking of his courtship with his eventual wife, Evelyn Coleman Green, who was living in Slowe Hall, working as a Department of Agriculture Secretary at the time. See Hall, “Remembering the Wartime Call of the Capital.”
black workers in one significant executive agency – the Office of Price Administration (OPA) – illustrate this reality. The OPA played a key role in regulating the economy by implementing price controls and administering the rationing system. The agency, writes its Director of Personnel Everett Reimer, was the creation of a small group of young, mostly Jewish attorneys who were in fierce rivalry with other agencies over jurisdictional matters influencing the OPA’s reach and ability to fulfill its mission. Just a few months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the OPA had over 60,000 employees nationwide with a field organization consisting of “7,000 local boards, 300 rent offices, 70 district offices and 9 regional offices.” According to Reimer, there “literally was not time for the [racial] prejudice of individuals to become consolidated,” particularly when, as Jews, so many officials experienced social ostracized as well.66

Although black workers comprised just 2.1% of the OPA’s workforce, the OPA nonetheless emerged as one of the more progressive federal agencies at the time.67 The OPA’s administrator from 1943 until the end of the war was Chester Bowles, who had built a reputation as a leftist-leaning, independent political thinker. Bowles, according to Reimer, “gave more attention to the problem of race discrimination than any of OPA’s other administrators” and was “the first of OPA’s Administrators to discuss the question of discrimination personally with the heads of the field offices.”68 One of Bowles’ early acts was to amend local board member selection policies to allow for more minority representation. Bowles also required district offices to include minorities to better represent and serve their districts. This change directly resulted in blacks hired to do professional work for the very first time in some Southern states. Further,

66 Account of Director of Personnel, Everett W. Reimer, Office of Price Administration, May 27, 1947, Part 7, Record Group (RG) 220, RPCCR.
67 The OPA also employed a larger number of employees. See Table 2.1, infra.
68 Ibid.
more than just issue blind memorandums from the national office, Bowles held regular meetings to encourage his program deputies to treat black employees fairly. While directly responsible for only a small portion of OPA hiring decisions, Bowles’ mandates created an environment of racial acceptance on the job.

Physical Barriers

Bowles’ management style was quite unorthodox compared to the vast majority of federal agencies that observed racial segregation as merely part of everyday protocol. Federal agencies routinely segregated black and white federal workers by physically positioning filing cabinets and other furniture to isolate and cordon off black workers from whites within the same section of the same agency. Karen Anderson suggests that in many cases, white women were more apprehensive about sharing the same physical workspaces with blacks while white men were more anxious about their rank, rate of pay promotion rate being higher relative to other black male workers. Federal administrators also placed screens and partitions between black and white workers to ease white staff members’ irrational apprehensions of being too close to black workers and possibly defiled in the process.

69 Upon receiving an inspection tour of Pentagon, President Franklin D. Roosevelt noted four restrooms placed “along each of the five axes that connect the outer ring to the inmost on each floor of the building” upon inquiring the reason for such prodigality of lavatory space, as only two at each axis was all that was necessary, “the President was informed that nondiscrimination required as many rooms marked ‘Colored Men’ and ‘Colored Women’ as ‘White Men’ and ‘White Women.’ The differentiating signs were never painted on the doors.” Constance McLaughlin Green, The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation’s Capital, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 257.

70 See generally, Anderson, “Last Hired, First Fired: Black Women Workers during World War II.”

71 National Committee against Segregation in the Nation’s Capital, June 23, 1947, Internal Memorandum, Correspondence with Institutions, Organizations, etc., Part 12, RG 220, RPCCR.
However, even the OPA, with its unusually liberal chief administrator, enforced physical segregation creating tension between black and white employees at the agency. Housed inside the Old Census Building, the OPA separated cafeteria lines and dining rooms by race during wartime. After many whites occupied the Negro line and cafeteria in order to cut down wait time, Negroes did the same to the white facilities in response. But one OPA official remarked, defensively: “[w]hat is important is that while there were at that time many prejudiced persons in OPA they did not set the pattern for the majority as they usually do.”\textsuperscript{72}

In 1947, the OPA’s Personnel Office attempted to improve racial relations by creating an internal policy dictating that any official parties “could not be planned by any organizational unit which all members of the unit could not attend.” Washington, D.C., as a highly segregated city, left the agency with few options, with some segregationist facilities “bending” their rules “to the extent of permitting mixed groups in private dining rooms.” But the OPA had its own struggle with discrimination. Reimer reported problems with unsuccessful racial and social mixing in the recreational room and numerous incidents “in which white girls became fearful of Negro men.”\textsuperscript{73}

In response to these tensions, the Printing and Distribution Branch of the OPA in 1943 took the unprecedented step of commissioning a fact-finding committee to investigate charges of racial disparities. The fact-finding committee was borne about in response to stinging charges of discrimination brought by the United Federal Workers of America (UFWA), a left-leaning, interracial union that had about 10,000 black members nationwide by 1944.\textsuperscript{74} The committee

\textsuperscript{72} Office of Price Administration, “Internal Memorandum,” May 27, 1947, General Correspondence with Government Departments and Agencies, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{74} Historical Statistics of Black America: Volume I (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Group, 1994), 1105. UFWA affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).
conducted extensive interviews and learned, unsurprisingly, that black expectations for equal treatment conflicted with white maintenance of segregationist customs. For example, the committee heard the testimony of a black employee, Mrs. Robb, who originally had a desk job working on the nationwide census with the Census Bureau, housed in the Department of Commerce since 1913. Because of Robb’s fair complexion, she was mistaken for white. After white colleagues discovered her racial identity, they immediately placed Robb in the stock room, far away from her former white colleagues.75 Her experience was far from unique. The committee determined there “was and is physical as well as organizational segregation of Negro employees of the Branch. In some sections with both Negro and white employees, the seating arrangement is such that the Negroes are grouped together.”76

The UFWA had a close relationship with the officials of the OPA as well as its black employees. Everett Reimer noted that the UFWA was “a consistent, vigorous and intelligent protagonist and watchdog of the cause of non-discrimination.”77 Individual supervisors and administrative officers of OPA were also members of UFWA. This encouraged the OPA Personnel Office in particular to “develop a sense of mission with regard to the rights of minority group members.”78 Soon after the OPA made its non-discrimination policy public early in the war effort, the union made the bold step of bringing charges of discrimination against a Deputy Administrator for failing to promote qualified blacks in his unit – an uncommon move at the time

75 See “Memorandum from Fact-finding Committee Appointed to Investigate Charges of Mal-administration and Racial Discrimination in the Printing and Distribution Branch to Edward N. Way, Deputy Administrator, Final Report of Committee,” May 3, 1943, Record Group 188, Office of the Price Administration, General Records, NARA.
76 Ibid.
77 Office of Price Administration, “Internal Memorandum,” May 27, 1947, General Correspondence with Government Departments and Agencies, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
78 Ibid.
given underdeveloped anti-discrimination protocols. After the hearing board presented a draft report of its findings, the Deputy Administrator resigned which “bolstered the union’s confidence in the good faith of the management, [and] strengthened its bargaining power with operating executives.”

Yet, at the same time, many federal agencies reinforced existing segregation by contracting with job placement services such as the United States Employment Service (USES), which had a standard racially segregated protocol that dictated, “two separate and distinct files of applications are maintained.” It also maintained separate reception desks and working sections for blacks and whites in its own offices. Such stark physical separation made it difficult for prospective black employees to start their careers without feeling racially inadequate. In addition to physical segregation on the job, blacks faced physical scrutiny during the application process for such federal jobs. With the “Rule of Three” practice, federal employers looking for candidates would distill applicants down to three finalists and would pick the most qualified applicant for the job. Since three pictured candidates received consideration simultaneously, it was difficult to establish that non-selections of top black candidates were because of discrimination. Yet, black federal workers and the NAACP successfully campaigned to abolish this practice in 1941 citing a disproportionate impact upon black candidates who were passed over upwards of twenty times. Aside from the expensive practice of obtaining a photograph, which disproportionately impacted black candidates, what was truly costly for black employees

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79 Ibid.
was that they were more often than not screened out of jobs because employers knew their race beforehand.\textsuperscript{81}

\textit{Economic Barriers}

It is clear that black federal workers consistently earned lower salaries than fellow white employees, performing the same work. Yet, the difficulty in analyzing economic data in isolation is that low salary levels alone do not reveal the discriminatory patterns. On the one hand, a few black employees of the OPA made as much as $6,500, or nearly three times the median for whites at the agency. Yet, 65\% of blacks working there never progressed higher than Grade 1, where the annual salary was just $1,260.\textsuperscript{82} Those black employees commanding higher salaries, perhaps unsurprisingly, had received a higher education (e.g., as a lawyer, economic statistician, or accountant), which was true for only 1.3\% of blacks at the time.\textsuperscript{83}

In addition, black students tended to drop out of high school in greater numbers than did whites. In Washington, DC, for example, school attendance percentages were roughly the same for both races (54.8\% for blacks, and 59.2\% for whites) until students reached the age of fifteen. But then most black students began leaving school to look for work. Only about half as many

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{81} Clarence M. Mitchell, Jr., NAACP Lobbyist to James M. Mead, U.S. Senator, New York, November 20, 1940, Part II: A194, RNAACP. \\
\textsuperscript{82} See “May 13, 1945, Memorandum, Robert R. R. Brooks to Consumer Advisory Committee,” Record Group 188, Office of the Price Administration, General Records, NARA. \\
\textsuperscript{83} In 1940, only 1.3\% of blacks obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher, the education of which is a virtual prerequisite for many of the professional trades. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Table 4, Percent of the Population 25 Years and Over with a Bachelor’s Degree or Higher by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin, for the United States: 1940 to 2000,” http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/census/half-century/tables.html (accessed May 10, 2013).
\end{flushright}
graduated from high school, as did their white counterparts (see Table 1.3). This put them at a severe disadvantage when competing for other than entry-level jobs in the federal government.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Native White, %</th>
<th>Negro, %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attending School</td>
<td>157,629</td>
<td>117,800, 59.2%</td>
<td>33,694, 54.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>11,940, 94.3%</td>
<td>8,909, 95.6%</td>
<td>2,958, 90.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 and 17 years</td>
<td>19,538, 75.5%</td>
<td>15,373, 81.1%</td>
<td>3,954, 59.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 and 19 years</td>
<td>10,820, 36.4%</td>
<td>8,883, 40.5%</td>
<td>1,755, 23.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The ubiquity of black employees in the OPA within lower level positions reveals the relationship between education and employment levels; 87.5% of all black employees in March of 1945 occupied the two lowest pay categories (see Table 1.4). Unsurprisingly, this group sustained the largest amount of attrition after the war (i.e., over 40%), a further indication of their vulnerability and perceived expendability.
Moreover, this salary disparity explains how an agency like the OPA could – accurately – boast a growing number of blacks, but few in upper-level, higher-paying positions. A 1944 press release announced that, “Negro employment in the National Office of the Office of Price Administration has risen to 12 percent of the total force, from 1½ percent in January, 1943.” The

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Jobs</th>
<th>No. of Negros Employed</th>
<th>March 1945</th>
<th>Nov. 1945</th>
<th>Salary Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Attorneys associated with Price, Rationing and Enforcement</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>$3200 - $4600</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Price, Rationing and Rent Director, Executives, Examiners, Inspectors, Aides and Interviewers</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>$1620 - $4600</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Information Officers</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>$2000 - $3800</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Administrative Officers</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>$3200 - $3800</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Investigators</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>$1800 - $3800</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Economists, Accountants</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$2000 - $3800</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. Stenographers, Typists, Clerks</td>
<td>891</td>
<td>501</td>
<td>$1260 - $3600</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. Machine Operators</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>$1260 - $1620</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,034</td>
<td>626</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: The larger salary range and broader range of job functions may explain the amount of black workers listed in Category II. The amount of workers in Category V, Investigators may be explained by a concerted strategy by OPA Chief Chester Bowles who was “anxious” to have staff carry out: “Full use of Negroes, or members of other minorities, not only as regular staff members but in positions where it is important to have persons who know intimately the needs of the various minority groups within the particular region.”

Source: Office of Price Administration, Analysis of Reports on Negro Employment in All Field Offices, November 30, 1945, Box 7, RPCCR; Office of Price Administration; Memorandum: Special Assistant to the Administrator on Racial Relations, November 25, 1944, Box 7, RPCCR.
same press release celebrated that OPA received a plaque from the UFWA for having the best race-relations policy among government agencies. Yet, the same press release hinted at the rarity of upper-level black employees when it listed the occupations of those blacks in the OPA’s Enforcement Department as consisting of: “a senior attorney, an investigator, statistical clerks, typists.” While an attorney is an upper-level position without dispute, grouping in black typists suggests a liberal classification to mask the dearth of upper-level blacks employed.

Black employees working side-by-side with white employees in the same agency received different treatment despite performing the same work and having similar backgrounds. While typically receiving lower wages with slower promotion rates, a job with less pay was still better than no job at all. For instance, Arlene Neal was a black, married Mimeograph Operator at the OPA with a beginning classification of CAF-1, a pay rate of $1,260 and a superior record of performance. In 1943, Neal learned from her supervisor that she “reached her peak” in the section after a year’s time. Neal’s supervisor directed her to take a typist training course to prepare her for a lateral move. Rather than give her a promotion and pay upgrade in her field of specialization, the OPA fired Neal. Yet, the white worker hired to take Neal’s old job received an immediate raise to $1,620 which constituted a more than 30% increase in Neal’s old pay despite performing Neal’s same duties. Statistical data demonstrates that only 10% of white employees across all educational levels worked at Grade 1 versus 65% of all black employees. This

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84 Office of Price Administration, “For Immediate Release,” September 15, 1944, General Correspondence with Government Departments and Agencies, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
85 See “May 3, 1943, Memorandum from Fact-Finding Committee Appointed to Investigate Charges of Mal-administration and Racial Discrimination in the Printing and Distribution Branch to Edward N. Way, Deputy Administrator, Final Report of Committee,” Record Group 188, Office of the Price Administration, General Records, NARA.
discrepancy suggests that white colleagues and supervisors valued and evaluated each other’s work differently from that of black collar workers.

Another example of economic segregation was the 1943 case of OPA employee John A. Alexander, a black assistant file clerk, classified as a CAF-3, and paid $1,620 annually.86 Despite earning strong marks for past job performance, Alexander applied for a promotion three separate times. Alexander’s supervisors denied him on each occasion. Adding to his frustration, on each application Alexander learned that his supervisors offered other white males the promotion—even though they had not applied. When Alexander’s superiors found no one willing to take the promotion, the agency abolished the position and created two new jobs that ranked lower than the original position for which he had applied. A new white employee filled one of the new positions, while Alexander filled the other. Alexander’s promotion ordeal demonstrated the agency’s reluctance to bestow blacks in the workplace more power and responsibility at work since the position would have placed Alexander in charge of whites. The OPA “resolved” the problem, but only by forcing Alexander to share his responsibilities with a new white employee with much less seniority.

Interviewed as a Senior Clerk of the Printing & Distribution Branch of the OPA, Alexander said that when he missed the first and second vacancies, he thought little of the matter. When Alexander missed the third job vacancy, however, he began to realize that “that it was my color which was keeping me down, I felt pretty much in the dumps.”87

86 CAF stands for Clerical, Administrative, and Fiscal Service; see note 21 supra.
87 See “February 15, 1943, Testimony before the Fact-finding Committee of OPA,” Office of the Price Administration, General Records, Record Group 188, NARA.
**Bureaucratic Barriers**

In addition to physical and economic barriers within the federal workplace, blacks had to navigate bureaucratic barriers, which were subtler and more difficult to challenge. It was harder for isolated black employees to defend themselves against such subtle barriers particularly when so few of them ascended to the bureaucracy’s upper ranks. More so than being blocked from view by obstructive file cabinets or receiving a smaller paycheck, bureaucratic segregation spoke to the black collar worker’s marginalized experience as an employee whites ultimately saw as incompatible with them. The reason behind the lower pay or physical separation was the shared, collective sentiment that blacks were less competent, less capable of management or simply less desirable (e.g., said one manager in defense of rejecting black employees: “I was afraid of losing a number of the very good [white] girls I had”).

While such attitudes reflected Jim Crow conventions, they nonetheless betrayed core ideals of equity the federal government supposedly pledged to uphold. For instance, the OPA fact-finding committee found that “Negroes were not promoted to vacancies in sections other than Stock and Duplicating. In terms of the total numbers of white and Negro clerical personnel in the Branch there were proportionately four times as many promotions of whites as of Negroes from the period August 1 to October 16, 1942.”

Hence, bureaucratic segregation led directly to the “ghettoization” of black labor which kept most blacks at the lower salary levels, prevented them from advancing in their careers, and

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88 National Committee against Segregation in the Nation’s Capital, June 23, 1947, Internal Memorandum, Correspondence with Institutions, Organizations, etc., Part 12, RG 220, RPCCR.
89 See “May 3, 1943, Memorandum from Fact-Finding Committee,” NARA.
often isolated them from upwardly mobile white employees. For instance, Table 1.5 demonstrates that before the end of the war in 1945, 462 or 93% of all black employees at the OPA were getting paid at least $2,000 or less while 237 white employees commanded salaries of $6,500 or more, with 2,499 or 77% of all white employees making at least $2,000 or more. The absence of black employees within the upper level positions contrasted sharply with the heavy preponderance of white workers in them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Levels</th>
<th>$6500 &amp; up</th>
<th>5600</th>
<th>4600</th>
<th>3800</th>
<th>3200</th>
<th>2600</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>1800</th>
<th>1620</th>
<th>1440</th>
<th>1320</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Empl.</td>
<td>3723</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>526</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>693</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negro Empl.</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Negro of Total</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Office of Price Administration, *Analysis of Reports on Negro Employment in All Field Offices*, November 30, 1945, Box 7, RPCCR.

In an informally segregated workplace, the exclusion of blacks from private conversations between white employees only justified the inferior pay and inferior placements many blacks received. This psychological framing helped maintain the unequal status quo.

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90 Additionally, many blacks were not privy to direct political access that translated into personal direct gain within the federal system. Contrast the ghettoization of black labor discussion with this exchange over a two-week period in 1944. Letter from Cong. Albert Gore to Wallace Sayre, Director Personnel Division, Office of Price Administration, June 2, 1944, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR: “I am therefore asking you to review [Margaret E. Williams] application and credentials with the view of utilizing her services in the Washington office of OPA, if you have need of a person with her qualifications; I endorse Miss Williams’ application.” Letter from K. Killiam, Clerical Placement to Margaret E. Williams, June 12, 1944, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR: “Cong. Albert Gore has brought to our attention your interest in a position…we are glad to offer you an appointment as Clerk Stenographer, CAF-4, $1800.
Most low-grade positions were heavier on manual and menial labor and required little or no interaction with white co-workers. While the OPA was a trendsetter in its maintenance of a transparent set of statistical records, many agencies did not amass and collect such racial data unless expressly asked.\footnote{91}

For agencies employing a large proportion of white-collar employees, there was little, if any, black representation. For example, Table 1.6 illustrates how the Securities and Exchange Commission had over 1,000 employees located in Washington, D.C. in 1941, but only five were black. That same year, the General Accounting Office had 4,959 employees working in Washington, D.C., with only 151 black (3.04%). Where black workers occupied a significant percentage of the workforce (i.e., 10% or more), it was largely in agencies that required a large number of manual and menial labor (e.g., Public Works, the Post Office, and the Government Printing Office) and where, unlike working inside of an office, they would not share a physical space with whites.

\footnote{91} Federal agencies would not become required to report racial data until passage of the Civil Rights Act in the mid-sixties and the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.
Publicly, many federal agency heads tried to avoid appearing unfair to their black employees. While privately observed, federal agency leadership rarely publicly acknowledged the existence of racial discrimination – at least within the province of their agency. For example, on December 3, 1945, OPA Chief Chester Bowles wrote a letter to United States Civil Service Commissioner Arthur S. Flemming detailing various racial problems within his agency. Since the war had ended, many black OPA employees were “reduced-in-force” as the agency sustained overall cuts. However, unlike most agencies, many OPA officers routinely made the effort to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1.6 ➔ Federal Departments with over 1,000 Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FEDERAL DEPARTMENTS WITH OVER 1,000 EMPLOYEES, 1941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEPARTMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RR Retirement Bd.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Owners’ Loan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm Credit Admin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FHA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recon Fin Corp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fed Emer. Admin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WPA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soc Sec Bd.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen Acctg Ofc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

find jobs for employees with other agencies.\textsuperscript{92} Frustrated by reports from the Personnel Division that black employees were having difficulty getting transfers, Bowles drafted an internal memorandum listing several specific examples of racial discrimination. Bowles alleged that the State Department specified white, Gentile messengers, that the Weather Bureau in the Department of Commerce inquired for transfer applicants of light complexion, that the Naval Research Laboratory indicated they lacked facilities for “Negro employees” and that the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) stopped considering a prospective applicant after learning he/she attended Howard University.\textsuperscript{93}

Bowles’ inflammatory memo was accidentally leaked to the press, prompting an outcry from the federal agencies it accused of practicing discrimination.\textsuperscript{94} Bowles then drafted a more generic, politically benign letter that he authorized for release to the public. Bowles apologized and rescinded his comments by sending separate, personal apologies to the head of every agency mentioned in his letter.\textsuperscript{95} CAA Chief T.P. Wright’s response to Bowles’ apology reveals the

\textsuperscript{92} While scant data exists to definitively corroborate the phenomena, it is likely given the milieu of socio-economic political factors surrounding black employment that a disproportionate number of black employees – especially those in menial positions – were “reduced-in-force” disproportionately in contrast to white employees. An OPA report issued after war details how from the period of November, 1945 to March, 1946, the number of negro attorneys associated with price, rationing and enforcement was only reduced from 9 to 6, whereas negro stenographers, typists, clerks went down from 891 to 501. See “Analysis of Reports on Negro Employment in All Field Offices as of November 30, 1945,” Record Group 188, Office of the Price Administration, General Records, NARA.

\textsuperscript{93} “Letter from Chester Bowles to Commissioner Arthur S. Flemming,” December 3, 1945, Record Group 188, Office of the Price Administration, General Records, NARA.

\textsuperscript{94} While there is no data or evidence establishing the source of the leak, it is fascinating to speculate over the possibility that said leak came from a lower-level black employee who maximized their leverage to exert pressure for larger social change.

\textsuperscript{95} “Letter from Frieda Sucher to Chester Bowles,” January 5, 1946, Record Group 188, Office of the Price Administration, General Records, NARA. In a private move suggesting Bowles’ belief in the veracity of his initial criticism that he since publicly backpedaled from, a month later he instructed his administrative assistant, Frances Williams to take an informal poll to gauge additional reaction towards his original memorandum. The “Negro public” opined that Bowles’ memo “lifted my spirits” and “spoke when no else would.” For the “section of the white public I know,” Ms. Williams informed they thought, “It is just what I expected from Bowles.” In contrast, officials within OPA found the memo “unfortunate,” “crazy” and an example of “bad timing.” See “Memorandum from
understandable desire to avoid appearing discriminatory, despite data suggesting otherwise. Wright clarified for Bowles that the alleged discriminatory CAA act “was not made by the Personnel Office of the Civil Aeronautics Administration, but by the Personnel Office of another Federal agency. It is indeed unfortunate that the CAA was erroneously mentioned in your letter.”96 Tellingly, Wright’s letter did not confront the discriminatory conduct carried out by another federal agency nor did it condemn the incident’s occurrence under federal auspices. Rather the letter sought exculpation for the CAA’s inter-agency reputation, and to protect it from being unfairly impugned any further.

These bureaucratic barriers meant that many black federal employees remained largely unprotected from blatant acts of discrimination by their white co-workers. White workers were loath to incriminate one another, especially in a culture where it was still acceptable to openly disparage blacks, both individually and collectively. The normalcy of black devaluation is evident in the case of War Department employee Jessica Valentine. In 1945, Valentine complained to the local NAACP branch after unsuccessfully pursuing resolution of her discrimination complaint through her own agency’s chain of command. Valentine, a Junior Statistical Clerk and the only black worker in her group, testified that she “never was warmly received by the group, but I always exchanged greetings with them, and I endeavored to work harmoniously with them, with a detached and business-like attitude.” Despite her attitude, her fellow workers and her immediate supervisor freely used the epithet “nigger” and sang the song

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96 “Letter from T.P. Wright to Chester Bowles,” December 29, 1945, Record Group 188, Office of the Price Administration, General Records, NARA.

97 Frances Williams RE: Reactions to Publications of Your Letters to Flemming and Niles Regarding Discrimination Against Employment of Negroes by Federal Agencies,” January 5, 1946, Record Group 188, Office of the Price Administration, General Records, NARA.
“catch a nigger by the toe,” laughing repeatedly as they did so. No disciplinary action occurred, and the uniformed head of her section told her that she was “too sensitive,” while the head of personnel, a Captain Weir, “immediately began to relate some anecdotes to me about Negroes that he once knew who have been called ‘nigger’ and how they ignored it…. Captain Weir then said that if I felt that I was being discriminated against, and could not get along, the thing for me to do was to resign, because ‘he could not fire anyone.’” The War Department doubly victimized Valentine: initially with the offending behavior and secondarily by the bureaucracy’s refusal to recognize her grievance.

As more federal agencies hired more black employees in the wartime city, the struggle between the “theory” and “practice” of racial equality only grew more complex because blacks had access to a newfound federal job market with a wide range of economic – and by association – political implications for their roles within the larger American society. Overall, black federal employees were unprepared for the new variety of physical, economic and bureaucratic barriers they had to confront.

**D.C. AND BOGGESS BOTH CHANGE**

After the war, Dorothy Boggess left the War Department and enrolled in Howard University’s School of Social Work to continue the studies she initially abandoned after joining the war effort. Upon completion of her studies, Boggess successfully pursued a career in the health services industry – still within the public rather than the private sector – this time for the

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97 Jessica Valentine letter to NAACP Legal Branch, May 9, 1945, RNAACP.
local city government of Washington, D.C. Like many of the black female employees who stayed in Negro dormitories like Slowe Hall, she married a man also a federal worker; who she met while he was working at the Navy & Munitions Building.

The contrast between both Boggess’s story and that of Jane Meredith in “Jane’s Journal” reflects a larger dynamic at play during a vital period in modern American history. Much as the Statue of Liberty symbolized hope for incoming immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, the Capitol building symbolized both opportunity and security to blacks migrating to Washington, D.C.

Officials in the federal government were keenly aware of this hope for real freedom. The War Department, for example, used the image of black Pearl Harbor hero Dorie Miller on recruiting posters directed at African-Americans. Miller, a Navy cook who manned a machine gun during the chaos of the surprise attack, may have shot down a Japanese plane, and received the Navy Cross for his bravery. However, the War Department neglected to mention that blacks were more likely to remain restricted to kitchen duty or other service jobs rather than see live action with any artillery or heavy machinery.98

Miller’s hope was widespread; after sustaining personal sacrifice and traveling a great distance and agreeing to work for the federal government, more black workers were eager to start a new life of public service on their own terms. Despite mainstream, private sector society legally oppressing and consistently constraining economic opportunities for blacks, black workers were nonetheless free to join the federal ranks. They shared the righteous indignation of

NAACP president Walter White who declared, in 1940: “It’s our country, too.” During wartime, initial eagerness for employment would slowly evolve into the expectation of enjoying full equality on the job as the number of black collar workers continued to grow.

Gainfully employed black federal workers differed significantly from their counterparts in the private sector. While some black federal workers performed specific tasks that emulated blue collar or service positions in private industry (e.g., operating press machines for the Government Printing Office or mowing lawns for the Department of Interior), the larger federal employment structure provided a more transparent and tangible system for career development and advancement. In short, while a committed steel worker had likely few employment options outside of the steel mill, a federal worker had several agencies where he or she could make lateral or upward movements based upon performance and opportunity.

Whereby auto and steel workers were adjuncts to the machinery that kept their large corporations running, black government workers gained an additional measure of esteem for they both literally and figuratively represented the face of the American government. This additional esteem, while difficult to measure in monetary terms, nonetheless had value in a Jim Crow world that rarely affirmed the competency and capability of black workers.

World War II provided a new window of economic opportunity for many blacks migrating to Washington, D.C. in search of work. However, Jim Crow practices continued during war, and the federal government maintained mostly segregated workspaces for the new black workers it welcomed on the job. Arguably, the government’s most significant step toward racial equality since Reconstruction occurred on June 25, 1941 when President Franklin D.

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Roosevelt signed Executive Order (E.O.) 8802, which called for dismantling racial barriers within the defense contracting industry. President Roosevelt promulgated E.O. 8802 in response to black labor activist A. Phillip Randolph’s plan to stage a march and rally on the Washington Mall to protest the exclusion of black workers from defense jobs.100 Randolph’s efforts to advocate for black labor in the private sector also gave black workers in the public sector an important new legal weapon to improve their status. After Randolph agreed to call off the march, E.O. 8802 also fostered the formation of the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) to administer the unprecedented executive order. E.O. 8802 affected the day-to-day working conditions of a few workers like Boggess, but it did create the first official federal mechanism to track and monitor discrimination on the job. Placed under the War Manpower Commission in 1942, it lacked powers of enforcement or investigation and dissolved four years later. Still, its existence – and weakness – underscored the need for additional resources to effectively combat the very disparities contemplated with the FEPC’s creation.101

The historical record reflects government acknowledgment of racial discrimination as a labor problem as early as 1941. Yet, effective solutions to discriminatory treatment initially lacked centralization and consistent application. Even the left-leaning OPA, which amassed a better anti-discrimination track record than most agencies, still did not stray far from the majority of agencies that aggregated most black workers in the unskilled, lowest ranks with the lowest wages. OPA administrators like Everett Reimer acknowledged the confluence of events that

101 “During the first year [FEPC] hearings involving forty-nine industries, unions, and defense training programs were conducted in Los Angeles, Washington, Chicago, New York, and Birmingham” and “served to confirm the allegation that discrimination was rampant in war industry. Seventy-five per cent of these early cases involved Negroes.” Louis Coleridge Kesselman, The Social Politics of FEPC: A Study in Reform Pressure Movements, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1948), 16.
contributed to black federal employment rather than the singular inspiration of altruistic racial justice: “The war, the labor market, the nature of the program, the way the agency got started, and the way it grew, the fact that it was a new agency; all these contributed to the results achieved.”

If the factors Reimer listed were necessary to provide a few black workers with working conditions only slightly better than the average black federal worker, which were arguably better than those of the average black domestic or agricultural employee, then such conditions spoke volumes about the low quality and quantity of working opportunities for black workers within the private sector.

During WWII, black federal workers came to the nation’s capital and were rewarded with stable work that provided more promise of a future career than did most private sector jobs. In 1944, Maurice A. Gersing of the Columbia Heights Improvement Association told the Senate District Committee that most blacks in Washington, D.C. “are newcomers who came here because they were told they could get good jobs, high wages and they should clean up while the cleaning is good and then go home.”

Gersing’s succinct analysis accurately describes the scenario surrounding many incoming blacks that literally changed the complexion of the federal workforce during a time of wartime need. Yet, Gersing and the federal government were still unclear about what changes lay ahead as many emigrating blacks decided against “going home” and stayed in the area looking to call Washington, D.C. their new sanctuary.

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102 Letter from Office of Price Administration Director of Personnel, Everett W. Reimer to Robert K. Carr, Executive Secretary of PCCR, May 27, 1947, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.

CHAPTER TWO

“AND THEN RUN”: THE ACHIEVEMENT AND LIMITS OF COMMISSIONS TO STUDY DISCRIMINATION IN THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE, 1945-1948

RETURNING TO WORK

After WWII, white veterans returned to Washington, D.C. expecting to reclaim their jobs. Conversely, black workers (women in particular) wondered whether they would have to return to the domestic jobs they held before the war now that many white veterans wanted their jobs back. While the influx of white veterans in the labor pool threatened black workers’ job security, overall black presence in the federal government was secure. Blacks grew to become a permanent part of the federal workforce.

While the government benefitted from this new source of relatively inexpensive labor, the government still had to pay a steep social price for black federal workers. The significant additions of black employees during the war forced the federal government to manage a more racially diverse workforce of men and women who lived in a racially divided society outside of work. Thus, many white workers saw integrated workspaces as an interruption of the “normal” social and working relations they had known before the war.1 It was especially disorienting for

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1 Additionally, the indelible image of blacks operating primarily within a service capacity was reinforced and reflected in mainstream popular culture. A 20-year study conducted by the Graduate School of Business Administration at UCLA noted that in 1946, the overwhelming majority of blacks depicted in mainstream commercial advertisements “were depicted in the ads as having laborer or service jobs: maid, waiter, slave, field hand, personal servant, the Aunt Jemima, or the Uncle Tom. The higher status occupations (including police and firemen) shown in the ads constituted three percent of the American Negroes.” Harold H. Kassarjian, “The Negro and American Advertising, 1946-1965,” Journal of Marketing Research 6, no. 1 (Feb., 1969), 35. In recognition of the paucity of visible black professionals, it is not wholly coincidental that soon after WWII ended, John H. Johnson began publishing Ebony Magazine in November, 1945. In so doing, Johnson wanted to show in “[w]ords and pictures, Black words and pictures, and a holistic presentation of the Black image, showing professionals and
Norah D. Stearns, a white editor with the U.S. Geological Survey, demonstrated the difficult social transition ahead for federal integrated workforces once the war concluded. In December 1945, she stated: “I have no doubt that most former domestics will go back to housework, but conditions must be changed. Intelligently-run housekeeping bureaus should be established to put domestic work on the same basis as industrial and governmental jobs.”

In commenting about postwar job contraction, Stearns argued that black female workers should leave the federal workplace and return to domestic labor. Stearns rationalized that such housework was still desirable – but only if elevated to the federal standard of prestige, stability and security to which black workers had become accustomed. She seemed not to consider that a fellow female employee might resist having to scrub floors and wash clothes after having tasted the fruits of white-collar labor.

Stearns’ comment also revealed another troubling development for black federal workers. Once WWII ended, the value of black federal workers decreased dramatically in the eyes of many white administrators. While those administrators had counted on black workers during dire times, the need for them quickly dissipated in peacetime. Many black workers found they were the last hired and the first fired as the federal government downsized from its peak wartime levels; black workers found it especially difficult to keep their jobs, find lateral transfers or land new jobs altogether.


One year into the postwar era, for example, Neil Dalton, a senior official in the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), posited that the absence of blacks in employment was more than mere coincidence: “From the results to date in regard to the employment of Negroes, it would seem that the search for qualified members of minority groups had proceeded neither positively nor vigorously.”

To rectify the absence of black federal workers in higher paying positions, agencies like the FHA took the proactive step of mailing weekly Personnel Division listings directly to local civic organizations such as the NAACP, National Council of Negro Women, and the National Urban League. While these organizations never guaranteed results, government officials often saw the membership of a black worker in one of them as evidence of the personal stability required for a career as a federal professional.

Similarly, the federal government tried to understand the full scope and nature of the racial problem in its agencies to gain a handle on how much larger it might become. Recognizing that black workers had become a permanent segment of the federal workforce in Washington, D.C., the government initiated investigations into the state of race relations, paying particular attention to how racial disparities affected its own workforce.

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3 General Correspondence with Government Departments and Agencies, Memorandum from Neil Dalton, Deputy Expediter (Field Operations) of FHA to All Regional Expediters on September 5, 1946, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.

4 In one instance, FHA Director of Personnel Edward A. Macy lamented that of the four direct referrals received from the NAACP, three black candidates spurned federal offers to work for the private sector. While existing documents do not shed light on the precise reason for the job refusal, one can presume that if workers were marketable to the federal government, they were likely equally if not more marketable within the private sector. For those rare few blacks who pushed through to higher levels of education, often a premium was placed on their unique and rare status and their exceptional credentials often shielded the more common racist vitriol experienced towards the bottom of the totem pole. Letter of Edward A. Macy, Director of Personnel to Lewis E. Williams, Director of Administrative Operations Branch, September 18, 1946, 2, Part 12, RG 220, RPCCR.
RETURNING TO PEACETIME

In contrast to Dorothy Boggess’ journey to Washington, D.C. in search of federal employment at the beginning of WWII, Dr. Robert C. Weaver left both his federal job and the nation’s capital towards the end of the war. Yet, while the gender, timing and employment status of Boggess and Weaver differ, Weaver’s story is just as informative as Boggess’ in revealing the working conditions black federal employees faced and why the government decided to study the matter of racial discrimination further. Dr. Weaver’s story is also significant because unlike Boggess, he did not have to start his federal career from the bottom of the political hierarchy with an entry-level job.

A Washington, D.C. native and Dunbar High School graduate, Weaver became a rare, high-ranking black federal employee who represented the empowering possibilities of government employment. Having earned a Ph.D. at Harvard University in economics, Weaver saw his Directorship of Minority Group Services with the War Manpower Commission as a viable means of implementing change for other black Americans. Yet, Weaver’s education, experience and training failed to fully protect him from the sting of black collar treatment. Dr. Weaver felt that too much theorizing stood in the way of effective policies to increase job and housing opportunities beneficial to black Americans. His chief complaint was the lack of authority to perform his job. In early 1944, despite working for the federal government in a high-ranking, high-powered position for eight years, Weaver resigned in frustration over his
“administrative impotence.” Weaver’s resignation signaled that, despite his numerous attempts to change federal employment policy, change, even in the higher ranks, was slow in coming. Weaver left his government office to write *Negro Ghetto*, a book that outlined his thoughts on why black poverty was unique and so difficult to overcome. Although, Weaver felt that, while he worked for the government, he was “enmeshed in a maze or irrelevant and unimportant functions,” he nonetheless saw it as a key source of jobs for the black community. Yet, he wanted to make sure such jobs would continue to be available, and increase in peacetime as well as during wars.\(^5\)

Once the war ended, how to deal with thousands of new black federal workers now looking for long-term careers was a growing concern for the federal government.\(^6\) A few months before the Japanese surrender, 41,556 blacks constituted nearly one-fifth of the entire federal workforce in Washington – quite remarkable in view of a 1940 total black population of 187,266 (22%).\(^8\) With such a dramatic demographic shift in such a short period, the federal government had to understand quickly what potential problems might arise and what solutions were feasible for all parties involved. In September, 1945, Agnes E. Meyer, wife of the editor and publisher of *Washington Post* Eugene Meyer, warned the Washington Council of Church Women that the, “adjustment of the migrant war workers and the absorption of the returned veteran by the local community” called for a highly coordinated effort between federal and local

\(^6\) Chamberlin, *Victory at Home*, 113.
agencies. Mrs. Meyer’s motivation was to “prevent acute and widespread hardship…especially of Negroes.”

Her observations were indeed prescient. After WWII, black federal workers were “affected two and one-half times as severely as white workers” by unemployment since so many had held service positions that only lasted for the duration of the war. Before many agencies rescinded their temporary war service positions, the federal government assisted as many workers as possible with lateral transfers to perform similar work with agencies that had survived the war. However, black federal employees disproportionately failed to obtain transfers or permanent employment elsewhere.

Research by local Washington, D.C. unions and civic organizations showed that in the aftermath of WWII, agencies such as the Department of Labor and Department of Commerce explicitly stated, “that they have clerical positions for white workers but not for Negroes.” Even the United States Employment Service (USES), although expressly responsible for making fair job placements for all eligible applicants, maintained, “separate interview units for black and white workers, kept separate files of job applicants, and on request, referred applicants to

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employers on the basis of race.”

Hence, a return to peacetime also meant, at least at first, a return to Jim Crow traditions that stifled black workers’ opportunities and clouded their once bright future.

**EARLY ATTEMPTS TO ADDRESS INEQUITY**

*Not Much to See*

After the war, initial attempts to confront racial disparities within the federal government yielded inconsistent results. High concentrations of blacks in low-level positions coupled with a dearth of high-ranking black employees with seniority only disadvantaged black employees further, as few blacks had the ability to influence grievance mechanisms within the workplace.

Investigatory mechanisms often lacked binding power. Exacerbating matters was the general lack of agreement on what constituted a discriminatory act. Virtually every federal agency had its own agency head with a different philosophy as to what constituted discrimination.

For instance, in November of 1945, Oliver Short, Director of Personnel for the Department of Commerce wrote “very few cases of alleged discrimination have come to my attention during the past few years.” In a memorandum to other heads of bureaus and offices

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14 Historian Jesse Thomas Moore, Jr. notes that of the “nearly 300,000 Negro government employees in 1945, approximately 70 percent were in unclassified positions.” Agencies such as the Public Health Service, the International Bank, the Patent Office, the Federal Security Agency, and others, publicly acknowledged that they did not employ Negroes except as cafeteria workers or porters. The NUL and other organizations chided the President for allowing federal agencies to engage in such racial discrimination. Jesse Thomas Moore, Jr., *A Search for Equality: The National Urban League, 1910-1961* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981), 133.
within the department, Short counseled “to maintain this good record during the current [postwar] readjustment period we must carefully avoid actions that might be construed as violations of this policy.” His statement emphasizes the superficial appearance of a good record, and suggests avoidance as a strategy for solving discrimination.

Additionally, Short’s self-assessment of a “good record” exhibits curious logic – just because he was unaware of a racial complaint, he assumed that none existed.\(^\text{15}\) The consequence of a decentralized anti-discrimination protocol at the agency level meant that agency heads and supervisors had wide latitude to define discrimination. For example, in 1946 when the Civil Service Commission (CSC) conducted an investigation of all federal agencies in Washington, it found race discrimination proven in only fifty-eight of the 1,871 cases it investigated, a rate of just three percent.\(^\text{16}\)

*Truman takes Action*

Unlike many agency heads, President Harry S. Truman did show an interest in substantively improving racial relations through taking concrete actions. Truman saw better race relations as part of the “fair deal” he promised Americans. Or, perhaps the mounting evidence and pressure for action became too difficult to ignore. For example, on December 17, 1945, FEPC Chairman Malcolm Ross reported several instances where federal agents violated federal

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\(^{15}\) “Open Memorandum from Oliver C. Short, Director of Personnel Department of Commerce, to Heads of Bureaus and Offices,” November 9, 1945, Part 12, RG 220, RPCCR.

\(^{16}\) For example, in 1946 when the Civil Service Commission (CSC) conducted an investigation of all federal agencies in Washington, D.C., it announced it found race discrimination proven in only fifty-eight of the 1,871 cases it investigated, which only amounted to a three percent finding rate. See Rung, 168; Samuel Krislov, *The Negro in Federal Employment: The Quest for Equal Opportunity* (St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1967), 34.
policies against discrimination. Recognizing the dual problem of job cutbacks and discrimination, Truman responded the following day by: 1) signing Executive Order 9664 extending the life of the FEPC by six months until June, 1946 and 2) issuing an anti-discriminatory directive to all federal agency heads.\textsuperscript{17}

The President remarked, “it has come to my attention that a considerable number of loyal and qualified employees have been refused transfer and reemployment by employing agencies solely because of race and creed.”\textsuperscript{18} Yet, in the government’s nascent stages of addressing internal discrimination, Truman had to walk a fine line; he chose not to ignore an important issue but did not yet confront it directly. His tone was far from forceful: “I am writing to request that you make careful analysis of your personnel policies, procedures and practices in order that you can assure me that they are in accord with national law and policy.”\textsuperscript{19} Rather than unilaterally impose a new federal policy, Truman suggested the desired conduct (“I am writing to request that you make careful analysis…”). Although weak and inconsistent policies frustrated early attempts to combat discrimination, racial equity nonetheless remained on Truman’s mind and would be the subject of further federal study.

Yet, ironically, addressing discrimination in the federal workplace may have become more difficult with the introduction of anti-discrimination rhetoric; more finite language only made identifying discrimination a more nuanced process. Thus, while Truman’s December 1945 directive to stop racial discrimination was simple enough to comprehend and follow, federal

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
correspondence illustrates the practical frustration of executing Truman’s commands. For example, roughly a month after Truman issued his directive, four black women in Washington applied for federal employment. The Department of Agriculture rejected all four, but mistakenly mailed back to one all the applications with an internal memorandum attached: “Attached are the applications I talked to you about. Except for color – they look like good girls.” The letter failed to offer any other explanation; the reference to race as the reason for rejection suggested a casual tolerance of discrimination that would require more than one presidential directive to eradicate.

Existing anti-discrimination regulations did not help these women because they were not yet federal employees. But the United Public Workers Association (UPWA) learned of the incident and argued, fruitlessly, that the rejections were racially discriminatory. Were it not for an administrative error that revealed the ugly truth, the Department of Agriculture might have persuaded the rejected applicants that race was irrelevant in the hiring decision. What remains unknown is how often agencies denied they were discriminating against black workers while contradicting themselves within internal or informal messages not currently part of or discoverable in the public record.

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20 The rejection note was dated January 27, 1946. “Testimony on Racial Discrimination in Government Agencies before Subcommittee of President’s Committee on Civil Rights by Thomas Richardson, International Vice-President, United Public Workers, CIO,” April 2, 1947, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
The federal ideal of workplace equity appeared very different when practiced locally and regionally. In some cases, agencies deferred to local Jim Crow laws despite federal mandates that should have made them unenforceable. For instance, in 1947, Veterans Administration official policy was “to hospitalize all veterans without discrimination in the same institutions.... The only exceptions made to this policy are dictated by the local custom of the community in which the hospital is located and from which it draws the larger part of its patients.”

Similarly, institutional discrimination at federal work sites such as the Washington National Airport continued to fly under the radar because of a 1945 District of Columbia-Virginia boundary bill subjecting the National Airport to Virginia’s criminal code and consequently, to Virginia’s Jim Crow statutes. Although black National Airport employees worked for the federal government, they too, as black collar workers suffered the humiliation of having to use separate and inferior toilet facilities on the job. Additionally, blacks working for the airport avoided patronizing the coffee shop or restaurant at the facility to shelter them from rebuke or abuse.

Recognizing the gap between federal policy and local practice, Department of Commerce Solicitor Harold Young lamented in 1947: “we are in thorough disagreement with the wisdom

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21 For a thorough treatment of how a federal ideal was manipulated on local levels, see Ira Kaztnelson’s discussion of the G.I. Bill in When Affirmative Action was White (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005).
22 Memorandum from Mr. Stewart to Mr. Murtha, “Veterans’ Administration Report,” April 23, 1947, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
and propriety of this [discriminatory] practice, but we do not have the authority to compel the company operating the restaurants to ignore or violate the laws of the State of Virginia.” As the National Urban League concluded, ”there are many [federal agencies] in which discrimination in the employment of Negroes is widely practiced, although its national policy distinctly forbids such discrimination.”

**STUDYING THE PROBLEM FURTHER**

Despite President Truman’s demand that government agencies eliminate internal discrimination, inequities within the federal workplace persisted. His next response was to investigate why. Truman had the foresight to know that tangible data more easily facilitated substantive changes in racial policy. He therefore authorized the President’s Committee on Civil Rights (PCCR) through Executive Order 9808 on December 5, 1946. The Committee’s central task was to gather data about civil rights generally and to produce a final report focusing upon workplace relations.

The PCCR consisted of fifteen members in various professions ranging in background from corporate (e.g., Charles Edward Wilson, President of General Electric) to academic (e.g., John S. Dickey, President of Dartmouth College) to legal (e.g., Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., an attorney in private practice). Since the full committee seldom met face-to-face during the year

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25 “Civil Liberties Implications of the Employment, Housing, and Social Adjustment Problems of Minorities: Statement to the President’s Committee on Civil Liberties,” April 1, 1947, General Correspondence with Government Departments and Agencies, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.

26 At the time FDR Jr. was appointed, he was engaged in private practice and according to his Congressional biography, did not begin his political career in earnest until after his PCCR appointment.
it existed, and telephone conferences were expensive and impractical, its Executive Secretary Dr. Robert K. Carr bore the brunt of the Committee’s labor. A government professor at Dartmouth, Carr was primarily responsible for soliciting and cataloging all of the report’s data. Out of the sixteen PCCR members, there were only two African-Americans: lawyer and civil rights advocate Mrs. Sadie T. Alexander and religious youth worker Dr. Channing Tobias.

The Constitutional responsibility and symbolic function of the federal government for all workers, both private and public became dominant themes guiding the Committee’s work. Carr reminded every PCCR members that “in its race relations practices, Washington is almost a southern city…because it is a border city in which the patterns of the North and South meet, what finally emerges in Washington will be of major significance in any attempt to rebuild the structure of group relations throughout the nation.” Carr thought it was “too obvious to require elaboration that the District of Columbia is the federal government’s show case, both for Americans and for the representatives of the other countries of the world.”

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27 As with any committee, levels of participation varied from the irritated and mildly disinterested (Letter, John S. Dickey to Robert K. Carr, May 12, 1947, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR: “I am still by no means clear how much longer I am going to be able to stay with this assignment. Just since getting back several extremely important and demanding responsibilities have come up and I am now at a point where something has got to give and, as Miss Cleveland adds, I should much prefer that it was not myself.”) to the exacting and serious (Letter from Boris Shiskin to Robert K. Carr, May 29, 1947, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR: “Inasmuch as the taking of the oath of office by the Committee was suggested by me, I would like to take this opportunity to express my disappointment in the form of the oath administered to the Committee.”).

28 PCCR Committee Members: Charles E. Wilson, Chairman (President, General Electric); John S. Dickey, Vice Chairman (President, Dartmouth College); Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., Vice Chairman, (lawyer); Mrs. Sadie T. Alexander (lawyer); James B. Carey (Secretary-Treasurer CIO); Morris L. Ernst (lawyer); Roland B. Gittelsohn (Rabbi); Dr. Frank P. Graham (President, Univ. N. Carolina); Most Rev. Francis J. Haas (Bishop); Charles Luckman (President, Lever Brothers Company); Francis P. Matthews (lawyer); Rt. Rev. Henry Knox Sherrill (Bishop); Boris Shishkin (Economist, AFL); Mrs. M.E. Tilly (Field Sec’y, Southern Regional Council); Channing H. Tobias (Director, Phelps-Stokes Fund).

29 “Memorandum, to the President’s Committee from Robert K. Carr RE: Background Statement of Civil Rights in the District of Columbia, prepared by Milton Stewart and Rachel Sady,” April 24, 1947, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
The National Committee on Segregation in the Nation’s Capital (NCSNC), an independent local research group formed in the fall of 1946 to study the prevalence of Jim Crow discrimination specifically in Washington, D.C. joined the PCCR in seeking and developing data about racial disparities. The NCSNC was part of a growing liberal consensus that defined “rights” and “access” as new battlegrounds for social activists. Serving on its Executive Committee were such national luminaries as FDR’s first “Black Cabinet member,” Robert C. Weaver, NAACP lawyer Charles Hamilton Houston, the renowned black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. The chief architect of the National Committee was white liberal philanthropist Edwin Embree. With additional funding from the Rosenwald Fund, Embree persuaded over 100 leaders of national stature and diverse racial backgrounds to serve on the committee and conduct an exhaustive study on discrimination within the capital of American democracy.  

Both investigatory bodies issued seminal reports before they disbanded; the Presidential Committee released *To Secure These Rights* in December 1947 while the National Committee released its report on *Segregation in the Nation’s Capital* a year later. Together, both reports helped flesh out the nature and extent of racial discrimination within the federal government.

*To Secure These Rights*

The Presidential Committee’s report, *To Secure These Rights*, was broad in scope and touched upon several key dimensions of race relations in the United States. As part of the

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30 Not all national leaders were black as key founding white members included Edwin Embree, Louis Wirth and Marshal Field. Strategically to maximize exposure and influence, the 100 national leaders were diverse in character, pedigree and race. Wendell E. Pritchett, “A National Issue: Segregation in the District of Columbia and the Civil Rights Movement at Mid-Century,” *Georgetown Law Journal* 93, no. 4 (Apr. 2005): 1326.
process, the committee collected revealing data about black federal workers in Washington, D.C. It found that although more blacks had obtained “good jobs” during wartime, such employment did little to reduce workplace discrimination in the postwar era. While the government provided a wider range of jobs and more white-collar ones than in the private sector, most black workers were still “ghettoized” within the federal workforce. They remained in the lowest pay grades, performed menial tasks, and advanced less frequently than did their white colleagues. For example, although the Veterans Administration increased its black hiring nearly five-fold to 2,907 by the end of WWII, “over 70% of the Negroes in the Veterans Administration were nonetheless in clerical jobs.”  

Hoping to gain a large and receptive audience, the Presidential Committee issued a 178-page report that was quite conciliatory in tone and had the blessing of the White House. In contrast, the National Urban League (NUL) conducted an exhaustive 1946 study on racial relations at the workplace, which came to similar conclusions found in the Truman report. The NUL report received scant attention and the mainstream media largely ignored it. Nonetheless, the Presidential Committee’s report influenced President Truman to issue Executive Orders 9980 and 9981, which desegregated the federal workforce and the armed forces respectively in July of 1948.

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31 Ibid.
32 E.g., in noting that about a fourth of all FEPC complaints were against the federal government, the Committee merely questioned “the effectiveness of the Civil Service Commission rules against such discrimination.” President’s Committee on Civil Rights, To Secure These Rights, 58.
33 “The Negro group is relegated to lower occupational levels and is concentrated largely in the unskilled labor groups, less technical jobs, and in minor clerical occupations.” National Urban League Staff Report on Racial Relations, RNUL.
In contrast to the broader national scope of the Presidential Committee’s report, the National Committee report was more specific to Washington, D.C. As an independent body, the National Committee could be more critical of the state of racial affairs in its stinging, ninety-one page report. It concluded, “the segregation of Negroes (in Washington) is worse than it was 60 years ago.” And the report had at least one clear success: just days after it was released in December 1948, the Civilian Aeronautics Administration unexpectedly and abandoned its strict segregationist policy at Washington National Airport.

In its findings, the National Committee outlined three levels of black employment within the federal government based upon models of exclusion, segregation and integration. The committee cited such federal agencies as the State Department, Justice Department, Bureau of the Budget, Federal Trade Commission and Federal Reserve Board for exclusionary tactics in which hired blacks obtained placement only in menial jobs that whites refused to accept.

The National Committee cited agencies such as the Census Bureau, the Government Printing Office and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing for operating a segregation model that employed blacks but isolated them in separate units performing the most routine of jobs. One

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35 Observed discrimination at the National Airport was discontinued in 1948 just days after the National Committee on Segregation in the Nation’s Capital released a stinging national report and not coincidentally, just days before a segregation lawsuit on the matter was to be heard. See Richard L. Lyons, “Segregation Ended at Airport,” *Washington Post*, January 5, 1949.
noteworthy example of continued physical, racial separation included the discovery that the Veterans Administration had “segregated a number of colored employees on a floor below the sub-basement in its main Washington office where there is poor ventilation and trouble with rats.”

Lastly, the Office of Price Administration and the National War Labor Board had official integrationist policies that held jobs open to blacks at all levels on equal terms. Yet, such agencies were extremely rare, and both were temporary, wartime phenomena. Further, as the previous chapter made clear, the OPA still exhibited internal inconsistencies in the promotion and tenure of black federal employees.

Whereas the Presidential Committee consulted with numerous individuals and organizations nationwide, the National Committee had a narrower focus, drawing much of its information from local branches of the NAACP. The NAACP had actually done its own research, canvassing 200 federal agencies and detailing thousands of individual cases, before beginning this cooperative relationship. But its report, like that of the Union League, had failed to reach a wide audience. The NAACP had noted ominously, “Thousands of others escaped attention because the bewildered victims of discrimination do not know where to turn for assistance.”

Early Findings

Both reports revealed that government action effectively reduced employment discrimination during wartime, but that the end of the war eroded many black wartime gains. One harrowing example came from the Navy Department. In 1946, a Navy interviewer initially refused a black applicant because he “was told by the Navy interviewer that he had to be a permanent status employee,” as opposed to a contract or term worker without a full-time job in hand. Undaunted, the applicant-produced papers showing he had obtained permanent status, only to be told that, “the job was for a veteran.” After the applicant indicated that he was a veteran, he “was told that disabled veterans were preferred.” Finally, when the Navy Department applicant produced “evidence of his status as a ten-point veteran, he was told that the Department had enough applicants for the openings. A check with the Civil Service Commission several days later revealed that the orders were still open.” At every step of the way, the candidate met the stated requirements, only to learn about a “new” requirement that he failed to satisfy. In these small, underreported spaces, black collar workers often paid a high price – both materially and psychologically.

40 Again, black advocates were a step ahead in diagnosing the problem that affected them directly. Staunch labor advocate, NAACP Labor Secretary Clarence Mitchell noted as much when he championed unsuccessfully in early 1947 for a separate agency to prevent discrimination in federal employment. Mitchell explained to NAACP Secretary Walter White: “Approximately 85% of all colored workers in government during the war were employed by emergency agencies. This means that 73.1% of all colored workers in the CAF classifications and 69% of all colored professional workers were in this group. Even if there was no discrimination against them because of race, curtailment of wartime activities would mean that practically all of the [wartime] gains of colored workers in government would be wiped out.” Memorandum from Clarence Mitchell to Walter White, RE: “Proposed Agency against Discrimination in Federal Employment,” April 9, 1947, Part II: B88, RNAACP.

41 Ibid.
In 1946, *Washington Star* journalist Joseph Young summarized the dilemma of being a black collar worker in Washington, D.C. during the postwar era. He wrote that federal wages stacked up poorly when comparing raises for upper level professional positions and made more economic sense for lower level positions. Analyzing the relative growth in salary for those federal employees within the lower brackets, Young found that if one was already at or near the bottom of existing income levels, government jobs likely provided “greater salaries than employees (sic) doing comparable work in private industry.”42 But upper-level private sector professional jobs, which had no caps or limits on potential income, were more elusive to black workers – as were upper-level public sector jobs. Hence, the federal government mirrored the private sector by “ghettoizing,” or limiting the majority of its black workers to low wage positions, most performing manual labor.

**HOW THE COMMITTEES GATHERED DATA**

The Presidential and National Committees both asked federal agencies to supply information on barriers to racial equality. Agencies responded differently to these requests, their reactions reflecting how much of a priority it was to pursue a policy of anti-discrimination. Only a few agencies, such as the left-leaning OPA, responded fully and self-critically. More common was a tendency to avoid acknowledging racial disparities.

In response to a query, F.J. Lawton, Director of the Bureau of the Budget informed Dr. Carr of his desire to avoid racial conflict entirely. “The general pattern of the Bureau’s work is

not such as to bring its staff into direct contact with any of the problems which may have been encountered in carrying out policies concerning minority groups. Our experience, therefore, does not reveal any information which would be of value to the Committee.” Lawton’s response illustrated how some agencies stonewalled the President’s Committee, thereby frustrating the point of the enterprise.

The Department of State also minimized the extent of Jim Crow influence within its ranks and asserted that, “[w]e feel that we have met with more than an average amount of success in the realization of [non-discrimination within] this program.” State officials made this statement despite having less than one-fifth of 1% of blacks occupying all sub-professional and professional occupations (see Table 2.1). The Department of State was also one of the larger federal agencies, employing over 5,000 workers.

Similarly, the Veterans Administration responded that if it had data regarding the “employment of Negroes, we would be glad to comply with our request. We, however, have had a long established policy of non-discrimination and no data of this kind are kept.” Such policies made it difficult for black employees and their allies to come up with statistical evidence to back up the racism they knew existed.

Other agencies simply resisted the Presidential Committee’s inquiry; for example, the Department of Labor responded tersely by withholding minority employee data, but provided

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43 Letter from F.J. Lawton, Director, Bureau of the Budget, to Robert Carr, May 29, 1947, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
44 Letter from Walter K. Scott, Director, Office of Departmental Administration, Department of State to Robert K. Carr, May 20, 1947, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
45 Memorandum from Veterans Administration, August 18, 1947, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR. At the time, Southern states had stark black employment ratios (e.g., Louisiana = 4 black/1,500 total employees, Georgia = 7/5000), accounting for only .0002% of black veterans finding employment with the Veterans Administration in Southern states. Digest of Press Clippings in the Civil Rights Field, Memorandum from Robert Carr to Members of the PCCR, April 16, 1947, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
copies of their employee relations’ policies instead. Similarly, Keith Himebaugh of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), responding to a request for minority statistics, indicated: “As to your request for recommendations on use of our information programs for an educational campaign on civil rights…[t]he Department of Agriculture, of course, is not charged with enforcement, has no powers other than those legally assigned to it, and therefore could not participate in a civil rights educational campaign unless a legal basis were provided.” Himebaugh made a statistical inquiry a legal one, and equated Carr’s intentions with that of an “educational campaign on civil rights.” Himebaugh further underscored the necessity for a centralized mechanism with enforcement power by essentially daring the Presidential Committee to force his agency to comply in the absence of “a legal basis.”

Himebaugh’s hostile response only validated the apprehensions of NAACP Labor Secretary Clarence Mitchell, who earlier in 1947, lamented to Civil Service Commissioner Arthur Flemming, “I regret that, in far too many [racial grievance] cases, the heads of agencies are much more interested in explaining away discrimination than they are in correcting it.” And if Himebaugh were so defensive in response to a white official’s request for mere minority employment data, black federal workers with racial grievances were unlikely were to gain Himebaugh’s – or his agency’s – sympathy.

In the end, the Presidential Committee established that federal agencies consistently ghettoized black federal employees in Washington, D.C. across agency lines. The Committee

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46 Letter from Keith Himebaugh, Director of Information, USDA to Robert Carr, May 21, 1947, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
uncovered a systemic issue of institutional proportions that informed the very culture of federal employment itself. (See Table 2.1):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Negro (% of Total)</th>
<th>Sub/Professional (% of Negro)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department of Commerce</td>
<td>11,763</td>
<td>1,553 (13.2%)</td>
<td>135 (8.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Agriculture</td>
<td>8,440</td>
<td>695 (8.2%)</td>
<td>9 (1.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interstate Commerce Commission</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>97 (6.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of the Interior</td>
<td>3,326</td>
<td>277 (8.3%)</td>
<td>27 (9.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Accounting Office</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>814 (N/A)</td>
<td>28 (3.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>1,683</td>
<td>804 (47.7%)</td>
<td>18 (2.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departmental Service of the U.S. Tariff Commission</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>10 (3.3%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Service Commission</td>
<td>1,901</td>
<td>422 (22.1%)</td>
<td>5 (1.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Labor Relations Board</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>69 (19.7%)</td>
<td>2 (2.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Security Agency</td>
<td>4,346</td>
<td>931 (21.4%)</td>
<td>165 (17.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exec. Office of the President, Bureau of the Budget</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>25 (4.6%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Atomic Energy Commission</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>16 (6.2%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of State</td>
<td>5,202</td>
<td>552 (10.6%)</td>
<td>10 (1.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing and Home Finance Agency</td>
<td>586</td>
<td>29 (4.9%)</td>
<td>3 (10.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of Price Admin. (Nov. ‘45)</td>
<td>36,040</td>
<td>758 (2.1%)</td>
<td>105 (13.8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: All jobs are Clerical, Administrative and Fiscal Service (CAF) or Crafts, Protective and Custodial Service (CPC) unless otherwise indicated as Sub-professional or Professional.

OPA Director of Personnel Everett W. Reimer echoed and affirmed the limited trajectory for black collar workers when he responded to the Presidential Committee with a general pronouncement that “by the middle of ’42 there were 250 Negroes on the Washington staff. With few exceptions, however, they were in clerical or laborer jobs.” Reimer was forthright in describing his agency’s segregation practices when he relayed that most blacks “were concentrated in a few organizational areas, many worked in all Negro units,” and that “there were numerous large organization units with no Negroes.” Reimer referenced the OPA’s progress after WWII’s conclusion, noting there “had been a break in the dam, but non-discrimination had by no means been achieved.” While the OPA did lack a high overall percentage of black workers, it contained a higher percentage of black professionals in contrast to other federal agencies. Nonetheless, if OPA was one of the most forthright and candid agencies in addressing the issue of discrimination in federal employment, the prospects for black federal workers in other “old-line” agencies were less encouraging.

The OPA was unusual in its stance and leadership, and the Presidential Committee was aware of this fact. Accordingly, Carr quoted a 1947 article in Survey Graphic which explained that if one contrasted “the personnel practice of the Department of the Interior under Harold L. Ickes, or OPA under Leon Henderson and Chester Bowles, with the racialism of the tradition-bound Department of State, or with the paternalistic Department of Agriculture…you will find that a large area of administrative discretion actually exists.”

48 Letter from Office of Price Administration Director of Personnel, Everett W. Reimer to Robert K. Carr, Executive Secretary of PCCR, May 27, 1947, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
A few officials in other agencies did apologize for their low statistical showing, in part to avoid public exposure. Presidential Committee data gathering revealed that some agencies privately acknowledged inconsistencies between their actual personnel practices and the official, more egalitarian aims. For instance, Fletcher C. Waller, Director of Organization and Personnel for the Atomic Energy Commission, confessed to Dr. Carr that: “Our problem of staffing is peculiarly complex, and accordingly it is being resolved relatively slowly…. For this reason, we would prefer that you do not make it available to any other agency. The information does injustice to the non-discriminatory policies of the Atomic Energy Commission, and the increasing effectiveness with which they are being administered.”50 While Waller’s request acknowledged that black workers rarely secured professional positions, his wish to conceal unwelcome data only served the myth of non-discrimination.

EXPLAINING THE GAP

Lack of Education

Both reports from the Presidential Committee and the National Committee showed a paucity of black federal workers in higher-level positions. One real barrier to promotion was the lack of education. In 1945, on average, whites in the U.S. had three more years of schooling than did blacks.51 As a result, although upper-level jobs required a level of experience that many

50 Memorandum to Robert Carr, U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, August 22, 1947, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
black workers possessed, without proper education, black workers frequently missed landing the
requisite jobs that provided the additional experience necessary for advancement.

Yet, the black collar worker dynamic still operated for that small group of black federal employees who had earned a college degree. As Thomas Richardson, International Vice-President of United Public Workers of America observed: “The major sections of Government employment were lily-white, with the exception of custodial workers, many of whom were Negroes with Bachelor, Master and Ph.D. degrees.” While Richardson may have been exaggerating the problem to a degree, research from the National Committee demonstrated that inconsistent evaluation of black and white educational experiences was a bothersome issue. Table 2.2 shows that 86% of white college graduates worked at mid-level or professional grades. Conversely, 89% of black college graduates worked for the federal government in low-level or custodial grades:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Ranking</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% White</th>
<th>Total Negro</th>
<th>% Negro</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAF 5-15</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAF 2-4</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPC</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** CAF 5-15 = supervisory & administrative, CAF 2-4 = rank and file clerks, CPC = unclassified; CAF = Clerical, Administrative and Fiscal Service; CPC = Crafts, Protective and Custodial Service.

**Source:** Presidential Committee on Civil Rights, Memorandum from staff of NCSNC to Members of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, June 23, 1947, Box 7, RPCCR.

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Transcripts April 2, 1947, Proceedings of the PCCR Committee, Statement of Thomas Richardson, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
The presidential commission demonstrated this pattern of discrimination in a survey of unnamed federal agency. Out of about 3,000 employees, one-third was black and of the 472 college graduates, 104 were black. Yet, 89% of all black college graduates worked at the clerical rank or lower in stark contrast to 86% of their white colleagues with college degrees slotted within administrative, supervisory or professional jobs. While the authors noted that they did not “take into consideration work performance,” the numbers alone indicated “an unbalanced utilization in terms of educational qualifications.”

Another example from the State Department illustrates the “unbalanced utilization” of black collar workers. Sensitive to criticism for its failure to employ Negroes, the department asked for a “highly qualified colored college graduate” for a “responsible” position. The position, it turned out, was only that of a low-level mimeograph operator with a rating of CAF-3. Along these same lines, the State Department told a black applicant with a Bachelor’s of Science degree via telephone that she was “acceptable for a job as supervisor of a cafeteria in the Pentagon.” When her employers discovered she was black in the flesh, they told the applicant it was “against policy” to hire her. The following day, she saw another advertisement in the Washington Post for the same job. While the position advertised was the same, the ad specifically requested a white candidate. The NAACP intervened, and the black college graduate finally landed the job for which she originally applied. However, her “responsible” position

53 “Discrimination in Government Employment,” Memorandum from staff of NCSNC to Members of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, June 23, 1947, 7-8, General Correspondence with Government Departments and Agencies, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
consisted of an assignment to a snack bar “which had failed to pass War Department health inspection during [1946].”

Moreover, her immediate supervisor “did not inform persons working under her that the new employee was a supervisor.” At first, the white employees could not believe that “the newcomer had been hired for anything other than a counter job.” While most college graduates benefitted from a presumption of competency and respect, the frustrated black applicant mused that black employees were expressly instructed to call any white supervisor “Miss or Mrs., [while white employees] were told they could call the colored supervisor ‘anything.’” Hence, even for black college graduates, education in and of itself was an imperfect barrier to black collar worker treatment.

Lack of Experience

The PCCR and NCSNC reports merely made tangible what many black federal workers had long experienced on the job. However, given the correlation between low levels of education and placement within lower-level positions, many black federal workers had the additional burden of working with less seniority and so were commonly the first to lose their jobs. Given the precarious financial state of many blacks before they had secured federal employment, such premature job loss was especially difficult to endure. Few agencies recognized this problem. In 1946, an administrative assistant at the Civilian Personnel Office’s

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55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 National Urban League Staff Report on Racial Relations, RNUL.
Employee Relations Section observed that, “Most Negroes fall into the lower income levels, consequently many of their problems are of a financial nature, and that is why we have set up an Employe (sic) Relations Loan Fund.” This initiative, despite its noble intentions, still failed to address the question of why wage disparities existed in the first place.

Nonetheless, many black federal workers agreed that federal employment remained the best alternative to a Jim Crow, postwar private sector economy. Despite the attendant difficulties of federal employment, E.B. Henderson observed “[i]t is because private employment refuses to give Negroes jobs in many areas of work that causes them and some other minority groups to look for jobs under the Federal Government.” Ultimately, a job fraught with some racial difficulty was better than no job at all.

Even when black experience levels were comparable to those of their white co-workers, black federal workers still suffered from black collar status and limited promotion trajectories. In one study, the National Committee analyzed a controlled pairing of forty workers matched and paired based upon similar demographic variables (e.g., educational attainment, length of job tenure, age, sex, etc.) from a pool of 503 white and 292 black federal workers. As testament to their parity, the average efficiency ratings for both the black and white federal workers were the same. But the Committee found that whites received twelve grade promotions in a total service of twenty-two years, which equated to an average of one promotion for every two years of service. In contrast, black federal workers within their control group received only two grade promotions out of a total service of twenty-eight years of service, which equated into one

promotion for every fourteen years of service. Black workers were simply unable to amass the necessary experience qualifying them for promotion at the same rate as their white colleagues.

The black stenographer Lula Fields exemplified how difficult it was to push such racial barriers aside. In a 1948 letter to the Washington Post, Fields complained that, “the Negro stenographers are given the most insignificant stenographic positions. They are mostly placed in stenographic pools; they are seldom placed in individual offices where they can have a chance for advancement.” Her reference to “Negro stenographers” indicates awareness that the unseen obstacle between black federal stenographers and more substantive career assignments was racial discrimination.

Fields went on to report that when she did receive a job callback, it was only to accept a lower grade position as a typist, which was below her trained expertise as a stenographer. “In the agency in which I am employed there are white girls with just a clerk-typist status – who have never passed the stenographic test, but are working as grade 5 secretaries.” Fields continued, “Also there are some who don’t have any status but are working as grade 5 secretaries. Yet, Negro stenographers are told that they can’t get a grade 4 stenographer job unless they have passed the Civil Service test as a stenographer.” Fields’ knowledge of her white colleagues’ inferior background and experience only exacerbated her frustration.

While the federal workplace provided a somewhat transparent and more level playing field than did the private sector, black workers nonetheless suffered the consequences of impoverished professional relationships. Segregation affected the lives of black workers since

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60 Another study by the Civil Service Commission showed that it took blacks on average seven times as long as whites to gain a promotion. Jerry Kluttz, “The Federal Diary,” Washington Post, October 30, 1947.
many blacks lacked casual and formal opportunities to make contact, network, and acquire information necessary for improved job performance and experience both inside and outside the workplace. Living in segregated neighborhoods also hampered the ability of black federal workers to develop the kinds of professional relationships outside the workplace, which could lead to promotions. Commonly, black federal workers in ghettoized positions had fewer opportunities for casual contact with higher-ranking whites, the kinds of subjective relationships that often led to a better job.62

Residential segregation could have a deleterious impact on black advancement in other ways as well. For example, in 1947, just before its demise, the Office of Price Administration tried to use a local school building at night for an in-service training session for its clerks. The District of Columbia Board of Education denied the request after learning that the training session included both black and whites in the same classroom space; such racial mixing violated segregationist policy. While white employees arguably also suffered harm from a denied training opportunity, their black co-workers had even fewer opportunities to improve their status.63

Undisturbed exclusionary patterns within the federal workforce held wide-ranging detrimental effects for black workers. Since black collar workers were often systematically restricted from high-ranking administrative positions, their absence became “proof” unto itself that blacks were not deserving nor desiring of such positions. For instance, in 1947, NAACP Labor Secretary Clarence Mitchell reported that, “the State Department called [another federal agency] and asked for some person who could work on fiscal matters. The person calling

specified that the individual should be white. I called the [State] Department personally, and talked with the individual who had given the order. It was said that the specifications were a mistake because ‘one just didn’t think of a colored person as being able to do that kind of work.’ Mitchell’s follow up telephone call revealed that ignorant white attitudes about black competency had wide-ranging professional consequences. The State Department official also told Mitchell, conversely, that he did not think to ask for a black professional any “more than you would think of asking for a white janitor.”

**OUTCOMES**

The reports issued by the Presidential Committee and the National Committee did help many white administrators understand the full scope of the discriminatory issues they faced. In so doing, they validated the experience of black employees and illuminated the pervasiveness of racial discrimination within the federal ranks. Moreover, the reports quietly alerted black federal workers to the ever-evolving nature of racial discrimination. New advocacy would have to confront new attempts to block the improvement of black status within the federal workforce. For if the past was any predictor, the reports showed that as new protocols emerged for mediating federal employment discrimination, new methodologies of black career blockage emerged as well.

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64 Memorandum from Clarence Mitchell to George Weaver, February 3, 1947 “Discrimination in Private and Federal Employment,” Part II: B88, RNAACP.
65 Ibid.
For instance, in the fall of 1946, when OPA underwent its largest reduction in force, OPA officials organized a final effort to find jobs for displaced employees. Virtually all of the 300 employees losing their jobs were black. The OPA was still highly regarded for its front-running, anti-discriminatory stance in contrast to other federal agencies despite its overall low employment rate of black federal employees. Nonetheless, OPA administrator Everett Reimer tried unsuccessfully to find lateral placements in other federal agencies and grew exasperated by polite demurrers and deferrals, none of which explicitly referenced race. Over half a year later and still supremely bothered by a discriminatory practice with which he disagreed, Reimer vented his displeasure in an eleven-page memorandum to a receptive Dr. Carr amassing data for the Presidential Committee on Civil Rights report in May, 1947. Reimer complained that, “Few people admit prejudice themselves. Most discrimination is under the guise of protecting others or out of real or simulated fear of the reactions of others to minority group members. Chase the prejudiced person down and often you won’t find him.” The inability of Reimer to find the prejudiced person highlighted the increasing subtlety with which systemic discrimination against black federal employees occurred.

Although both the Presidential Committee and the National Committee’s reports both demonstrated continued discrimination by federal agencies against black employees, the methodology of racism was changing. Overt tactics, now increasingly frowned upon, gave way to more subtle methods. As newer agency protocols forbade blatant discrimination, more whites

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66 For instance, in a separate article lauding the rare occurrence of high-placed black federal employees working in the Pentagon building, the author noted: “Two important things were discovered as a result of making this tour….Negro employees (sic) are perhaps better integrated in ‘key’ jobs in the Pentagon than they are elsewhere in the Federal service, OPA excepting.” Here, the OPA is noted for its unusual left-leaning stance. *Washington Pittsburgh Courier*, “News Reporter Finds Number of Negroes in Important Positions,” August 10, 1946.

67 Letter from Office of Price Administration Director of Personnel, Everett W. Reimer to Robert K. Carr, Executive Secretary of PCCR, May 27, 1947, Part 12, RG 220, RPCCR.
grew more nuanced in making the same discriminatory decisions that yielded the same discriminatory results. However, it became increasingly difficult to find blatant evidence of discrimination.

For instance, Herman J.D. Carter, a Washington, D.C. Southeast resident and war veteran working in the War Department, provides a lucid example of the indignity of covert discrimination. Ever since he began his job in February 1941, Carter had consistently received reviews of either “Very Good” or “Excellent.” Yet, these ratings changed as Carter changed his disposition towards racial mistreatment on the job. In 1947, Carter first drew the ire of his supervisors when he “brought charges against a white guard who had thrown soup on a colored woman and man in the War Department cafeteria.” Thanks to Carter’s complaint, administrators made the guard apologize and make financial restitution to the victim. Additionally, Carter’s supervisors terminated his employment soon after he reported the guard’s attack. They contended they “had received frequent letters from his creditors asking for settlement of claims against him” and that such letters reflected poorly on his fitness to do his job. Carter felt blindsided by his termination since he believed he had satisfied his creditors over six years earlier.⁶⁸

Carter’s termination was likely in retribution for upsetting the informal and unspoken rules of racial etiquette that frowned upon blacks challenging whites in authority. Exemplifying the more nuanced discrimination tactics, Carter’s supervisors made clear to “punish” the offending white guard while focusing their attention on a seemingly unrelated personnel issue.

with Carter. From Carter’s perspective, the contested personnel issue was untimely, personal, and irrelevant to his current job function. Carter’s takeaway message was that after challenging authority to defend black dignity, the cause and effect was the loss of his job. Conversely, while unable to hold on to his bowl of soup, the offending guard did manage to hold on to his job.

In addition, several agency heads felt the emerging postwar focus on anti-discrimination was detrimental to an efficient workplace. In June 1947, the National Committee shared with the Presidential Committee an account of a frustrated federal administrator who complained, “Whenever we have an inefficient colored person and want to fire her there is a charge of race discrimination. Because race discrimination is charged whenever a Negro is inefficient, we have supervisors who tolerate Negro inefficiency. They have to prove it up to the hilt whenever they want to fire one.”

On one hand, some white employees felt that black allegations of racial discrimination often covered up and hid actual instances of black incompetence. On the other hand, the broader Jim Crow culture created conditions in which black employees suffered additional pressure, scrutiny, and higher expectations. For example, the National Committee discovered a federal practice of agencies “leaning over backwards in choosing our [Negro] supervisors; that is, we have insisted on an extra measure of ability and skill in a colored person before we have made him or her a supervisor simply because we did know that they were on the spot in a way that a white is not.” For the few blacks that made it into higher pay grades, their experiences loosely paralleled the pressure Jackie Robinson felt at the same time as first black man to play Major

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69 NCSNC memo to PCCR, June 23, 1947, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
70 Ibid.
League Baseball in the 20th century. The pressure was on the black federal pioneers to meet increased expectations without exhibiting signs of defensiveness or worse, aggression in response.

Of course, as with any group of employees, some black workers failed to fulfill their job responsibilities. The Presidential Committee addressed this concern in its final report: “In presenting this evidence, the Committee is not ignoring the fact that an individual Negro worker may be less efficient than an individual white worker or vice versa. Nor does it suggest that wage differences, which reflect actual differences in the competence of workers, are unjustifiable.”

Many blacks lacked the educational background and experience required for upper-level management positions. Yet, race discrimination was still a major factor for the persistent wage and rank gaps between whites and blacks found within black collar employment. As the Presidential Committee concluded, “what is indefensible is a wage discrimination based, not on the worker’s ability, but on his race.”

A few white employees acknowledged this fact themselves. In a 1948 letter to the NAACP, a Washington, DC federal employee named Phyllis Zeughauser admitted that she was “annoyed with the goings on in my office” since a heavily credentialed and excellent black female operator filled the order for a Comptometer Operator, but “because of her color, she was not hired.” Two weeks later, a white woman was sent up for the same position “and the supervisor in charge was told that the second person, a white girl, was not as good as the first one, but nevertheless, the latter was hired for the position.” Zeughauser revealed that incidents

71 Jackie Robinson broke the color line with the Brooklyn Dodgers on April 15, 1947.
72 President’s Committee on Civil Rights, To Secure These Rights, 58.
73 Ibid.
“similar to this one have been happening for quite sometime. In fact, out of at least 100 employees on my particular floor, there is only one Negro person employed.” Yet, she was reluctant about sacrificing her own career for an anti-racist cause: “[n]aturally, because of my position here, I would rather that my name is not used.”\textsuperscript{74} Unfortunately, the archives contain only a handful of such confessions from white employees as compared with the abundant communications from defensive and/or complacent agency officials.

Still, at the dawn of the postwar era, the federal government did take steps to show concern for the persistence of racial discrimination – prodded by left-wing public unions, Cold War pressures, and an evolving liberal agenda. When the Presidential Committee completed its work at the end of 1947, President Truman declared that it had “shown once and for all that it is possible to equalize job opportunity by governmental action, and thus eventually to eliminate the influence of prejudice in the field of employment.”\textsuperscript{75}

The declaration was welcome but quite premature. Black men and women had increased their numbers in the federal workforce. But the content and quality of their jobs still lagged far behind the egalitarian ideal.

\textsuperscript{74} Letter to NAACP Assistant Special Counsel Marian Wynn Perry from Phyllis Zeughauser, February 10, 1948, Part II: B88, RNAACP.

\textsuperscript{75} Harry S. Truman in letter to PCCR accepting resignation of its members, June 28, 1946, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
CHAPTER THREE
“STINK LIKE ROTTEN MEAT”: WHITE RESISTANCE TO BLACK PERSISTENCE, 1948-59

IN THE MIX, NOT OF THE MIX

Hot Cross Buns

Around noon on a humid August day in 1948, Federal Security Agency (FSA) chef Neaser James Kelly was preparing cinnamon buns, hot rolls, cookies, fruit salad and dessert ices in addition to tomato juice, coffee, tea, and milk. Suddenly, federal investigators interrupted Kelly’s lunchtime preparations and brusquely whisked him away from the FSA office building at 4th Street and Independence Avenue to a hearing of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor and Federal Security inside the Capitol building.

Kelly, a rare, high-ranking black federal employee, was the head chef for the FSA, where he supervised a staff of thirty-one employees. But down at the Capitol, Kelly received few questions about the content of his menu, the quality of his cooking or how he performed his work; the controversy concerned where Kelly did his work. Although investigators intercepted Kelly while cooking at FSA offices downtown, Kelly’s post was St. Elizabeth’s Hospital – a federal mental institution under control of the FSA – roughly five miles away in southeast Washington, D.C.¹

¹ Washington Post, “Ewing is Accused on U.S. Cook Use,” August 6, 1948.
Federal investigators requested Kelly explain his absence from the hospital and clarify how he could possibly fulfill his managerial obligations cooking for hundreds while simultaneously taking on a five-mile commute to make private lunches every day. Rather than shoulder the commute to earn extra pay, Kelly endured the arduous work schedule because his immediate supervisor, Chief Federal Security Administrator, Oscar R. Ewing ordered him to do so. Only after the federal investigation did Ewing learn that he could no longer use Kelly as his “personal servant” to prepare meals in Ewing’s private office.2

Ewing defended the practice claiming it was more efficient to have food readily available rather than lose time searching for lunch. Ewing also reasoned that because some lunch meetings occasionally involved both black and white attendees, government facilities were more hospitable than segregated facilities outside the office. Yet, committee chairman Senator William F. Knowland (R- California) disagreed, stating that it was a bad practice “taking the head cook of a hospital responsible for feeding more than 2,000 persons, and putting him to work preparing luncheon for a handful of persons.”3

The FSA was a large, sub-cabinet agency encompassing various agencies with wide-ranging responsibilities (e.g., the Social Security Administration, the Public Health Service, the Office of Education, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the U.S. Employment Service).4 Despite his agency’s high profile and Ewing’s occasional meetings with President Harry Truman, his status was not high enough to merit round-the-clock personal servants. Yet, his

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treatment of Kelly illustrates the blurred line between public service and servitude for black collar workers, even those who held managerial positions.

Despite working a full shift at St. Elizabeth’s, Kelly spent as many as five additional hours daily working for Ewing.\(^5\) Further underscoring Kelly’s predicament as a black collar worker, he received no additional compensation for such work.\(^6\) When the scandal broke, however, Ewing clarified that FSA administrative funds compensated \textit{St. Elizabeth’s Hospital} for “the part time use of its cook.”\(^7\) Rather than find extra funds to compensate Kelly directly for his labor, Ewing instead found monies sufficient to build a kitchen inside Ewing’s office in order to “expedite” his lunch meetings. Kelly’s unusual working arrangement and the reasoning behind it belies an undervaluation of black labor, ironically at the expense of overvaluing the worth of Ewing’s time as a white male administrator.\(^8\) On the one hand, Kelly earned an annual salary of $3,225 and enjoyed managerial responsibility – both of which had been extremely rare for blacks a decade earlier.\(^9\) Yet, Ewing exploited Kelly’s culinary talents purely for personal satisfaction.\(^10\) Perhaps, just because he could. Ewing failed to recognize any wrongdoing – let alone any racial

\(^5\) “Kelly told a reporter the luncheon duties do not interfere with his regular work at the hospital. He said his work at St. Elizabeth’s is done at 10 a.m. and doesn’t begin again until 4 am. He said his staff has its work laid out while he is absent.” Ibid.

\(^6\) “For these labors he received no extra pay, other than transportation tokens for his trips to and from the hospital.” \textit{Washington Post, “Ewing is Accused on U.S. Cook Use,”} August 6, 1948.


\(^8\) \textit{Washington Post, “Ewing is Accused on U.S. Cook Use,”} August 6, 1948.

\(^9\) To place Neaser’s salary in perspective, in 1939, only ten male cooks in the entire city of Washington, D.C. commanded a salary within the $3,000 to $4,999 range. 1940 U.S. Census. Table 16, 594. Further, the median income for nonwhite families in 1950 was $2,190 with 72% making less than $3,000 annually.

\(^10\) In addition to Kelly’s exploitation, NAACP Labor Secretary Clarence Mitchell confronted Ewing separately and directly about other FSA practices whereby some FSA “employment service offices are operated with backdoor entrances for colored people. In others, the offices for colored applicants are set up in unsanitary and outmoded buildings where those seeking employment must face extremely uncomfortable conditions.” Letter to Oscar R. Ewing, Administrator, Federal Security from NAACP Labor Secretary Clarence Mitchell, February 17, 1949, Labor: Government Agencies General 1949-51, Part II: B88, RNAACP.
implications – of his actions when he casually defended himself by stating, “I intend to continue using him.” While it is unclear what sanctions the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee levied against Ewing, they were not fatal to his career; Ewing retired from his position with the FSA several years later in 1953. The hearings indirectly underscored the true level of federal concern about black dignity and respect within the workplace; the hearings were likely more a political technique to embarrass Ewing rather than a substantive technique to root out racial improprieties.

The Double “V” Campaign Continues

Blacks’ increased expectations for better treatment within society and the workplace were similarly reflected in the “Double V” campaign sponsored by several civil rights organizations and black newspapers both during and after the war. Double V symbolized victory against fascist enemies without and against racist enemies within. During the early Cold War, Double V took on new meaning. The United States sought to win the global battle for political supremacy and convincingly illustrate the superiority of American democracy over Communism. Government officials felt pressure to avoid hypocrisy by publicly opposing Jim Crow at home. This gave black federal workers an opportunity to challenge their second-class status on the job.

At the same time, many of their white colleagues resisted such demands for equality. Ewing’s treatment of Kelly, while possibly devoid of racial animus, nonetheless demonstrated

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that black workers still had large hurdles to overcome. Despite the official stance of anti-discrimination, both white administrators and their employees continued to practice segregationist habits.

Shift in Stance

A year and a half after Oscar Ewing received orders to stop taking Neaser Kelly away from his official post at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, his office was in the news again. Illustrative of the ambiguous role the government played in enabling versus eliminating discrimination, this time, the FSA was supporting the cause of equality rather than undermining it. In March 1950, the Washington Urban League held a daylong career conference at the FSA auditorium. That day, Ewing’s black assistant, Anna Hedgeman, delivered a keynote message of optimism, boldly declaring, “We are no longer a problem.” She went on to assert the centrality of black workers in the federal government, claiming, “American democracy is no better than Negroes help America make it.”

Hedgeman took pride in having a federal job, even though her college education had not earned her a position higher than performing clerical duties for her boss. “We are America’s greatest asset,” she added, “but we have to act like it.”

Hedgeman’s “encouraging admonition” was quite similar to the tone struck a few years earlier by another black federal worker, George

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14 Ibid.
Holland of the Veterans Administration. In 1946 Holland reminded unemployed black war veterans that work was readily available and that: “you’re just wasting your time if you don’t do something about it.”15 Neither Hedgeman nor Holland acknowledged that many white workers opposed those same black workers with federal jobs from obtaining promotions, which, by experience and seniority, they deserved.

**STORM WARNINGS FOR THE NEW RACIAL CLIMATE**

*Cold War Front*

President Harry Truman continued to lead the charge to make the federal workplace more accessible and hospitable to African-Americans. He implored Congress to adopt the recommendations of *To Secure These Rights* in several candid speeches on the topic. He was confident that government action could equalize job opportunity and “eliminate the influence of prejudice in employment.”16 Moreover, Truman felt the federal government should encourage private businesses to follow its lead.17

But most of the Presidential Committee’s recommendations did not become law. Its own report suggested one reason why: “In a world forever tottering on the brink of war, civil rights will be precarious at best. In a nation wracked by depression and widespread economic

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15 *Baltimore Sun,* “Use of Army Skills Urged,” March 18, 1946.
17 Ibid.
insecurity, the inclination to consider civil rights a luxury will be more easily accepted.” The National Committee’s research staff exposed America’s duplicity on the global stage when it catalogued the experiences of international visitors treated as racial inferiors in postwar America. In 1948, one visitor from India commented, “I would rather be an Untouchable in the Hindu caste system than a Negro in Washington.” To avoid losing momentum in its quest for democratic supremacy during the Cold War, historian Mary Dudziak informs that improving racial relations thereby became part of diplomatic policy. Dudziak informs that, “the Ethiopian Minister to the United States was asked to change his seat in Constitution Hall during a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science,” and that it was “confusing” or “embarrassing” for American diplomatic hosts to run interference for international guests who “were not recognized.” The federal government’s focus upon the external appearance of its domestic democratic practices, as Dudziak acknowledges, only confirmed the PCCR’s prescient suggestion that an insincere motive to eradicate discrimination would result in inconsistent results.

The National Committee further spoke to the hypocritical image of American race relations when it reported, “four Negro students from the British West Indies sat at a downtown lunch counter. The waitress informed them they would have to stand to receive service. But when they produced their British diplomatic passes, she apologized, remarking she didn’t realize they were ‘not niggers.’”

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18 President’s Committee on Civil Rights, To Secure These Rights, 133.
19 See generally, Mary Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
Additionally, widely circulated photographs of squalid living conditions within plain view of the Capitol embarrassed the government internationally. *The Washington Post* observed, “Pictures of putrid slums ‘right in the very shadow of the Capitol’ are no rarity….”\(^{22}\) This contrast prompted Acting Secretary of State Dean Acheson to confess in 1947: “the existence of discrimination against minority groups in the U.S. is a handicap in our relations with other countries.”\(^{23}\) However, the State Department’s paucity of black sub-professional and professional workers (i.e., 10 out of 5,202) demonstrated its own failure to turn the administration’s promises into reality.

*Short Reign of Fair Employment Board*

Of concern to Truman was the Presidential Committee’s final, damning proclamation that Washington, D.C. was “a graphic illustration of a failure of democracy.”\(^{24}\) To rectify this embarrassing failure, Truman created the Fair Employment Board (FEB) with Executive Order 9980 in 1948, which made reports and recommendations to the Civil Service Commission about workplace inequities. In recommending general regulations governing fair employment practices for the federal work place, E.O. 9980 stated that findings of discrimination for a designated federal employee were subject to direct appeal to the head of the department, whose decision on

\(^{22}\) *Washington Post,* “Same Old Slums,” April 21, 1949.  
“appeal shall be subject to appeal to the Fair Employment Board of the Civil Service Commission, hereinafter provided for.”

In recognition of the problems “inherent in the collection of certain statistics…regarding informal complaints filed with the first-line supervisor,” the Fair Employment Board in early 1949 changed its policy. Originally, one’s supervisor registered complaints. Yet, in many instances, the supervisor was the direct source of the conduct complained about. Hence, while it lacked significant enforcement powers, the FEB did become an independent source to which black workers could now report their grievances.

Theoretical measures to help black federal workers were only as effective as the white administrators responsible for executing them. In 1948, black federal employee Alvin Webb complained that, despite Truman’s request that agencies insure fair employment opportunities and promotions for black workers, “agency heads have emasculated the Chief Executive’s order by selecting, in most instances, the very personnel directors who are already guilty of discriminatory employment practices.”

Even when white administrators observed the recommended anti-discrimination protocols, they rarely admitted to finding discrimination under their supervision. Moreover, they had little incentive to incriminate themselves or their agencies. The government therefore revised its protocol by requiring a third-party Deputy Officer at the FEB to receive and review initial complaints as well as appeals. This protected black victims from having to file a grievance with

26 Letter to Heads of Executive Departments and Independent Establishments from Executive Secretary L.C. Lawhorn, March 8, 1949, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
the very supervisor responsible for the alleged discrimination.\textsuperscript{28} Even still, according to the Fair Employment Board “[d]uring the period, July 26, 1948 through December 31, 1953, there were 797 written complaints filed.” Of the 797 complaints, aggrieved black workers successfully appealed only 13% of all cases to the Board. The ultimate disposition of the 797 complaints was as follows: “52.3 per cent, no discrimination found; 32.2 per cent, withdrawn; and corrective action taken in 15.5 per cent of the cases. Most complaints, 87 per cent, were filed by Negroes.”\textsuperscript{29} Even though the federal government had taken the necessary step of recognizing and confronting discrimination, the implementation of its policies often fell short.

Superficial quantitative analysis sometimes allowed officials to believe in tangible progress in the fight against discrimination. For instance, in a 1950 memo for President Truman, Donald S. Dawson, his administrative assistant, observed that the “record of Federal Civil Service on Fair Employment practices is extremely good” because “only 168 complaints were filed and a finding of discrimination was made by the top Board in only eleven cases.” Dawson’s memorandum reflected the assumption that the low number of discrimination findings was worthy of celebration, especially when “[n]ine of these cases arose out of a single incident in the Treasury Department.”\textsuperscript{30} Yet, such reports neglected the many cases black employees chose not to report due to fear of reprisal, embarrassment, or ignorance about the grievance process; or investigators’ inadequate training to detect all but the most overt forms of racial bias.

\textsuperscript{28} Letter to Heads of Executive Departments and Independent Establishments from Executive Secretary L.C. Lawhorn, March 8, 1949, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.

\textsuperscript{29} Vincent J. Browne, “Racial Desegregation in the Public Service, With Particular Reference to the U. S. Government,” \textit{Journal of Negro Education} 23, no. 3 (Summer, 1954), 244.

**White Workers Slow to Change**

*Segregation by a Different Name*

Although it was once the rule, physical segregation within federal workspaces was quickly diminishing after World War II. In 1949, the NAACP’s Labor Department reported that, “efforts to end segregation in the cafeteria of the Government Printing Office were successful in Washington. Colored employees are no longer required to sit in a special area.” The line of separation between black and white workers was no longer physical, but functional. Within federal ranks at the time, only five percent of black males employed held professional, semiprofessional, proprietary, managerial, clerical or sales jobs – compared with thirty percent of all white federal employees.

Furthermore, as segregation became more informal, it also became more difficult to prove. For the Fourth of July holiday in 1951, a federal announcement placed in *The Washington Post* invited all federal workers and their families to a cruise along the Potomac river with “a list of absolutely free, no-strings-attached things you, the Federal employe (sic), can do on July 4.” While the notice did not invite only white federal workers and their families, it did add, at the very bottom: “Negro employes (sic) and their families are welcomed at an outdoor dance.”

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31 Press Release, September 30, 1949, Job Recommendations, Part II: A326, RNAACP.
32 While the event was advertised for all government employees, no specific agency was cited as the primary sponsor. Jerry Kluttz, “The Federal Diary,” *Washington Post*, July 2, 1951.
Black federal workers often had to endure daily microaggressions as part of the normal workplace order. In 1952, postal employee Violette Taylor wrote a letter to the *Washington Post* about the indignity of eating her food in a cafeteria directly adjacent to a “much larger and more attractive” cafeteria for white employees.\(^3\) Such exclusions prevented black workers from acquiring the cultural capital necessary to advance their careers in a government bureaucracy dominated by whites. In the postwar era, many white federal employees had to alter their behavior to work in an increasingly integrated workplace. Yet, when they were away from their jobs, they could still believe in and practice racial inequality.

*Older Habits Die Hardest*

Within the federal workplace, new anti-discriminatory rhetoric was bumping up against older discriminatory practices, when normal workplace routines dictated that black workers accept small humiliations without complaint. For example, late in 1950, a branch chief at the office of the Quartermaster General was leaving to accept an overseas assignment. The Quartermaster’s black and white employees signed a scroll, paid $2 each to cover the cost of gifts, decorations and refreshments as well as helped prepare the office for his going-away party. Yet, the white employees excluded black employees from attending the very function the black employees helped to fund, plan and organize.\(^4\) Before the FEB’s grievance process, there was virtually no recourse for routinely excluded black workers and no punishment for the excluding white workers. Such behavior was normal. In the case of the uninvited black partygoers, it is


unknown whether they officially filed a grievance. Even if the jilted black workers did file a grievance, it would be difficult to hold the employing agency responsible since the crux of their complaint revolves around the lack of comity and respect displayed by fellow workers for a non-work related task rather than management denying black employees their rights based upon their professional obligation to the agency.

White workers found other ways to resist a new order of racial equality. In 1953, the U.S. Civil Service Commission’s Fair Employment Board verified some whites were still reluctant to work under blacks when it ruled in favor of a civilian Naval employee, Elmer Harris. Washington, D.C. legal representative Frank D. Reeves of the NAACP filed a complaint on Harris’ behalf asserting that in addition to the Navy maintaining segregated facilities, “there was an unwritten policy of refusing to promote Negroes to any position which requires supervision over white employees”35 – a key line segregationists wanted to defend. The NAACP’s investigation found that “only one black” obtained a promotion to the GS-4 classification of Storekeeper out of the previous twenty-one promotions to that position from GS-2 and GS-3 levels.

The significance of the Storekeeper GS-4 position is that it carried supervisory responsibilities over other Storekeepers in GS-2 and GS-3 classifications as well as shipping, receiving and stocking duties. Storekeepers performed a variety of shipping, receiving and stocking activities for government operations that sold directly to other businesses or individuals (e.g., sale of snacks and other sundries inside the main office building). Although promoted, Harris initially lacked supervisory abilities over two white Storekeepers of lower grade.

classifications. Harris sought the NAACP’s help because after he made his grievance known, he was dissatisfied that only a segregated “group of Negro Storekeepers were assigned to him from various units.”\textsuperscript{36} Nameless white workers refused to work under Harris and no one compelled them to do so – their discriminatory preferences remain forever protected from exposure within the public record.\textsuperscript{37}

But the FEB did rule in Harris’ favor. Its Acting Chairman Fred C. Croxton found that “there has been a reluctance on the part of some officials and supervisors in the Ships Supply Depot to promote Negroes to positions requiring supervision over white employees. This reluctance has resulted in Negroes not receiving the same consideration as white employees for supervisory positions.”\textsuperscript{38}

However, Harris’ victory was a limited one. The FEB, whose enforcement powers were limited, was unable to deliver an order capable of being enforced and instead issued a recommendation that “the Navy Department take such steps as are necessary to insure that candidates for promotion, particularly to supervisory positions, are accorded consideration with sole reference to merit and fitness.”\textsuperscript{39} Rather than warn Harris’ white supervisees against insubordination, the Navy decided to defer to their preferences and allow a black supervisor to

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item There are other examples of insubordinate acts of discrimination within the federal workplace as well. For instance, in a memorandum entitled “Digest of Press Clippings in the Civil Rights Field, Memo from Robert Carr to Members of the PCCR,” April 16, 1947, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR. Dr. Carr includes an article reporting over fifty white machine-card punchers in the Bureau of Internal Revenue, Statistical Section that engaged in a work stoppage and left their jobs because a “Negro girl” was moved to their section of the room in Washington on March 4, 1947.
\item U.S. Civil Service Commission, Fair Employment Board, Washington, D.C., August 10, 1953 – Decision by Fred C. Croxton, Acting Chairman, Fair Employment Board RE: appellant Elmer Harris, August 10, 1953, Labor: Naval Yard and Bases, Part II: A326, RNAACP.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
have only black trainees. At the same time, most blacks had to work under whites at the Navy department and at other federal agencies.

Unequal Pay for Equal Work

While Truman was President, Congress reformed the federal workplace by passing the 1949 Classification Act and the Government Wage Scale. The 1949 Act replaced the 1923 Classification Act and reduced some racial pay rate inconsistencies while establishing a more transparent system of worker compensation. The 1923 Act had only covered positions in the Washington, D.C. area; the 1949 Act extended the new pay structure nationwide. From 1949 onward, the “General Schedule” or GS Scale (GS) became the standard for all federal employees. Jobs ranking from GS 1-7 were entry-level and were generally more manual in scope; jobs ranked from GS 8-12 were mid-range and supervisory in nature; and top-level positions ranked GS 13 and above were managerial and policy-making ones. As of 1949, employees in Grades GS-1 through GS-10 earned annual salaries between $2,200 and $5,000; those in higher grades earned roughly $1,000 more at each stage, up to $14,000 for a GS-18. See Table 3.1:

40 Grades GS 16-18 were eventually replaced with the Senior Executive Service (SES) level due to the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Salary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GS-1</td>
<td>$2,200</td>
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<tr>
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<td>GS-17</td>
<td>$12,200</td>
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<tr>
<td>GS-18</td>
<td>$14,000</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*NOTE:* $2,200 (GS-1) in 1949 would be worth approximately $21,204 in 2012; likewise, $14,000 (GS-18) would be worth approximately $134,936 in 2012.

The GS scale made it easier to chart the status of black employees and their rates of progression throughout the structured levels, as well as their career progression in comparison to their white counterparts. However, it did little to prevent black collar workers from earning less and having fewer opportunities for advancement – irrespective of their education, placement or rank. Although the new wage scale made it possible for the Government to “offer a greater incentive to able young men and women considering whether to enter public service as a career,” it was common for many blacks with low GS ratings to essentially “keep” their low GS ratings over the course of their careers.42

Public sector administrators, keenly aware of their obligation to appear accessible to the public, strove to remain accountable to notions of fair play during hiring and promotion – notions skirted more loosely in private sector enterprise. Despite many federal agencies’ shared ethos of transparency, opportunities to advance depended heavily upon favorable performance evaluations, recommendations, advanced training, and higher education – all of which comprised variable elements within a subjective formula for promotion.43 While it is possible to study the aggregation of blacks in lower GS pay grades, it is difficult to measure the number of black workers within lower GS grades who stopped working as hard, lost motivation or quit in light of the ever-elusive climb towards higher paying jobs and positions of power.

Careful analysis of the GS salary scale reveals that the overwhelming majority of black workers remained largely segregated to or trapped within inferior, entry-level positions throughout the GS 1-7 slots. These positions paid less in comparison to the higher-ranking slots

42 Ibid.
and tended to be manual and monotonous labor. Further, such positions required little or no interaction with white co-workers, lacked managerial functions, and did not include supervisory powers over white employees. While designed to level the playing field, the GS scale ironically exposed the older, tenacious, discriminatory and segregationist habits of white administrators and employees. While unclear whether one reason for the GS system’s creation was the result of reformers efforts’ to document discrimination, ultimately, the GS scale made even clearer what the Presidential Committee had already reported; inequities were still common.

**CONFRONTING WHITE RESISTANCE**

*Dealing by Avoidance*

As racial tensions and discrimination persisted on the job – albeit less overtly than before – black federal workers debated whether, when and how to address such tensions. One passive-aggressive strategy was to act as if such tensions did not exist. FSA chef Neaser Kelly likely employed this strategy when he declined to protest the five hours a day he spent cooking meals for his department supervisor five miles away from his official job. Black workers felt pressure to get along with their white bosses, who were the majority at nearly every agency.

Working alongside one another in office spaces required new levels of interracial interaction at meetings and sharing ideas more informally. Thus, black employees routinely had
to decide whether to openly advocate for racial justice or to quietly continue to work hard in hopes of earning a promotion.\textsuperscript{44}

The alternative was to openly agitate for race-specific remedies. Yet, many blacks found this delicate balance between free speech and career promotion difficult to maintain. After all, in 1948 several Washington, D.C. postal workers with at least fifteen years work experience lost their jobs over disloyalty charges merely because they also belonged to the NAACP. While the firings blatantly violated the First Amendment, likely indicative of the devalued status of black collar workers, little was made of this case and its disposition. A lone NAACP letter dated November 26, 1948 mentions the sudden discharge of postal workers holding NAACP memberships for disloyalty. Yet, the final disposition of the discharged employees is unknown.\textsuperscript{45}

Many black federal workers constricted what they said on the job. As historian Constance Green noted, “colored civil service employees, fearful of losing their jobs, refused to lodge complaints, leaving NAACP officials without provable grounds for protest.”\textsuperscript{46} In 1947, the NAACP’s Labor Secretary reported receiving a call “from a government employee who asked whether she should say that she is a member of the NAACP.” But not all black workers were afraid to speak out. In 1947, the NAACP interviewed a postal official who welcomed discovery

\textsuperscript{44} After being called “nigger” several times publicly with her supervisor joining in group laughter, Jessica found her environment to be racially hostile, but alienated herself further by pursuing her claim. Her internal inquiry came to a halt when the agency head suggested that Jessica could resign if she was being “too sensitive.” According to Jessica’s agency head, her options were to either leave, or keep working silently in response to racial epithets. Jessica chose a third option and appealed to the NAACP to intervene. Jessica Valentine letter to NAACP Legal Branch, May 9, 1945, RNAACP.

\textsuperscript{45} Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 536. See also Belknap, Employment of Blacks by the Federal Government, 27.

of his membership, declaring, “the present loyalty investigations were a good thing because now agencies could find out who these people are who go to outside organizations for assistance.”

The National Urban League abetted the practice of self-censorship when recommending black candidates for federal jobs. Echoing Branch Rickey’s famous 1947 advice to Jackie Robinson to remain civil in the face of incivility, the Urban League suggested that job seekers tolerate some racial abuse in order to advance black progress over all. In placing a solicitation for potential federal employees, the League specified “‘pilot placements’ who can meet the demand in respect, not only to job competence, but to human relations in the position of the first Negro employed.” The League understood that black employees would likely suffer from unfair treatment at some point. Yet, the NUL counseled prospective employees to be “mature” enough not to respond in a manner that reflected poorly on the organization recommending them.

However, going along to get along was seldom a good way to advance to a better job.

Take the example of Nina Hilburn, who, in 1954, was the black secretary to George W. Snowden, Minority Group Housing Advisor of the Federal Housing Authority. Hilburn’s duties were typical for a secretary: “taking and transcribing dictation – correspondence, conferences, long distance and other important telephone conversations… all office housekeeping procedures – organization and maintenance of files, keeping current mailing lists, binding and otherwise maintaining special reference books, etc.”

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48 Branch Rickey, general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers that broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball by hiring Jackie Robinson in 1947, told Robinson that he would have to learn “to take it without dishing it out.” Harold W. Pfautz, “The New ‘New Negro’: Emerging American,” Phylon 24, no. 4 (4th Qtr., 1963), 360-68.
49 “Meeting Community Needs,” NUL Annual Report for 1953, RNUL.
But Hilburn often acted as an office manager when Snowden was absent on field trips and believed she merited a promotion to that position, along with the higher salary that accompanied it. As she told the Urban League, "I am required to have a working knowledge of the operations of each of the Departments under the Office of the Commissioner and the inter-relationship of those operations with the functions and operations of our own office and am responsible for knowledge and application of established office procedures, policies and regulations." But Hilburn remained in her secretarial post.

Too Much Truth Too Soon

By the 1950s, an African-American finally landed an appointment to a high status, subcabinet position. When President Eisenhower appointed J. Ernest Wilkins Assistant Secretary of Labor in 1954, he became the first black American to hold such a high government post. Wilkins occasionally attended cabinet meetings at the White House when his superior, Labor Secretary James Mitchell, was away. In public statements, Wilkins declared that, when he appeared as the official American representative to the International Labor Organization, his presence “sort of destroyed the propaganda effect of Russian claims of discrimination here [in America].”

Notwithstanding his visual value in selling America’s message of inclusive democracy Wilkins fell out of favor with the administration when he refused to confine himself to

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51 Ibid.
52 Robert C. Weaver was the first black American to hold a Cabinet position from ’66-’68 with the Department of Housing and Urban Development.
celebrating the status quo of moderate racial progress. While many black workers usually avoided protesting workplace inequality and other forms of racism out of concern of jeopardizing their job status, Wilkins when walking down the hallways, “noticed all-white sections and complained to personnel.  

Ebony Magazine’s Washington Bureau Chief reflected that, “As the first black sub-Cabinetee, Wilkins earned the ire of supervisors by approaching black workers in hallways and inquiring about their jobs, grades and advancement opportunities. He became a one man EEO in the department and a miniature NAACP outside the building.”

Wilkins also had to weather the accusation that he failed to defend the United States adequately when attending an overseas meeting at which Soviet delegates lambasted his country for its poor record on civil rights. When Secretary Mitchell demanded to know why Wilkins did not counter the attacks, he flatly responded: “because [the Soviet delegates] were telling the truth.” Such quiet advocacy of racial equality led Eisenhower to dismiss Wilkins from his position at the Labor Department and to appoint him to a seat on the Civil Rights Commission, set up by the 1957 Civil Rights Act.

Wilkins protested this demotion and asked to state his case to President Eisenhower directly. Fighting rumors that he was ill and unfit to perform his duties, Wilkins tearfully pleaded with the President to be able to retain his sub-cabinet job. But Eisenhower held firm; Wilkins died, in 1958, less than a year later but remained a politician until the very end. In a move that

56 Ibid.
57 While there is little public record on the matter, it was generally known that the position was targeted and would be filled by the man eventually replacing him, George Lodge, son of Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge. See Chicago Defender, “Ike Denies Asking J. Ernest Wilkins To Quit,” August 30, 1958.
bespeaks either supreme professionalism, dedication to his political party (with an eye on an imminent appointment) or extreme internalization of his own oppression, Wilkins had declared upon leaving his position at Labor that racial discrimination in “the theaters, the hotels and schools…all those things have been cleared up since the Eisenhower Administration came in.”

Like Ike

Despite a sparse track record of landmark civil rights advancements, President Eisenhower did take one important step to advance the government’s commitment to civil rights in the federal workplace. In August 1953, President Eisenhower issued Executive Order 10479, which promised “successful execution of, the equal employment opportunity program of the United States Government” through the creation of the President's Committee on Government Contract Compliance (PCGCC). Under the terms of the order, the head of each contracting agency had to report whether firms who did business with the federal government complied with existing anti-discriminatory regulations. In issuing an executive order, Eisenhower repeated the pattern set by Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. Like them, he avoided proposing a civil rights bill that required a difficult and lengthy legislative process potentially ending in failure. However, the trade off was a unilateral executorial move that lacked political buy-in and consequently lacked rigorous enforcement power. Sugrue described the committee as a “largely

60 Note that under President Eisenhower, a civil rights bill, the voting rights focused Civil Rights Act of 1957 did gain passage after lengthy debate, but only after the Supreme Court initiated desegregation dismantling with its 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education school case. Eisenhower enacted E.O. 10479 before such political tide had turned in
do-nothing body that gathered information on race in government contracting but did little to enforce antidiscrimination measures.”  

Yet, Eisenhower did recognize that anti-discrimination efforts were now obligatory. At the first meeting of the PCGCC in 1953, he declared that, “on no level of our national existence can inequality be justified. Within the Federal Government itself, however, tolerance of inequality would be odious. What we cherish as an ideal for our nation as a whole must today be honestly exemplified by the Federal establishment.” That November, when Secretary of Labor Mitchell announced that federal jobs were available to all “qualified persons,” the federal government finally eliminated any remaining doubt that it had repealed Woodrow Wilson’s 1913 decree of segregation. Mitchell’s declaration signaled the federal government’s continued progression away from blatant and overt discrimination – a significant step that the private sector had yet to take, let alone take voluntarily.

In 1955, Eisenhower issued Executive Order 10590, which established the President’s Committee on Government Employment Policy (PCGEP) with the power to prevent discrimination against members of minority groups. The PCGEP differed from its predecessor, the Fair Employment Board, in that it called for departments to author regulations ensuring a compliant mechanism, hearing and resolution in accordance with its modest mission of stopping all discrimination in all of federal employment. The PGCEP improved upon the Fair

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61 Sugrue, 267.
62 Letter from Dwight D. Eisenhower read into record by Vice-President at the first meeting of the Presidential Committee on Government Contracts, September 14, 1953, Part 7, RG 220, RPCCR.
Employment Board, because it involved federal agencies more fully in the government’s push for anti-discrimination. Initially, the FEB only made reports and recommendations to the Civil Service Commission about federal agency’s behavior while PGCEP required that individual agencies take stock of its own disparities (if any) and create a protocol for addressing them. The PGCEP’s process did not ensure agency compliance with anti-discrimination, but such requested regulations attempted to share the responsibility for discouraging discrimination outside of a lone federal department head.

Although the PGCEP represented the administration’s concerted attempt to make non-discrimination an extension of federal policy, PCGEP’s recommendations for action were merely “advisory in nature.” PCGEP conducted its own data analysis and one initial survey showed that although 24.4% or 48,536 black federal employees worked in Washington, D.C. in 1956, 85 percent of blacks were still concentrated in Grades GS-1 through GS-4.64

While black federal employees continued to draw benefits from federal employment in contrast to existing private sector alternatives, many still had to contend with the deeply ingrained and habitual practice of racial harassment by white colleagues and administrators on the job. In the absence of egregious and blatantly personal attacks, racial discrimination was difficult to detect systematically given the federal government’s decentralized agency model and widespread nature. Further, to the extent that the government had early mechanisms to ferret out inequities at the workplace, white administrators found few instances of “official” racial discrimination.

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Long before the federal government developed an investigative arm that had the ability to issue binding decisions like those from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, it was quite difficult for anti-discrimination committees to identify larger patterns of *institutional* workplace bias. It was far easier to isolate a bigoted, renegade employee maltreating a black employee than it was to castigate a department of mostly white directors, managers, supervisors and mid-level managers for consistently passing over qualified blacks for promotions over a prolonged period. As white resistance evolved and changed, so did the need for black federal workers to revise how they fought for equal treatment on the job.

In essence, the struggle for increased dignity and respect by black federal workers highlights another tension between actual and relative progress. Official pronouncements from high-ranking federal officials and new commission formations signal to international observers abroad and black workers at home that the government is serious and actually committed to the successful practice of democracy. Yet, as anti-discrimination efforts change and improve, so did white resistance. Discrimination became less overt and became increasingly covert and difficult to trace or detect. Only with comprehensive statistical data were discriminatory patterns more apparent suggesting a more complicated reading of black progress. Actual gains for black federal workers remained relative to white institutional responses; the struggle for dignity and respect remained constant.
CHAPTER FOUR

“LIKE A SYRUPY SWEET?”:
JULIUS HOBSON AND THE RISING CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, 1960-1969

STRATEGY SHIFT

As the civil rights movement grew during the 1960s, black federal workers tried harnessing its momentum to advance their opportunities and status. As labor historian Robert Zieger puts it, “it was a short step from demanding equal rights in schools, restaurants, and voting booths to demanding higher wages, improved working conditions, and fair treatment” on the job.1 Washington, D.C.’s black middle class – which included many federal employees – grew larger during the decade and slowly exerted more influence on policies affecting them.

Black federal workers amassed political influence rather slowly because although more blacks held federal jobs, few had obtained positions in management. At the beginning of the sixties, African-Americans held only 1.3 percent of all upper-level GS positions (i.e., GS 12-16).2 Still mired in the lowest pay grades, nearly 64% of all black federal employees in the District occupied the bottom GS grades, 1-4.3 Despite the overall growth of black employment, the percentage of blacks in upper-level management positions had changed little since the 1940s when segregation was the rule. Out of 82,257 federal workers in Washington, D.C. in 1940 (excluding postal and defense workers), only two-tenths of one percent of black workers held

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2 Derived from table attached to letter to Roy Wilkins NAACP from Lee White, Special Counsel to the President, November 13, 1965, Part III: A144, Folder Government, National Civil Service 1958-65, RNAACP.
3 Letter to Robert E. McLaughlin, President, Board of Commissioners, District of Columbia from Sterling Tucker, Executive Director, August 8, 1960, Part III: A144, RNAACP.
professional or semi-professional positions.\textsuperscript{4} While the increase of professional black federal workers did grow from 0.2% to 1.3%, such growth still measures small against the background of sweeping administrative changes that no longer formally acknowledged racial segregation within the federal workplace.

The stubborn pattern of discrimination had crippling effects over time. For many black workers, it meant fewer retirement benefits, lower life insurance values, lower quality health insurance, poorer living conditions, poorer educational opportunities and ultimately access to lower quality food.\textsuperscript{5} In 1963, Sterling Tucker, executive director of the Washington Urban League stated, “The Negro in Washington – and everywhere else – is expected to live as well, eat as well, dress as well, educate his children as well and have a nice home on less money than whites...and even Negroes aren’t that smart.”\textsuperscript{6}

While smarting at such disparities, many black federal workers still felt uncomfortable making racial grievances on the job. Agency grievance procedures typically started with one’s own supervisor, thereby creating a major disincentive for individuals willing to bring forth a complaint.\textsuperscript{7} The stress of working under the fear of retribution or a punitive performance review made self-advocacy difficult especially for any worker whose effectiveness depended upon shared group feeling, comity and support. Another factor inhibiting self-advocacy was growing

\textsuperscript{5} “Not only are Negroes at the bottom of the job ladder, but they receive less pay than whites for the same work.” August C. Bolino, Manpower and the City (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1969), 33.
\textsuperscript{7} “Proving discrimination in Government is a difficult task. Negroes point out that complaints in the Federal Government are often reviewed within the department by the supervisors who may be the source of the discrimination in the first place.” Ibid.
isolation and moral support from other black employees, especially for any worker who managed to climb higher on the GS scale.

Nonetheless, during the 1960s, black federal workers slowly shifted to a more aggressive stance in voicing their concerns. Because it was so difficult to confront supervisors directly, they did so primarily through organizations and advocates outside the workplace itself. The Washington Urban League and the local chapter of the NAACP generated impressive advocacy records over the years, whether it was actively opposing photograph requirements with job applications under the “Rule of Three” provision struck down at the beginning of WWII to staging political rallies at local churches for aggrieved federal workers.\(^8\) However, both groups were overwhelmed with requests for help from black men and women with concerns other than employment. Fortunately, local black federal workers could rely on Julius Hobson.

**ACTIVIST FOR HIRE**

*Meet Julius Hobson: Activist At-large*

Julius Hobson was the perfect advocate for black federal workers, if only because the federal government was entirely responsible for his career. Born in 1922 to a Pullman porter and an Alabama schoolteacher, Hobson grew up in a hostile Jim Crow South that his mother taught

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\(^8\) The “Rule of Three” was abolished in 1941 with the aid of the NAACP. The Washington Urban League staged a rally and organized a petition at the Vermont Avenue Baptist Church for frustrated workers. 101 black workers cited data showing average black salaries within the procurement division of $6,442 in contrast to white average salaries of $10,028 for 357 white employees. Carol Honsa, “Negro GSA Workers Charge Administration with Discrimination,” *Washington Post*, June 22, 1969.
him to confront head on through education – he was christened as a child at the same 16th Street Baptist Church subsequently bombed in 1963 by the Ku Klux Klan, claiming the lives of four little girls. Hobson later used his confidence gained from education to confront the political establishment over its discriminatory policies.

After finishing high school, Hobson worked as an electrician for the Birmingham Paper Company until he lost his job in 1941 due to a racial confrontation. After a coworker called him “nigger,” Hobson punched the coworker in retaliation.9 Hobson then joined the wartime Army Air Force. He took part in thirty-five flight missions as an artillery-spotter and earned distinction upon discharge. While attending Howard University on the G.I. Bill for his Bachelor’s degree, Hobson was attracted to Marxism after hearing and making friends with the German émigré left-wing economist Otto Nathan. Hobson pursued a Master’s after graduation and to the chagrin of his Master’s Thesis advisor, Hobson used Marxism to deepen his understanding of the relationship between capitalism and racism, the powerful and the oppressed.

Despite his collegiate pedigree, Hobson entered the federal workforce in 1948 only as an entry-level desk attendant at the Library of Congress. He worked his way up, eventually landing a position as a statistician and economist with the Social Security Administration where he worked from 1950 to 1970. In 1953, Hobson began a long career of civil rights advocacy when he sought a better elementary school education for his son. In walking his son to a segregated, overcrowded, all-black school, Hobson became increasingly infuriated as he passed by a better-manicured, all-white school closer to his home. His son’s school, Lucy D. Slowe Elementary, had the same name as one of the segregated dormitories the federal government built for Negro

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G-girls during WWII. Dissatisfied with the response he received from school officials, Hobson pressed the city’s Board of Education, which denied his request for equal spending per pupil at his child’s segregated school.

_Hobson’s Brand of Activism_

By 1964, Hobson had become one of the leading activists in DC. He had organized more than eighty picket lines against job discrimination at some 120 downtown retail stores, which won jobs for some 5,000 blacks. He also initiated campaigns that resulted in D.C. Transit hiring its first black bus drivers as well as ones that resulted in the first black auto salesmen and dairy company employees in the district. Hobson’s creative thinking set him apart from many other activists at the time. While known for his wit and irascibility, Hobson also skillfully used the media to create negative publicity campaigns and leveraged the resulting social pressure to achieve his results. Accordingly, Hobson summarized his proactive political philosophy quite succinctly when he stated: “My experience leads me to the conclusion that discussion is not as effective as direct action.”

In 1964, for example, Hobson created a “Cop Watching Wagon.” This employed a parabolic microphone to surreptitiously record officers using abusive language and abusive tactics against black citizens. Hobson then falsely advertised rallies featuring prominent activists like Stokely Carmichael to generate crowds and media interest, only to play the inflammatory

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recordings for the extra police who showed up for security detail. Hobson used his personal relationship with Carmichael to expose law enforcement’s inappropriate and inconsistent behavior.

Another example of Hobson’s savvy also occurred in 1964 when he invited the press to follow him as he planned to “share” the rat problem with affluent white D.C. residents at a “Rat Relocation Rally.” Hobson packed rats from the poor black sections of Washington, D.C. and drove to the more affluent parts of the city, threatening to release the rats out in the streets of the “rich neighborhoods.” Within days, city leaders instituted new sanitation and pest control policies. Hobson then dumped the rats in a Georgetown sewer rather than turn them loose on the streets. These victories garnered Hobson considerable local respect as an independent activist in need of only “six men and a phone booth” to implement his agenda.

Hobson’s advocacy, while largely individualistic, marked a change from methods employed by established civil rights groups like the NAACP and Urban League, which relied more upon moral suasion to heighten awareness and pressure institutions and businesses to change outside of any extralegal means to force the issue. Further, as organizations, both the NUL and NAACP sought to build new relationships with federal agencies or expand upon older ones for the future benefit of present members. In contrast, Hobson, as a lone individual beholden to no particular federal agency, preferred the impersonal legal system, relying upon statistical evidence to support his claims and force changes in behavior. If anything, Hobson

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bolstered his confidence to take on the federal government through training he acquired while employed doing data accumulation and synthesis.

Yet, his political opponents criticized Hobson for being irascible and ornery, which damaged his relationship with the local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Hobson chaired the local D.C. chapter of CORE for over three years, but the national board voted him out in 1963 due to philosophical differences – despite having successfully led the local chapter on numerous marches, sit-ins and demonstrations that resulted in 120 different retail stores hiring blacks.14 Hobson came to see CORE’s emphasis on nonviolent tactics as too restrictive for his creative and freethinking tastes. Said Hobson, “I’m nonviolent…It’s just not a religion with me.”15 Ironically, while Hobson felt CORE’s national leadership was too restrictive, national leadership expelled Hobson from the organization in December 1964 for “undemocratic procedures” in running the local Washington, D.C. chapter autocratically.16 Shortly after expulsion, Hobson formed his own organization, the Association of Community Teams (ACT), which he led until his death in 1977.

But ACT was an organization in name only. It had no members, other than Hobson himself, and a small group of loyal allies. Yet, through ACT, Hobson received most of his requests to advocate for black federal workers. In addition to lobbying federal agencies directly, Hobson put pressure on local companies doing business with federal agencies to engage in equitable practices.

14 Gorney, “Julius Hobson Sr. Dies.”
Many black employees, frustrated by the complexities and long duration of the federal grievance process, authorized Hobson to represent them. The form they used stated that they authorized, “Mr. Julius W. Hobson to speak for, represent, and act for me in regard to my grievance and claim against the U.S. government in regard to racial (and sex) discrimination in employment.”\(^{17}\) Although no law expressly allowed Hobson to adopt this intermediary role, the desire of black government workers to seek independent, grassroots assistance gave him that opportunity. An open question is how different agencies within the federal bureaucracy accepted Hobson in his advocate role given the scant evidence of major results. While little available evidence expounds upon agency feeling, the volume of letters aggrieved black workers sent to Hobson along with his invitation to testify at informal Congressional Hearings about federal discrimination against black employees suggest Hobson was effective in generating a modicum of recognition as a trusted advocate.\(^{18}\)

However, Hobson became best known for a school desegregation case, \textit{Hobson v. Hansen}, inspired by his concern for his daughter’s education.\(^{19}\) In the 1967 U.S. District of Columbia federal case, Hobson showed that despite landmark changes in civil rights law, statistical data otherwise. Disparities persisted in the per-pupil spending rates for black and white students, with black students receiving significantly less than their white peers from the same neighborhood. Convinced that no jury could find fault with sound statistical data, the famed radical lawyer William Kunstler successfully argued the case while Hobson paid Kunstler’s expenses and assembled all of the research. Hobson’s victory resulted in the District abolishing

\[^{17}\text{“Authorization Form,” n.d., PJH.}\]
the different tracking systems it had been using for black and white students. Hobson’s lengthy life of public service concluded with his election and service as an at-large member on the Council of the District of Columbia from 1974 until his death in 1977.

**THE GOVERNMENT EMBRACES CIVIL RIGHTS**

*Key Labor Developments in the Early Sixties*

As president, John F. Kennedy initially moved cautiously on the civil rights agenda as Cold War issues dominated his attention. At first, he avoided agitating the Southern base of his party. As historian Daniel Stevens writes, “despite his campaign promises of vigorous executive action, the first two years of [Kennedy’s] administration were characterized by mostly symbolic actions and the strenuous avoidance of association with initiatives to introduce legislation to Congress.”

Nonetheless, Kennedy made a few decisions about American labor that significantly affected black federal workers. One was the signing of Executive Order 10925 on March 6, 1961, which required the government and government contractors to practice non-discrimination in their hiring practices. The individual responsible for the execution of the order, Secretary of Labor Arthur Goldberg, a former union lawyer who had negotiated with merger between the AFL and CIO, was a devout liberal and strong supporter of civil rights. Goldberg used the order to finally abolish segregated facilities, which still existed in some government offices, namely

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the U.S. Employment Services, the federal apprenticeship and training program, public sector unions in addition to the Department of Labor.

Goldberg remained unmoved by new data claiming racial progress when he himself failed to see such results manifest within his own department. On at least one occasion, Goldberg leveraged his sphere of influence to unilaterally appoint a black employee to a deputy director position at the Department of Labor. Prompting Goldberg into action was the inexplicable ranking of the black male applicant lower than two white applicants. While the white applicants held a high school diploma and a fourth grade education respectively, the black male compiled an excellent service record as a Cornell University Ivy League graduate. Not in all cases were highly qualified and deserving black candidates given the benefit of the doubt by the reigning Secretary of Labor willing to intervene on their behalf. Thus, many black collar workers suffered from a devaluation of their efforts and contributions, and suffered directly through chronically lower wages and promotion rates.

Much like Chester Bowles’ tenure with the Office of Price Administration, Goldberg was but only one left-leaning cabinet secretary. The question remained how to compel the remaining, vast majority of federal agencies to eschew discriminatory practices and habits detrimental to black workers outside of liberal leadership leading the charge for increased equity. E.O. 10925 established the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity (PCEEO), which monitored non-discrimination on government contracts. E.O. 10925 distinguished itself from

21 Said Goldberg when installed: “I was not satisfied with a quantitative analysis, so I went around and had a survey made of the grades and classifications encompassed in this area. I find, those of us in government, and I am sure the same thing is characteristic of private industry, that the concentration of employment is in the lower grades, messengers, other production people, people who load on the working platform, and clerks.” David Stebenne, Arthur J. Goldberg: New Deal Liberal: New Deal Liberal, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 246.

22 Ibid.
previous Executive Orders designed to eradicate discrimination by endowing the PCEEO with expansive policy-making powers.

Rather than purely focus on responses to individual worker complaints, the PCEEO also requested that employers complete and file compliance reports as part of the bidding process for government contracts. In select cases, this new measure prompted behavioral changes; some government contractors and subcontractors hired more black workers motivated from fear for losing a lucrative federal contract. Accordingly, new measures like E.O. 10925 fostered much optimism and enthusiasm among federal officials who wanted to stop discrimination on the job. For instance, in March of 1963, President Kennedy gushed that the President’s Committee of Equal Employment Opportunity “received over 1,300 complaints in two years…and has achieved corrective action on 72% of the cases handled – a heartening and unprecedented record.”23

Another key labor decision Kennedy made came nearly a year later on January 17, 1962, when he issued Executive Order 10988, authorizing, for the first time, limited collective bargaining rights for federal employees. Labeled “Employee-Management Cooperation in the Federal Sector,” E.O. 10988 helped federal employee union membership skyrocket from 10.8% in 1960 to 32% by the end of the decade.24 On June 22, 1963, Kennedy also issued Executive Order 11114, which expanded the authority of the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity to govern non-discrimination within government contracts and within contracts financed with federal assistance. All three executive orders helped narrow racial disparities.

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within federal employment (see Table 4.1). Yet, they did not address underlying racial tensions within the federal workplace between black workers and their white colleagues or with supervisors over pay and promotions.

> **President-led Initiatives to Reduce Discrimination, Table 4.1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Year Began</th>
<th>Year Concluded</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FDR (1933 – 1945)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fair Employment Act</td>
<td>1941 (EO 8802)</td>
<td>1946</td>
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<tr>
<td>NOTE: Prohibited racial discrimination in national defense industry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fair Employment Practice Committee</td>
<td>1941 (EO 8802)</td>
<td>1946</td>
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<tr>
<td>NOTE: In response to A. Philip Randolph march</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>War Manpower Commission</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>1946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair Employment Practice Committee</td>
<td>1943 (EO 9346)</td>
<td>1955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTE: Enlarged Committee's staff and strengthened directive to employers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>TRUMAN (1945 – 1953)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Presidential Committee on Civil Rights</td>
<td>1946 (EO 9808)</td>
<td>1947</td>
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<tr>
<td>NOTE: Disbanded after delivering 1947 report</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Desegregation of Armed Forces</td>
<td>1948 (EO 9981)</td>
<td>1955</td>
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<tr>
<td>NOTE: Prohibited racial, religious and ethnic discrimination in the armed forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fair Employment Board</td>
<td>1948 (EO 9980)</td>
<td>1955</td>
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<tr>
<td>NOTE: Allowed for inaction &amp; omissions in grievances</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>EISENHOWER (1953 – 1961)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pres. Cmte. on Government Contract Compl.</td>
<td>1953 (EO 10308)</td>
<td>1961</td>
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<tr>
<td>NOTE: Sought to insure non-discrimination in companies having governmental contracts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pres. Anti-Discrimination Committee on Govt. K</td>
<td>1953 (EO 10479)</td>
<td>1961</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pres. Cmte. on Government Employment Policy</td>
<td>1955 (EO 10590)</td>
<td>1961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTE: Replaced Fair Employment Board</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>KENNEDY (1961 – 1963)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCEELO has powers expanded</td>
<td>1963 (EO 11114)</td>
<td>1964</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* The Records of the Committee on Government Contract Compliance ceased to be when it was abolished on August 13, 1953 by EO 10479, and the Government Contract Committee (also known as the President's Committee on Government Contract Compliance, 1953-61) began. After the Government Contract Committee came the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity (1961-65). The 1964 Civil Rights Act under Title VII then established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which has continued until present day.
Kennedy’s Shift

By 1963, John Kennedy admitted, that because of pressure from a growing civil rights movement, that his executive orders had not solved the problem. In June of that year, speaking to a conference of mayors, the president Kennedy acknowledged that, although “We have undertaken to eliminate segregation and discrimination in Federal employment…in our cafeterias and other facilities. The proportion of Negroes holding Federal jobs in many areas is still distressingly low – particularly in the higher-grade jobs.”25 Still, Kennedy offered only vague statements (e.g., “but we aim to change this as quickly as possible”) rather than to offer specific, substantive solutions.26

Whereas many black employees shared similar aspirations as their white colleagues to work hard, improve, and advance in rank, their careers differed from their white coworkers in that they consistently received less pay and fewer promotions over time. More costly than the loss of pay however, was the opportunity cost to black federal workers; many saw years pass while trying to navigate the latest anti-discrimination mechanism. But as the federal government’s efforts against discrimination were the culmination of trial and error, a certain amount of time had to pass before the government accumulated enough feedback to assess a program’s effectiveness. The “correction lag,” or time that elapsed between implementation of a new anti-discrimination measure or policy and the response time to correct it would often last years. Hence, as correction lags grew longer, more black workers risked stagnation in their careers, which prompted many to call upon grass roots advocates like Julius Hobson to intervene.

26 Ibid.
Johnson’s Treatment

When Lyndon Johnson became president in November of 1963, he quickly made plans to enact the civil rights legislation proposed by his assassinated predecessor earlier that year. The Civil Rights Act (CRA) of 1964 was a benchmark in the history of anti-discrimination on the job (as well as within American society more generally) in that it declared equal access to existing jobs as its domain and provided legal causes of action in instances where such access was wrongfully denied. Historian Nancy MacLean rightfully identifies the 1964 Civil Rights Act as symbolizing a new brand of inclusive politics since Congress designed the new law to provide unprecedented economic opportunities to women and Latinos in addition to blacks.

Yet, more important for black federal workers, was the inability to maximize the unprecedented protections contained within the Civil Rights Act. When Title VII created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), for the first time, a federal investigative body had the power to adjudicate disputes, file lawsuits, and enforce monetary penalties for racially discriminatory behavior at the workplace. Unfortunately for blacks with specific grievances, federal workers remained exempted from the EEOC’s purview. While the EEOC’s creation signaled that the federal government was committed to improving working conditions for all employees and would no longer tolerate purposeful or willful discrimination against black rights, such commitment did not extend to the federal workplace itself.

The Civil Rights Act’s passage after surviving the longest debate in U.S. Senate history symbolizes the triumph of high-stakes, political compromise and deserves attention as a keystone victory for civil rights. Yet, as part of such compromise, provisions within the CRA were neither
sweeping nor immediate. Under the 1964 Act, only private employers with 100 or more employees were within the EEOC’s jurisdiction. This cutoff decreased every following year until it stopped at twenty-five, effective July 2, 1968. The federal government only tangentially started to police itself when President Johnson released Executive Order 11246 in September, 1965 which created the Office of Federal Contract Compliance as an enforcement mechanism to ensure compliance with federal mandates of those vendors doing business with the federal government not to discriminate along the parameters outlined in Title VII. The newly created office could terminate government contracts awarded to firms that failed to practice affirmative action in employment.

Not until 1972 – nearly a decade after CRA’s origination – was Title VII amended through the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 to include state, local and federal government actors and their employees within its purview. Additionally, the 1972 amendment allowed the EEOC litigation authority to initiate lawsuits on behalf of a complainant against non-governmental actors. Thus, while rightfully trumpeted as a breakthrough in American labor relations, an unfortunate byproduct of the Act’s compromise was that it initially exempted a significant number of employees from the Act’s protections. All public sector employees and all private businesses with twenty-five or fewer workers were preempted from the 1964 Act’s provisions. Although the 1972 Title VII amendment lowered the CRA’s eligibility cutoff from

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28 Ibid., 610.
twenty-five to fifteen employees, a large number of American enterprises conducted business as usual, safe from molestation by the CRA’s new enforcement provisions.29

Thus, it is unsurprising that the 1960s was a period of economic stagnation for black federal workers in Washington, D.C. – even well after the CRA took effect. Economist Andrea Beller states “Title VII’s enforcement had no significant overall effect on the earnings of black males relative to those of white males through 1969.”30 Beller’s study concluded that the “enforcement of Title VII as a means to combat racial discrimination must be characterized as unsuccessful during the sixties for the combined effect of its provisions was to reduce, albeit insignificantly, relative [disparities within] black employment and wages.” Beller’s research is part of a larger consensus shared by many scholars who believe the Civil Rights Act had a marginal economic impact upon black workers’ incomes.31 Hence, in the wake of changed rhetoric shared by the government disapproving of discrimination, individual activists like Hobson played an instrumental role in continuing to publicize the gaps between the acceptable rhetoric and the unacceptable, inequitable results.

29 While seven years later, available data from 1979 provides an idea of just how many employees were exempt from Title VII’s 1964 provisions. Excluding government employees, railroad employees, self-employed persons, 86% of all total employees nationwide worked at enterprises or businesses containing twenty or fewer employees, whereas only 1.4% had 100 or more employees. U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1981, “No. 901 Establishments, Employees and Payroll by Industry and Employment-Size, Class: 1979,” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981), 536.
Paradoxes of the EEOC

Nonetheless, the EEOC represented the federal government’s most conscientious attempt since WWII’s conclusion to directly address workplace discrimination. No longer did agency heads have to stress compliance or go out of their way to observe federal inclusion initiatives. If an individual employee had a grievance, they now had an official federal outlet at their disposal. Unsurprisingly, the EEOC soon became inundated with formal complaints. But while the EEOC provided formal recourse for aggrieved workers, it also elevated routine complaints towards the Commission level and weakened efforts at informal resolution at the agency level. Thus, ironically, its creation contributed to the very inefficiency it tried to eliminate.

In its first year of existence, the EEOC received over 200 complaints a week and had a backlog of 3,000 cases – although none directly involved federal actors or agencies. Yet, only five conciliators were on staff to render decisions. By August 1968, the average case took sixteen months to complete.\(^\text{32}\) By 1969, the backlog grew to nearly two years.\(^\text{33}\) Since few black complainants found new jobs while awaiting final disposition, obtaining confirmation of past discriminatory actions on the job was of little consolation. The government still lacked the ability to compensate employees retroactively for past time lost while waiting patiently for a more just and prosperous future. Accordingly, the *Harvard Law Review Association* noted in 1971 that, “to

require a destitute or unemployed plaintiff for whom speed is essential to wait out this period is tantamount to denying him an effective judicial remedy.”

Many black men and women had endured years of working for the federal government without ever having an honest chance to work ahead. For example, The Washington Post reported in 1963 that a black federal employee “recently retired as a Grade 5 after nearly 30 years service as Government clerk. He, too, trained whites, which rose to Grades 14 and 15. He is a bitter man.” Time was of the essence for many black federal workers pursuing promotion or career advancement cases, and few individuals had three decades to spare. Black workers often spent a good deal of time seeking to rectify lost pay and promotions their experiences should have granted them. As James Farmer, the head of CORE once observed, “before an aggrieved person can get a remedy [from the EEOC], he may have found another job or starved to death.”

In such cases, individual activists like Julius Hobson became critical in helping black federal workers combat systematic discrimination. The Civil Rights Act and the EEOC reinforced the need for sustained advocacy; the new legislation fell short of its idealized purpose and increased black activism was an immediate response to a well-intentioned federal government ill-equipped to make a quick response.

Hobson used his own frustration with racist practices to galvanize supporters. He often narrated the plight of his mother who the local white hospital in Mississippi turned away when she was pregnant with him and his twin brother and had already begun delivering them. She

34 Ibid., 1207. Similarly, Dr. Martin Luther King succinctly stated in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail that “Justice too long delayed is justice denied.”
35 Baker, “Job Picture Still Far From Rosy to Negroes Here.”
36 John David Skrentny, “Pragmatism,” 353-54.
developed complications en route to the colored hospital, farther away, and his twin did not survive. Hobson claimed his mother was never “right” after that. 37

**LIFE AFTER EQUAL RIGHTS**

As the federal merit system of advancement developed, more black workers grew exasperated over the time it took to get the new protocols functioning efficiently. For example, in 1966, the Pentagon mailed 800 questionnaires to a cross-section of approximately 4,000 civil service employees at United States Air Force Headquarters in Washington, D.C. Respondents marked their race and provided open-ended comments assessing the Merit Promotion Program’s efficiency.

Most black respondents were pessimistic about the benefits of the Merit Promotion program. “Personal favoritism plays an important part in promotion policies in HQ USAF,” claimed one worker. Many comments were quite dismissive: “Merit Promotion Program is a farce”; “I have found the merit promotion program to be practically a joke”; “they should do away with this program as it is absolutely a waste of time.” One black respondent wondered simply: “USAF Merit Promotion Program – What is it? – Where is it?”

One black employee revealed the favoritism behind many promotion decisions. “Merit Promotion in our Directorate is a joke!” she wrote, “Every time a career civilian transfers, retires, or drops dead, particularly at the GS-12 level, and up, the General sends over the name of a

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retired buddy of his as a suggested applicant. Usually the ‘suggested applicant’ is the selectee over any other civilian. I have been a GS-11 for 9 years.”

Secretary of Labor W. Willard Wirtz also shared such frustration. Wirtz positioned himself as a conscious white ally when he addressed the Convocation of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund on May 18, 1966 saying, “I am sick and tired, furthermore, of the false piety of those who answer inquiries about the racial aspects of their employment or membership practices with the bland, smug answer that: ‘We don’t know because of course we wouldn’t keep records on anything like that.’” Non-cooperative survey responses merely underscored that some anti-discrimination measures were only as good as varying agency interest levels.

*Upper Level Resistance*

Still, according to many a white federal administrator, the presence of anti-discrimination protocols was almost proof itself that discrimination did not exist. In a 1966 letter to Julius Hobson, Civil Service Commission (CSC) Chairman John W. Macy Jr. bristled from criticism Hobson had made about the CSC’s poor record of handling black workers’ grievances. In defending his approach to equality at the workplace, Macy detailed the protocols he expected all managers to enforce, although he declined to state if the managers actually enforced them. He stated that the CSC “looks for agencies” to 1) perform self-analysis of their “equal employment

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38 Memo: RE: 1966 Employee Attitude and Opinion Survey, June 14, 1966, AFGE Lodge 1092, PJH.
opportunity situation” and identify problems, 2) then develop a plan of action with “specific and realistic goals for achieving definite and measurable results,” 3) delegate responsibilities, 4) enlist “understanding and support of all employees,” and finally, 5) constantly “evaluate progress in relation to program goals.” On paper, Macy’s protocols seemed simple enough to execute. But he overlooked the bureaucratic barriers that made it difficult to rectify a history of inequitable pay and unfair promotion procedures.

White federal administrators had considerable leeway to make subjective decisions about employee advancement. Anti-discrimination thereby became an increasingly sensitive issue for them. White workers were apprehensive that an emphasis on equity for blacks slanted the norms unfairly against whites. Some white administrators worried about being unable to deliver legitimate criticism to black colleagues fearing that their feedback would always appear like discrimination to the recipient. In 1968, some enhanced opportunity for black federal workers was described by the Civil Service Commission as “tyranny of color,” where an “incompetent manages to hold onto his job only because of his race. This form of blackmail cannot be tolerated. Equal opportunity to be hired implies an equal opportunity to be fired.”

Yet, that same year, disparate treatment within at least one major federal agency – the United States Department of Agriculture – prompted the Washington Examiner to call it “the last citadel of Southern racism in the Federal Government…run by the large Southern white farmers, and Southern committee chairmen in Congress.” Some white federal workers at the USDA resisted the idea of black employees altogether. And they had the support of the high-

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40 Letter to Hobson from John W. Macy, Jr., Chairman, US Civil Service Commission, April 13, 1966, PJH.
ranking Senator Sam J. Ervin from North Carolina, who protested that many black workers were “brainwashed” into taking up social causes that had nothing to do with their jobs, while they sought protection from workplace discrimination.\(^{43}\)

Those individuals furthest removed from the problem often trumpeted modest gains made in the workplace most loudly. This partially explains why, in 1968, several Democratic Congressmen (both black and white) made the observation that the heads of few federal agencies found fault with themselves, since “findings of discrimination by the [Civil Service] Commission are extremely infrequent,” and that “not one contract has ever been cancelled for non-compliance.”\(^{44}\)

And the Civil Rights Act could not protect all black federal workers from lower wage and slower promotion rates – barriers that kept blacks “segregated” or ghettoized within lower grade positions and away from higher paying positions. While lack of education and experience were becoming increasingly legitimate rationales to explain disparities in black promotion, some protocols still lent themselves to racial abuse, one of which was grievance procedures. Ironically, the more that such standard bureaucratic procedures incorporated new complaint mechanisms, as an unintended consequence, the more encumbered such processes became. For instance, one reason why blacks with grievances had to wait before obtaining their day in court was due to EEOC regulations which required a complainant to first file with the EEOC, and wait sixty days for every party to go through the conciliation process.\(^{45}\) While the architects of the CRA intended


\(^{44}\) Letter to the Honorable Joseph S. Clark, Jr., Chairman of the Subcommittee on Employment and Manpower, June 17, 1968, signed by Wm F. Ryan, Charles C. Diggs, Edward R. Rogbal, Phillip Burton, John Conyers, Jr., PJH.

to avoid backlogs within the courts by encouraging informal resolutions of workers’ claims, the EEOC was not a binding authority and a decision in favor or against a complainant still did not preclude them or their alleged perpetrator from their day in court. Hence, the sixty-day wait rule amounted to a standard two-month delay as the vast majority of EEOC cases went forward with the legal process before achieving resolution through more formal means.

Just because a process for adjudicating discrimination complaints existed, the process was not always effective, fair or timely. Aggrieved workers now had to record their experiences on paper so that an impartial individual (other than their supervisor) could review the case. While a detailed recording of racially discriminatory charges makes sense in maintaining transparency and consistency in adjudicating disputes, this task proved difficult for many black complainants. In completing such paperwork, the victim had to recall specific past scenarios that appeared insignificant at the time, but within the aggregate, combined together with other microaggressions to establish a larger pattern of mistreatment.

In late 1968, Hobson complained to Rep. William F. Ryan (D-NY) at an unofficial congressional hearing that, “grievance procedures now available to Negro victims of discrimination are useless and intimidating and need to be revised.” Ryan held the informal hearing after repeated attempts to hold formal hearings failed due to a lack of support from several Congressional committees. At Ryan’s hearing, Michael Ambrose, a white ally, told how he had resigned from the Civil Service Commission where he helped administer the EEOC due to personal frustration with the low priority given to anti-discrimination efforts. Ambrose

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testified, “The grievance system does not work and only jeopardizes careers of employes (sic) who resort to it.”

White administrators often explained that their failure to hire black workers in high-status, well-paying jobs was due to the technical nature of the available positions. In the fall of 1968, John Macy told Rep. Ryan why only four of the 180 employees in the laboratory of the National Institutes of Health were black. According to Macy, “The reason for this ratio is allied to the fact that the acoustics and the underwater acoustics field is relatively new and demands a high degree of technical training. There is a scarcity of trained personnel in this field, in general, and more so from the Negro race.” For Julius Hobson, such rationales by Macy constituted an attack on black intellect, professional competency, and the capacity to compete. The NIH’s reluctance to hire blacks reminded him of those government officials during WWII who argued that blacks could not be fighter pilots because they believed them to be incapable of handling expensive machinery that required a high degree of technical training. In response to such arguments, Hobson remarked “culturally deprived is just another word for nigger.”

Life after MLK

After the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April of 1968, Hobson began a new, aggressive campaign to mobilize black federal workers. Through his Association of Community

47 Ibid.
48 Underwater acoustics was an emerging field in the late sixties; scientists within the medical field used the techniques within the field to conduct auditory experiments or gauge medical ultrasound efficacy. Letter to Rep. Wm. F. Ryan from John Macy, September 30, 1968, PJH.
49 Julius Hobson, Education Reporter, March, 1968, PJH
Teams, he circulated a petition claiming that King “endorsed the fight against racism in Federal employment as a part of his Poor People’s Campaign.” While unclear exactly how many signatures Hobson collected or what eventual impact they had, Hobson informed *The Washington Post* that he claimed receipt of more than 3,000 letters from frustrated black federal workers by June of 1968. What is notable is that the petition solicited signatures on two points:

- *I (we) agree in principle that available official data on Federal employment of minority groups do not fully reveal Federal discriminatory practices.*

- *I (we) agree in principle that the grievance machinery designed to deal with individual discrimination is inadequate and intimidating.*

In an important shift, the petition made clear that discrimination no longer meant, as during and before World War II, the outright refusal to hire blacks for powerful, high-paying jobs. Now, black collar treatment meant selective hiring in “ghettoized” areas, commonly separated from whites that routinely landed all ranges of positions. Furthermore, the petition focused upon the existing procedure’s “intimidating” nature, rather the lack of a formal one itself. But Hobson’s language was uncharacteristically passive, perhaps revealing a desire to avoid offending potential white allies.

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50 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated April 4, 1968. Pulitzer-prize winning columnist William Raspberry reported in late June that, “For several weeks, Hobson has been circulating petitions among Federal employees across the country in support of his contention. He says that he has received more than 3000 letters from aggrieved civil servants.” William Raspberry, “Hobson Tilts with Uncle Sam,” *Washington Post*, June 26, 1968.

51 King Petition, Circa 1968, PJH.
Managing Microaggressions

Discrimination cases became increasingly difficult and complex matters to resolve. In the absence of a direct racial epithet or a clear attempt to separate workers according to race, the victim had to prove a seemingly abstract feeling. It was difficult to provide proof of the numerous microaggressions, the routine, if fleeting, instances of racial insensitivity, the cumulative effect of which created an overall feeling of rejection at the workplace. Disparaging jokes, hostile facial expressions, and tones of voice all could make a black federal worker feel put down even if a supervisor did not explicitly communicate that sentiment.

Knowing it was nearly impossible to establish a discrimination case on feelings alone, Hobson used disparate pay and promotion rates as evidence of racial disparities. For example, in 1968, Hobson wrote an article for the *Saturday Evening Post*, which markedly increased his visibility as an advocate for black government workers. Entitled “Uncle Sam is a Bigot,” it criticized the federal government for being slow to improve black representation within higher ranks, citing statistical data from a 1966 Civil Service Commission Study. Soon, more black employees than ever before contacted Hobson with tales of how they had been blocked or stalled from achieving federal promotions.

One of these workers was Brad Johnson, who wrote to Hobson two months after the *Post* article appeared. Omitting the name of his agency, likely for self-protection, Johnson noted that he worked “in the mail room as a GS-2 Messigner [sic], and I have not been able to advance any

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Johnson mentioned that he had earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in business administration with a minor in economics and had managed to obtain a real estate broker’s license in his spare time. He was also a veteran of World War II. While Johnson did not mention where he obtained his college degree, likely indicative of a disadvantaged educational background, Johnson was unable to spell his own occupation title correctly. Nonetheless, in reflecting on his stalled career, Johnson lamented: “I have a family to support and educate, my children like to wear nice clothes and have some of the things in life for enjoyment like all red-blooded Americans.”

In 1969, Malissa J. Bozman, a black procurement clerk for the Defense Construction Supply Company, contacted Hobson for help. Bozman reported, “I have been employed in Federal Service for the past 19 years and in my present grade for the past 6 years.” The six years of career stagnation for Bozman exceeded the five-year average for other black federal workers and was a source of confusion for her. Bozman confided that her “201 file according to performance ratings does not show poor Potentials, Initiative, or lack of Experience but after 19 years I’m only a GS-4.” She reported to work for years knowing that her chances of upward advancement were slim.

Julius Hobson made it his personal mission to find data to support the complaints of federal workers like Johnson and Bozman. At a 1969 hearing before the Senate Subcommittee on Labor and Public Welfare, he quoted a survey by the Library of Congress, which found that 6% and 5% of the white and black employees had college and post-graduate degrees respectively.

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53 Letter from Brad Johnson of Detroit to Julius Hobson, June 10, 1968, PJH.
54 Ibid.
55 Letter to Julius Hobson from Malissa J. Bozman, August 25, 1969, PJH.
But blacks obtained promotions once every five years, while whites within the same department landed promotions once every fifteen months.\textsuperscript{56}

The stories told to Hobson demonstrated that change for black federal workers remained elusive, even after passage of the Civil Rights Act. What mostly changed over time were the style, method and manner in which discrimination took place. As Arthur Fletcher, the former Assistant Secretary of Labor remarked: “I received the shock of my life to discover that in 1969 the Department of Labor was looked upon as a bastion of liberalism and considered one of the best departments in government with reference to black and brown employment.” In reflecting upon the small number of blacks in upper level positions at Labor despite significant efforts to increase black participation, Fletcher continued, “I remember saying to myself, ‘If this represents liberalism, then Lord save us from the liberals.’”\textsuperscript{57}  

**REFLECTING UPON CIVIL RIGHTS PROGRESS**

*More than Exclusion*

Implementing anti-discriminatory measures was a far more complex task than creating them. Whereas the President of the United States could issue an executive order calling for a new study, coordinating the efforts of thousands of individuals within the federal workforce to implement the study’s recommendations proved more challenging. Many white supervisors and

\textsuperscript{57} Bureaucrat, “Minority Perspectives on Bureaucracy” 2, no. 2 (Summer 1973), 139.
colleagues of black employees, some through intentional acts, some unwittingly through “bad habits,” continued with daily practices that contributed to the devaluation of blacks, and the hyper-scrutiny of black job performance which resulted in higher incidents of discipline and punishment. Despite increasing official support for equity through grievance mechanisms and data collection, numerous instances of racial discrimination persisted. Overt discrimination gave way to marginalization (see Table 4.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4.2  Black Federal Workers Progress Chart</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Segregation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• dirtiest and most dangerous jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• enforced physical separation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• limited access to any job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marginalization</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• lowest paid jobs, jobs with lowest GS rating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• encouraged integration of public spaces (e.g., cafeteria)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• limited access to upper-level jobs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Here, 1965 serves as the definitive transition date from Segregation to Marginalization. Signed in 1965, the Voting Rights Act preceded by the Civil Rights Act the year before. Both acts together represent the high watermark in the civil rights movement that greatly influenced how the public perceived discrimination.

A common justification for the marginalized roles of black collar employees was that they lacked formal experience. Julius Hobson fought to open opportunities closed to blacks that led to valuable experiences. He inquired into the availability of federal summer jobs (e.g., in the U.S. Senate) for black students, which traditionally had gone to whites, often ones related to a lawmaker or official. “The problem,” he charged, “is not overt discrimination in present
employment practices but rather the failure to use affirmative recruiting procedures which might result in attracting Negro college students.**58**

Even though Congress excluded the federal government from the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the struggles that black federal workers endured while on the job were relatively tolerable in relation to a less transparent and openly hostile private sector.**59** But that only made continued discrimination in the public sector harder to bear. As Kent Corey, Director of Manpower and Training for an unnamed federal agency asked Hobson in 1968, “How can we point the finger of blame at private industry for discriminatory employment practices when our own government not only condones but encourages discrimination?”**60**

During the 1960s, most black federal workers continued to experience slower promotion rates and lower pay, despite stated policies that should have narrowed or eliminated such disparities. Advocating for black workers was easier said than done given the increased social pressure to acknowledge unprecedented social progress and new civil rights measures. While the unavoidable inconsistencies gave advocates like Hobson an opportunity to point out the gap between rhetoric and action, many agencies avoided disclosing statistics on their progress in ending discrimination to avoid embarrassment or reprimand over such shortcomings. In one case, Theodore S. Hesburgh, President of the University of Notre Dame and Chairman of the U.S.

**58** Letter to Julius Hobson from Berl I. Bernhard, staff director, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, April 15, 1963, PJH.

**59** As a reminder of how outside the federal government, blacks could obtain only laborer or service-type jobs,” within a crowded metropolitan area like the District of Columbia, the city’s Work Training Opportunity Center reported in 1968 that 98.4% of all applicants seeking training for new jobs were “Negro.” While the city’s black population was still growing in the postwar era, the 98.4% showing suggests overrepresentation in an area that was difficult to bear without federal protection. Department of Public Welfare, “Work Training Opportunity Center” 3 no.5 (May 1968), 3, PJH.

**60** Letter to Hobson from Kent Corey, Director of Manpower & Training, Commission on Economic Opportunities, June 8, 1968, PJH.
Civil Rights Commission, alleged that the White House tried to delay the publication of an October 1970 report charging the federal government with violating its own anti-discrimination policies in the hiring, promotion and tenure of blacks until after the November 3 election. The White House alleged that the report, although eighteen months in the making, would be “harmful” and was concerned about the timing of the report’s release to which Hesburgh responded: “We didn’t share their concern.”

Accordingly, the Civil Service Commission in late 1969 authorized a controversial method for keeping racial data in view of the difficulty associated with having federal agencies voluntarily maintain accurate demographic records for racial analysis. In order to prevent agency “flip-flops trying to determine the race of workers,” employees would revive a racially coded upon sight when hired. (e.g., “Negro” = Code 1, “Spanish American” = Code 2, etc.). The CSC admitted that the sight observations by federal administrators “are necessarily broad and therefore not anthropologically precise,” but nonetheless felt that the new program was “adequate to meet program needs.”

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More than Money

The federal grievance system, despite the best intentions of its architects, lacked designs to make victims whole in the present moment; it relied upon paying monetary damages for past discrimination. Yet, for black federal workers themselves, the money could not remedy the cumulative effects of innumerable social slights – both perceived and real – suffered over a long period. For example, Charles E. Shipp, a plasterer for General Services Administration (GSA), suffered discipline in early 1969 for complaining about GSA’s delay in promoting him. Shipp was a college graduate with twenty-one years of government service, but never received a promotion during his tenure with the federal government.63

Hence, for educated workers like Shipp performing their jobs amidst expectations of advancing their careers, it was virtually impossible to determine when a negative performance evaluation blocking advancement was truly constructive criticism or something more pernicious. Yet, in documenting and reporting every microaggression or small instance of possible racial hostility, black employees like Shipp risked appearing petty. To add insult to injury, once Shipp formally complained, he received a formal letter of reprimand inside his file.

Similarly, in 1968 federal employee John Craven contacted Julius Hobson and described the frustration: “I am speaking from 23 years of federal service. The average unsuspecting black is…brain washed into believing the system is fair because it represents the federal government.”64 Craven’s language of “brain washed” implicates that in return for secure employment, the government is “buying” silence or cooperation from those black employees

64 Letter to Julius Hobson from John Craven, April 26, 1968, PJH.
fortunate enough with employment. When Craven said, “brainwashed,” perhaps he referred to a mindset that eschewed direct critique and activism in exchange for political favor. Craven elaborated that if brainwashing did not occur, the average black federal employee “becomes so completely disgusted and frustrated he gives up, or he decides to fight and is finally trapped in a maze [sic] of ambiguous [sic] never ending red tape and ultimately he becomes the victim of unwarranted reprisals and variour [sic] other forms of mental torture with no hope of justice and redress of his grievance.” Here, Craven describes the psychological costs of submerging himself within a system intolerant of his presence. As the postwar era progressed, discrimination took a larger toll on black federal workers beyond their devalued paychecks. Life as a black collar employee was taxing in many, many ways.

Hence, Julius Hobson’s long career, as federal employee and fierce advocate, provided a public referendum on the changing but still taxing relationship between black federal workers and the federal government. During World War II, the federal government adopted a passive stance against discrimination within the workplace. A few left-leaning agencies like the Office of Price Administration (OPA) addressed racial disparities but had only limited success applying them in the absence of civil rights laws. Immediately after the war, federal commissions like the President’s Committee on Civil Rights produced data backing up the grievances of black workers and called for action to remedy them. But well into the 1960s, despite passage of right legislation, many white federal workers and administrators alike resisted black advancement. Many workers still observed racial customs and traditions outside the workplace, making the transition towards a bias-free workplace difficult. Activists like Hobson pushed back against this

65 Ibid.
stubborn reality. When Hobson died in 1973, the Washington Post eulogized him as a man who “made a career of impatience, of speaking out when other men held back.” The obituary concluded, “he was outrageous, inflammatory, melodramatic, insulting. A lot of the time, he also was right.”

66 Gorney, “Julius Hobson Dies.”
CHAPTER FIVE

“MAYBE IT JUST SAGS”:
BLACK POSTAL WORKERS STRUGGLE FOR IMPROVED CONDITIONS, 1969-1971

BLACK POSTAL WORKERS IN THE NATION’S CAPITAL

As the nature of governmental discrimination changed over time, black federal workers were more likely to struggle against marginalization rather than outright exclusion from good jobs themselves. Marginalization was more difficult to address systematically since it was more subtle, covert and sophisticated than the old Jim Crow order. A prominent struggle against marginalization took place during the 1970 wildcat postal strike and the subsequent reorganization of the Post Office Department. The black federal workers involved continued to fight disparities in pay and rank in contrast to their white colleagues within a post-civil rights environment in which anti-discrimination policies had gained legitimacy.

Overall, public sector employment rates more than doubled in the two decades following World War II.¹ In an era of unprecedented high birth rates, the growth of the Post Office Department kept pace with population increases, which led to a boom in employment for blacks that were able to obtain stable incomes and job security. Specifically, nearly one-fifth (17.8%) of all postal employees nationwide were black in 1969.² In such urban areas as Houston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Cleveland, Detroit and Los Angeles, blacks constituted more than forty

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¹ “Government employment between 1947 and 1967 increased from 5.5 million to 11.6 million, with about 85 percent of that growth occurring on the state and local level.” Robert Zieger and Gilbert J. Gall, American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 164.
percent of the postal work force nationwide in 1967.³ And they were a clear majority in Chicago and Washington, D.C., constituting two-thirds of the total postal employees.⁴ At Washington, D.C.’s main post office in 1967, 93% of all working postal employees were black.⁵ By 1975, the Post Office was the largest employer of blacks in the nation.

Post Office employment was significant for black workers because of the steady work it provided along with its large offering of social capital. Many black postal workers had highly visible and integral jobs driving mail trucks, delivering mail to homes, and servicing customers at post office facilities. As George E. Johnson, who later became a self-made millionaire and CEO of a cosmetic company, recalled: “Like many other blacks, I found the post office meant opportunity and a chance to get ahead. It has always been out front in offering equal employment opportunities to minority groups.”⁶

Such increased visibility demonstrated that blacks were integral to the federal government’s operations and were no longer content to sweep federal hallways in relative anonymity. In 1956, black postal employee A.L. Glenn, Jr. reflected on both the concrete financial and abstract social benefits of working for the Post Office in the postwar era when he observed that the income “enabled those with regular or steady income to buy homes, educate their children, and make choice investments which were beyond the worker’s means. Even in the

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³ See Post Office Department, “Information Service,” October 13, 1967, PJH. “A study shows that the post office is the leading employer of Negroes in 12 major cities, Postmaster General Lawrence F. O’Brien reported.” O’Brien went on to say that “[i]n several instances, the post office percentages were more than twice those of other employers and even of the Negro population itself.”
⁵ National Alliance of Postal Employees President Ashby Smith stated that at Washington D.C.’s main post office, 93% of the employees were black while 89% of the supervisory staff was white. Washington Post, “3 Rights Groups Hit Bias in Postal Jobs: Bad Money Case,” October 18, 1967.
⁶ National Alliance, “Notes,” 20, no. 5 (May 1971): 27. Johnson, a manufacturer of hair products, was eventually appointed to the United States Postal Service Board of Governors after a successful business career.
backward areas of the country, Negro postal employees remarked with pride how they were called ‘Mister.’”

The United States Post Office Department employed over a quarter of all federal employees generally. By 1969, it accounted for nearly one-third of all black federal employment (31.8%). Only the Department of Defense employed a larger percentage of black employees (see Table 5.1). Therefore, a case study detailing the largest group of black federal workers in Washington, D.C. and their participation in one of the largest federal work stoppages to date will illuminate the evolving status of black federal workers during the civil rights era.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>% of all employees</th>
<th>% of Minority Group employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defense</td>
<td>41.89</td>
<td>36.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Post Office</strong></td>
<td><strong>27.01</strong></td>
<td><strong>31.85</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEW</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>5.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treasury</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent agencies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans Administration</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>8.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GSA</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>2.94</td>
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The postal wildcat strike of 1970 and its aftermath are significant for three reasons. First, the strike showed how federal workers could make their voices heard for substantial changes within the federal workplace. Second, the job action allowed a glimpse into worker solidarity and collaboration across racial lines. But, lastly, the strike also showed how black federal workers still struggled to make their specific needs relevant since reforms that aided most postal workers did not help black postal workers as much as their white colleagues.

**Black Postal Workers Organize**

*Birth of a Union*

Black postal workers’ experiences in the 1970 wildcat strike cannot be understood without knowing the long history of the largest union of black postal workers: the National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees (National Alliance). The organization began as a direct response to President Woodrow Wilson’s decree to segregate federal employees in 1913. Wilson acted upon the recommendation of Postmaster General Alfred Burleson, who strenuously objected to black and white postal workers sharing facilities and equipment on tightly spaced railway cars delivering interstate mail.9

Some black postal workers saw the segregation order as a direct challenge to their livelihood and mounted an enduring response. In October of 1913, at the base of Lookout Mountain in Chattanooga, Tennessee, they formed the National Alliance. Unlike other existing

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postal unions that were skill and craft specific (e.g., Railway Mail Carriers, Postal Letter Carriers), the Alliance organized itself as an industrial union. National Alliance leadership, concerned about creating solidarity among all black postal workers, opted for an organizing model that alleviated the need for black workers to choose affiliations based upon their specific skills. In addition, the mostly white unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) discouraged or refused black membership at the time, which left black postal workers who felt they needed a union with little alternative.

Yet, from the first, the National Alliance acted more like a civil rights organization than a traditional union. Lacking any formal power to collectively bargain with the government as a union, the Alliance leadership saw its main function as maintaining dignity, respect and relevance for their members. Given the size of the Post Office Department, the Alliance also had a pool of potential members, particularly in Washington, D.C., larger than in any other federal agency. However, national leadership lamented that out of a potential 2,500 members, membership only hovered around 400 persons in the early stages before 1925.

While the National Alliance wanted to help lower-ranked postal workers, it resolved to challenge the notion that black workers were only fit for entry-level positions. From its

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10 Craft unionism refers to an approach to union organizing in the United States and elsewhere that seeks to unify workers in a particular industry along the lines of the particular craft or trade in which they work. It contrasts with industrial unionism, in which all workers in the same industry are organized into the same union, regardless of differences in skill. Before the Post Office Department was reorganized in 1971, postal unions were largely divided along racial and craft lines.

11 Craft unionism refers to an approach to union organizing in the United States and elsewhere that seeks to unify workers in a particular industry along the lines of the particular craft or trade that they work in. It contrasts with industrial unionism, in which all workers in the same industry are organized into the same union, regardless of differences in skill.

12 Glenn, History of the National Alliance of Postal Employees, 56.

13 “Entrenched beliefs about the demigration of labor done by blacks convinced government managers that they should, for the sake of productivity, segment blacks into low-paying menial jobs so as to elevate the status of ‘white’ occupations” Rung, 98; “black employees, if hired at all, belonged at the bottom of the labor hierarchy,” Ibid., 160.
found into the 1960s, the Alliance was a prime example of what labor historian Michael Honey calls a tradition of civil rights unionism.\(^{14}\) National Alliance members increasingly sought to use the organization to secure higher pay, perfect their craft, and foster social and political interactions among members.\(^{15}\) At the same time, the Alliance remained engaged in the larger cause of black freedom. Over the years, it contributed donations to the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Congressional Black Caucus, the Leadership Conference for Civil Rights, and the National Political Congress of Black Women.\(^{16}\)

By 1948, Alliance membership totaled 25,000, spread across several states and the District of Columbia, and spanned several states after the war in 1948. It had established itself as the primary advocate for black postal workers. Its membership peaked in the 1960s at about 50,000.\(^{17}\)

For half a century, Alliance leaders remained wary of collaborating with formerly discriminatory white-led unions and stressed the importance of remaining independent. This stance emboldened them to protest against the federal government without seeking approval from other labor groups. In 1941, for example, the Alliance teamed up successfully with the NAACP to campaign for the elimination of the photo requirement on federal job applications.

\(^{14}\) Michael Keith Honey, *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 237. For example, it was common to see poems extolling the virtue of members collectively exercising the right vote in “Don’t be a Billy Goat.” *Postal Alliance* 9, no. 9 (Sep., 1960), 3.

\(^{15}\) “The National Alliance, for example, regularly published news of activist Alliance members. They could be found in Baltimore joining with CORE to picket segregated theaters in 1963; marching in Austin, Texas, with the NAACP for a broad equal opportunity city ordinance in 1964; or picketing in Pittsburgh with other civil rights groups for passage of the Civil Rights Act and against discrimination at the post office in 1964-65.” Phillip F. Rubio, *There's Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 203.

\(^{16}\) *National Alliance*, October 1999, 14.

used mostly to discriminate against and screen out black applicants. The Civil Service Commission gave in and substituted fingerprints as a means of identification instead.  

_A Community Outside of Work_

Even with desegregated federal workplaces, the National Alliance retained its separate, race-based identity. Divided into ten separate districts with branches in thirty-seven states, both regional and national chapters sponsored various activities designed to fostered group feeling among its members, who increasingly earned decent, even middle-class incomes but were usually excluded, formally or informally, from events sponsored by whites. Alliance activities included dances, basketball tournaments, poetry contests and even cruises. Coronation balls, pageants, and fashion-shows created social spaces that allowed black postal workers to literally shed their uniforms and feel validated (if not glamorized) by their peers. Such events fostered camaraderie and _esprit de corps_ among members, thereby underscoring the Alliance’s value in offering members more than an easier way to higher wages – it was a _way of life._

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19 *Postal Alliance* 14, no. 9 (Sep., 1965). On the cover is a picture of Dr. Martin Luther King, Rev. Thomas Kilgore, and Mrs. Ella M. Hillman with the caption, “Dollars for Justice and Equality.” King received $1,000 check to aid in the fight for justice and equality for all citizens from NAPFE (represented by National President of the Women’s Auxiliary of NAPFE). Or consider the fact that NAPFE President Robert White received the George H. Richardson Award for his contribution to civil rights, letter dated February 13, 1973 from Postmaster General E.T. Klassen to NAPFE President Robert White, RNAPFE. Additionally, see *Postal Alliance* 9, no. 2 (Feb., 1960), 9 for an example of how political power for black postal workers is manifested through newfound middle class status. *Postal Alliance* profiles how a group of twenty-five civic leaders pledged $25,000 to the civil rights movement, $1,000 each over ten years. Included in this group of black elites was an attorney, a physician and surgeon and Rev. Charles G. Pritchett, post office employee; *Postal Alliance* 12, no. 3 (Mar., 1963), 21.  
20 *Daily Defender*, “Alliance Draws 2,500 at 19th Annual Dance,” October 4, 1962. Additional examples include: “The Coronation Ball is given annually by the Kansas City Branch Alliance.” *Postal Alliance* 12, no. 1 (Jan., 1963), 18-21; fashion show and “Miss Alliance” contest, *National Alliance*, May, 1970, 18. For signs of growing middle class, NAPFE offered after a national convention a tour to exotic Nassau - either on an air tour or on a luxury cruise ship.
The Alliance also held a national conference every two years and offered various services to union members, including a monthly magazine, *National Alliance*.\(^{21}\) While billing itself as an industrial rather than craft union, the Alliance assisted the professional development of its members, a function more commonly found within craft unions. The Alliance also offered leadership training classes to help newly minted black supervisors navigate sensitive issues, such as how to provide direction to unwilling white supervisees or how to lobby for new training and promotion opportunities.\(^{22}\) And its close ties to black Masonic lodges and churches enabled it to recruit new members.

Externally, Alliance leaders bristled over their exclusion from negotiations between white-led unions and the government over postal working conditions and pay. Yet, internally, the union debated the best strategy for combating such exclusion and, at times, seemed torn over how to end it. In 1966, the Alliance stated, “[w]e cannot claim unfair treatment and point out discriminatory practices and win our arguments and then settle back contentedly into positions at the bottom of the economic ladder. We have won the battle to achieve equal rights, but it appears that a different enemy is even more difficult to overcome. That enemy may be ourselves.”\(^{23}\) Hence, in addition to criticisms of white authorities, the Alliance’s organ often published pieces intended to help members endear themselves to the very same authorities. Such communications often took the form of “reminders” to remain punctual or admonitions to execute job functions with the highest precision. The unstated assumption was that excellent work would obtain recognition, regardless of historical conditions and burdens.

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\(^{21}\) Subsequently, between December 1965 and January 1966, NAPFE changed the name of its monthly publication from *Postal Alliance* to *National Alliance*. No official explanation was provided as to why in the January 1966 issue.

\(^{22}\) For instance, NAPFE conducted leadership training workshops. *Postal Alliance* 12, no. 3 (March 1963), 2.

\(^{23}\) *National Alliance* 15, no. 3 (March 1966), 15.
Yet, the National Alliance also steadily advanced its vision of civil rights unionism in order to help black federal workers advance both inside and outside the workplace. In 1965, after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. received a $1,000 check from the Alliance, he came to the group’s convention to offer his gratitude and a prophecy: “And so our job is a big one in the days ahead, but I can assure you that we will continue to work with the faith that we can solve the problem and that, we as a people can be brought into the mainstream of America.”

**Federal Recognition of Union Rights**

While National Alliance membership never topped more than one-third of all black postal workers, it remained a strong voice for black workers until January 17, 1962. On that day, President Kennedy signed Executive Order 10988, which allowed limited collective bargaining for federal employees for the first time, and opened the door to federal employee union membership under three different classifications: informal, formal and exclusive recognition.

Of the three different classes of union representation it stipulated, informal recognition was the easiest to obtain. With no minimum vote requirements, representatives from unions with informal recognition merely gathered and presented their concerns to the government. Unions with formal recognition required at least ten percent of the vote in an election and had consultation rights with union members on personnel matters. However, only those unions obtaining the majority vote of any craft obtained exclusive recognition and could engage the

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federal government in collective bargaining – so long as the union avoided discriminating against members of other unions.

The executive order placed the National Alliance at an immediate disadvantage because of its industrial rather than craft based organizational structure. While the broader industrial foundation enabled Alliance to maintain solidarity among black postal workers, it hindered its ability to win specific recognition from the federal government.

Alliance leaders made bold statements intended to get around this problem. Although the organization only represented a quarter of all black postal employees, in 1970 Alliance President Ashby B. Smith asserted, “I am confident that our organization can also count on the full support of the 200,000 employees of the Post Office Department in any action which may be necessary to protect the rights of our membership under the executive order.” Smith went on to protest that, “the concept of craft was so firmly fixed in the minds of postal management as they determined that craft should be the basis for union recognition under the Employee Management Cooperation Program created by Executive Order 10988, that they refused to consider any other basis.”

However, Smith miscalculated the degree of support the Alliance could expect. Soon after Kennedy issued E.O. 10988, elections held in the summer of 1962 determined the three classes of recognition (e.g., informal, formal and exclusive) at three different levels: national, regional and local. The largest postal unions, like the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) and United Federation of Postal Clerks (UFPC), easily won national exclusive

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26 *National Alliance*, “From the President’s Desk” 15, no. 2 (Feb., 1966), 2.
recognition after securing majority votes from their sectors of the labor force.\textsuperscript{27} As further evidence of the advantage the larger unions had, UFPC also won exclusive recognition in fourteen out of fifteen possible regions. Conversely, the National Alliance won exclusive recognition in only a few elections, with its most notable victory coming in a local Philadelphia election to represent motor vehicle operators only.\textsuperscript{28} But nationally and regionally, the Alliance remained shut out despite a sizeable membership of 50,000 members.\textsuperscript{29}

By way of comparison, by 1971, membership for the National Association of Letter Carriers was roughly 175,000 and the membership of the United Federation of Postal Clerks was at least 115,000 in 1961.\textsuperscript{30} While smaller in amount, the National Alliance’s membership size demonstrated the collective strength of an organization that was only pooling from a demographic group that constituted only 13\% of the nation’s total population. Given the smaller amount of blacks employed generally, the significant membership numbers of the National Alliance should have been too big to ignore.

Thus, the executive order, by granting exclusive membership almost entirely to interracial unions, undercut the very reason for the Alliance’s existence. It essentially became a victim of the growing legitimacy of the civil rights movement. Since Executive Order 10988 created a financial disincentive to remain segregated, other postal unions rushed to sign up black employees, as public sector union membership mushroomed among workers of all races.

\textsuperscript{27} Rubio, \textit{There’s Always Work at the Post Office}, 157.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Daily Defender}, “Alliance Unit Raps Nixon’s Postal Plan; Denies Merger,” March 9, 1970.
Although the National Alliance was the oldest industrial union within the federal
government, it never fully manifested its potential power.\textsuperscript{31} In 1970, the local D.C. branch
counted 3,000 members among an estimated 10,000 black postal workers in the city. \textsuperscript{32} Out of
some 713,000 postal employees, 19\% or 138,000 employees were black, and roughly one-third
of them were members of the Alliance. According to President Ashby Smith, the National
Alliance “could not hope to win a majority in a national election contest with craft organizations
and therefore would be unable to represent its members if some form of recognition other than
‘national exclusive’ did not exist.”\textsuperscript{33} Without obtaining “exclusive recognition,” the Alliance was
unable to represent black postal workers in any official capacity. Consequently, the Alliance
started losing membership to white-led unions almost immediately after E.O. 10988, slipping
from its apex of 50,000 to roughly 40,000 by the time the strike hit in 1970.

In 1965, the Alliance tried to halt its decline by opening its rolls to any federal worker of
any race and changed its name to the National Alliance of Postal \textit{and Federal} Employees
(Alliance). That year, at its fifty-second annual convention, the organization stated that it
“recognized the need for change when it voted to change the name of our union so that it will
more accurately mirror the field of our endeavor.”\textsuperscript{34} Leaders explained that the name change
only signified that “we have expanded our functions and services.”\textsuperscript{35} In actuality, it was a

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Black Enterprise}, “Civil Service: The Streamlining of the New Postal Service Raises some Old Fears as Agency
Eyes Move to Suburbia” 2, no. 9 (Apr., 1972), 25.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{National Alliance}, “From the President’s Desk,” 15, no. 2 (Feb., 1966), 2.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Postal Alliance} 14, no. 9 (Sep., 1965), 2.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
desperate attempt to survive, stay relevant and better obtain exclusive recognition from the federal state.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{Wildcat Strike}

By 1970, deteriorating job conditions threatened to dilute the economic benefits of most postal jobs. The continued use of decrepit buildings and defunct equipment made their work more difficult.\textsuperscript{37} Furthermore, postal workers felt their pay was too low and their unique public service undervalued.\textsuperscript{38} In February 1969, when the members of Congress voted themselves a 41\% pay increase, federal employees received only an across-the-board boost of 4.1\%, a disparity that seemed particularly egregious to many postal workers.\textsuperscript{39}

The apparent equality of that small pay raise obscured a deeper inequality. The \textit{National Alliance} complained that the young pages “who run errands for the Senators on Capitol Hill, will receive a pay boost comparable to that of postal employees…the Senate page in almost every case is a teenager; the postal employee, on the other hand is the head of a family.”\textsuperscript{40} The economic crunch that many black postal workers felt was all the more acute since most held low-

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Rubio, \textit{There's Always Work at the Post Office}, 197.
\item \textsuperscript{37} “An estimated 4,000 overcrowded postal facilities, some with leaking roofs and crumbling walls, were judged to have inadequate ventilation, lighting, and sanitary facilities – conditions that the Postal Service inherited from the old Post Office Department,” Gerald Cullinan, \textit{The United States Postal Service}, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1968), 183.
\item \textsuperscript{38} For example, Joseph Henry, black postal worker and NALC Branch 142 President in Washington, D.C. (which was 60\% black in 1970) was a letter carrier who qualified for food stamps while working out of Anacostia Station. Rubio, \textit{There's Always Work at the Post Office}, 249.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{40} \textit{National Alliance} 19, no. 5 (May 1970), 4.
\end{itemize}
wage positions and had to “work two jobs, or his wife must work, just to make ends meet.”\(^{41}\) In 1969, about eighty percent of all black postal employees were at the GS-9 level or lower (see Table 5.2) compared to just over a third of white ones.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Agency</th>
<th>Minority</th>
<th>Non-minority</th>
<th>% Gap</th>
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<td>86.7</td>
<td>65.1</td>
<td>21.6</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Post Office</strong></td>
<td><strong>77.9</strong></td>
<td><strong>36.3</strong></td>
<td><strong>41.6</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>90.6</td>
<td>65.2</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>GSA</td>
<td>94.2</td>
<td>63.9</td>
<td>30.3</td>
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The concentration of black employees on the bottom half of the Post Office Department’s economic scale was consistent with the pattern at other large federal agencies although it is telling that disparity gap was largest with the Post Office at 41.6%. In Washington, D.C., in 1969, black federal employees represented 60.3% of all employees classified in the lower GS

\(^{41}\) *National Alliance* 19, no. 4 (April, 1970), 4.
levels 1-4 in contrast to only 38.6% of their white colleagues. But 97.6% of all employees at the upper GS 16-18 levels were white compared with 1.6% of all black employees.42

In the spring of 1970, black postal workers expressed their dissatisfaction by participating, with most of their white colleagues, in an unprecedented wildcat strike. Some 200,000 workers took part in the strike, which began on March 18, closing down services in more than thirty major cities and in approximately 671 different workplaces.43 In spite of the high participation rate by black postal workers and the Alliance’s sympathy with their discontent, the organization officially declared it to be “‘the wrong tactic at the wrong time’ to achieve” its goals.44 Likely as indirect acknowledgement of their weakened position, National Alliance leadership advocated an “officially” more conservative approach towards collective bargaining in order to improve its chances of mediating the exact same issues at an upcoming date.

The strike’s crippling effect on the economy forced President Richard Nixon to declare a state of emergency. As social security checks, legal filings, and paychecks all began to pile up in post offices, Nixon mobilized 30,000 National Guard troops to do the work.45 When the strike ended two weeks later, it had succeeded in convincing federal authorities to bargain collectively with postal workers – and to move toward reorganizing the postal service as a corporate entity.46

44 National Alliance 19, no. 5 (May 1970), 2.
45 Brenner, 148.
46 National Alliance 19, no. 5 (May 1970), 2.
In the summer of 1971, Congress reorganized the Post Office Department as a semi-public corporation renamed as the United States Postal Service (USPS). Some government officials publicly complained about this move, believing it would do little to improve efficiency. In addition, the leaders of the National Alliance leadership protested that their members felt forced to accept a new structure that favored their white colleagues and excluded the concerns of black workers. As Alliance District #2 President Alonzo A. Adams stated, “the union was not averse to postal reform, but concerned about the manner in which reform has been inaugurated.”

Yet, before the new USPS came into being, the struggle to determine which unions would represent its workers had already begun. The only unions invited to negotiate with the government to end the 1970 wildcat strike were the white-majority craft unions – led by the National Postal Union under the leadership of Moe Biller. The National Postal Union claimed members in the crafts of postal clerks and mail handlers, tracing its origins to the National Federation of Postal Clerks, which started in 1906 in Chicago.

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48 See Transcribed notes on National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees Hearings, August 11, 1971, USPS Postmaster General Correspondence, PNAFE.

When the federal government sat down to bargain with federal postal employees, black postal workers, at least officially, required one of the white-led unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO to communicate its needs and desires. Of course, the National Alliance protested its exclusion and remained wary of cooperating, in a subservient manner, with those unions. It was essential, declared Bob White, Alliance president in 1971, for the group to retain its autonomy since it had a “historical commitment to always defend black postal workers when other unions let them down.” But suffering exclusion from the talks ending the big strike was just one of many obstacles the Alliance would face in its struggle to survive as the voice of African-Americans in the business of delivering the nation’s mail.

Three Missed Opportunities

Even before the great wildcat strike of 1970, the National Alliance had missed three chances to become one of the unions representing black and other postal workers. The first two had occurred in the early 1960s – during the Kennedy administration. JFK’s Executive Order 10988 had the effect of giving exclusive recognition only to the seven largest craft unions – which all belonged to the AFL-CIO. Then Kennedy’s Executive Order 10925 discouraged the practice of segregated local unions, which only accelerated the all-black Alliance’s downward membership. It put the Alliance in competition with larger white-led unions for black loyalty since – unlike the case for white postal employees – many blacks were members of both. While

50 White, Bob “From the National Office,” National Alliance (March 1971), 2. White was installed as NAPFE president in 1971. See also Rubio, There’s Always Work at the Post Office, 271.
many black postal workers stood to gain economically by joining larger white-led unions with political connections, they did at the cost of their independence and racial solidarity.

Then, in October of 1969, President Nixon issued another Executive Order, 11491, which further hindered the Alliance’s ability to represent the interests of black postal workers on any national stage. This executive order established a Federal Labor Relations Authority (FLRA) with the task of deciding which unions would win the right to exclusive recognition.\(^{51}\) E.O. 11491 technically allowed organizations “national consultation rights,” which the FLRA determined were “representative of a substantial number of employees of the agency.”\(^{52}\) But, in reality, it marginalized smaller outfits like the Alliance since it stated that national consultation rights “shall not be accorded for any unit where a labor organization already holds exclusive recognition at the national level for that unit.”\(^{53}\)

In July 1971, just after the new corporate USPS began operating, five of the largest AFL-CIO unions combined to increase their collective bargaining power as the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) on July 1, 1971.\(^{54}\) The APWU had the lion’s share of members in its industry and was the main union present at the table in every subsequent contract negotiation.\(^{55}\) In contrast, the Alliance, with no ability to represent its members in this way, could only assume

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\(^{52}\) Ibid., Section 9, note 53.

\(^{53}\) Ibid.

\(^{54}\) “Six postal unions merged into the 260,000-member American Postal Workers Union (AFL-CIO), an amalgamation that gave members a unified and much more impressive voice. The National Association of Letter Carriers (also AFL-CIO) with 240,000 members remained aloof from the merger but maintains close and friendly relations with the Postal Workers Union.” Cullinan, 250-51.

the distant role of advocate or racial conscience. It struggled to ensure that black postal workers received fair pay and essentially served as a civil rights “watchdog” for minority employees.\(^5^6\)

*New Direction, New Contract*

The Postal Service’s new, diminished role was evident with the first contract that the USPS negotiated with postal workers after the wildcat strike. The Alliance was displeased with the pay increase negotiated and wanted more for its members.\(^5^7\) Under the new contract, postal workers earned $1,250 more spread over a two-year period plus a $300 bonus and a Cost of Living Adjustment of $160 per employee. But Alliance leaders argued that the raise in base pay excluded both a cost of living adjustment and an annual performance bonus. Walter Hinton, an Alliance District President observed: “Seems they are now no happier with the bonus than Judas was with his 30 pieces of silver. I wonder if that too amounted to $300.00 minus tax? I think most employees now agree that they got the weenie.”\(^5^8\)

Loyal to their traditional mission, Alliance leaders were particularly uneasy about the long-term welfare of black postal workers. They feared the USPS’s elimination of job security protection and its power to suspend workers without a fair grievance procedure. After all, black workers had always been more vulnerable to layoff and penalties than white employees and so

\(^5^6\) “After the two-year term of this ‘sell out agreement,’ those employees who survive the double edged axes, will have another opportunity to select a union to represent them at a bargaining table.” *National Alliance* 20, no. 9 (Sep., 1971), 5.

\(^5^7\) Ibid. The national vice-president of NAPFE called the postal contract “a sham.”

\(^5^8\) *National Alliance* 20, no. 8 (Aug., 1971), 11.
were in greater need of strong grievance protocols. Further, the Alliance protested the brief mention of anti-racial discrimination in the new contract. Finally, under the new corporate structure, blacks were laid off in disproportionate numbers, since they occupied most of the “expendable,” i.e. low-paying positions.

**National Alliance Fights for Relevance & Respect**

The Alliance discovered that as time passed, so did memories. While the black-led union continued to protest a pattern of racial discrimination, it appeared stuck in time. For black postal employees who began their working careers after the end of legal Jim Crow, what mattered was that interracial postal labor unions were able to win higher wages for their members.

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59 Ibid., 12. See also letter from Walter Charkow, January 18, 1972, *Office of the Postmaster General*, General Correspondence, RG 28, NARA; Charkow is a postmaster who – successfully – defended himself against allegations that he stated “You people need be put in chains” to a black worker. Charkow acknowledges using the word “chains,” but only in reference to restraining an increasingly belligerent black laborer. *Springfield Star*, “Postal Workers Kept from Jobs” 2, no. 47 (Oct., 21, 1972). “Rumors circulated that the security guards were looking for a Black man. Yet, the lone Black female reporting to work was also stopped. Witnesses reported Black employees were made to pull over in their vehicles while lines of white employees were allowed to go on through.” As a corollary, a few days after this article appeared, “for fear of reprisal we remain anonymous” but in addressing the Postmaster General request for him to “exercise the powers of your office to relive the hammer of oppression off the heads of blacks here in Springfield.” Letter to Postmaster General E.T. Klassen from anonymous received October 26, 1972, RG 28, NARA. Further, acts of racial insensitivity were still reported after the reorganization, see letter from Mr. & Mrs. Paul Rosenblatt to Ted Klassen, Postmaster General dated June 27, 1972, RG 28, NARA, protesting dinner honoring retiring postmaster John B. Brass at the Santa Maria Elks Lodge which has limits membership to “whites only” in their by-laws; In a response letter dated July 17, 1972 from A.J. Prejean, Director, Office of Social Priorities to Mr. Paul Rosenblatt A.J. Prejean states “It is reported that any adverse publicity, unfavorable comments or complaints have been minimal.” RG 28, NARA.


61 As reported by District presidents at hearings District 2 President Alonzo A. Adams, “in Boston, Denver, and elsewhere, examinations for positions (which previously had guaranteed an equal chance to black job seekers) have been discontinued”; Yvonne Tucker, District 2 Labor Relations Director, “testified that reduction of personnel is being conducted through an increase in firings for offenses heretofore dealt with by letters of warning or other minor measures” and that “since July 1, removals and suspensions in Washington have quadrupled; that removals in Baltimore have doubled; and that supervisors are using the catch-all offense of ‘lack of reliability and dependability’ to reduce predominately black work forces.” See also Rudy Johnson, “Negroes Accuse Postal Service,” *New York Times*, August 12, 1971.
In the post-civil rights era, it became difficult to sustain a movement rooted in a history of militant protest. Late in 1971, the National Alliance lamented that “too many of us blacks are still ‘shucking and jiving,’ believing that we can survive in the new postal service being good Negroes.” Yet, without political support, playing the part of a “bad negro” made little financial sense.

Alliance leaders desperately tried to demonstrate that their union was still relevant since “blacks are nearly four times more likely than whites to experience disciplinary action from USPS management.” Yet, the Alliance president failed to gain an audience with the Postmaster General to discuss future representation and could not successfully broker a private meeting. In 1972, several postmasters even denied the National Alliance the same right to meet with and address newly hired employees although the APWU held such rights. Other postal unions, knowing that many Alliance members belonged to one of them as well, saw no reason to protest the exclusion of the venerable champion of black workers’ interests.

Yet, despite gains for postal employees overall, black workers remained mired in lower pay grades and positions. In May 1971, the cover of the National Alliance featured a picket sign

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64 Letter from NAPFE President Robert L. White to PMG Klassen, November 27, 1972, PNAFE. Such language is strikingly similar to another letter issued the same day concerning access to membership lists for recruitment. NAPFE leadership contended that “it is also entitled to be provided with the names and addresses of all postal employees, in the same numbers and manner as is done for the APWU. Please consider this as our request for such a listing.”
65 In a letter dated July 18, 1973 from Robert White to Postmaster General Klassen, RNAPFE, White expressed the hope that with termination of 1971 agreement, that the NAPFE would have a new opportunity to become involved in the negotiations. Meanwhile, beforehand in April, the Postal Coordinated Bargaining Committee consisting of the seven recognized unions, already had in motion plans to meet letter dated April 4, 1973 to Postmaster General E.T. Klassen from the Postal Coordinated Bargaining Committee, RG 28, NARA.
that read, “98% blacks retire at GS-4.” The periodical reported that 123,632 of 132,011 black postal employees (91%) were concentrated in the first five pay grades. Additionally, blacks comprised half or nearly half of all postal employees slotted at pay grades GS 1, GS 2 and GS 4, despite USPS employing four times as many whites as blacks overall.

Many black postal employees continued to call upon the Alliance when they ran into difficulties since the reorganization process did not end all discrimination at the workplace. For instance, in August of 1971, the National Alliance filed a federal lawsuit in U.S. District Court against the United States Postal Service for what they alleged was systemic and institutional exclusion from postmaster positions. After conducting hearings in a mix of different metropolitan cities across country, the National Alliance acquired data that suggested blacks’ upward career trajectories were at serious risk – even after reorganization. The suit alleged that only twenty blacks obtained appointments to the 6,950 fourth-class postmaster positions since November 30, 1969.

Hence, the National Alliance and black postal workers developed a distinct form of activism combining elements from both the labor movement and the civil rights movement to challenge both the government and the white leaders of organized labor to recognize and act to end racial inequality. It had also provided its members with a rich community outside the work

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66 National Alliance 20, no. 5 (May 1971).
67 National Alliance 10, no. 7 (July, 1970).
68 “Here at the U.S. Postal Service Headquarters positions are advertised, sometimes interviews are granted, sometimes they are not, but most of the times you are told that you do not qualify.” Letter dated May 6, 1974 from Linnell W. Reid to Postmaster General Klassen; see also Letter dated October 16, 1972 from Joseph L. Rutledge to Postmaster E.T. Klassen, RG 28, NARA: “in spite of the fact that we have had persons to pass the examination, they have not been able to qualify for positions in the local postal operations. From conversations with black citizens who have passed the exams as well as talks with some of the postal service administrators, it seems that the scores made, though passing, were not high enough.”
environment, one invaluable to cultivating the camaraderie and self-esteem of black postal workers. But the organization’s official publication acknowledged the group’s diminished role when it stated, in May, 1971, “The National Alliance will survive, and if we do no more than serve as ‘devil’s advocate’ to collective bargaining process, we still will be serving a useful and necessary purpose in behalf of minority employees in America.”

Ultimately, the Alliance never recovered from its exclusion from contract negotiations after the postal service’s reorganization. As historian Phillip Rubio observes, the “Alliance’s decades-old identity conundrum between labor union and civil rights organization had essentially been resolved for them over their objections. Without collective bargaining or grievance representation rights in the post office, they literally became the civil rights union.”

Ironically, the once-proud organization grew increasingly irrelevant with each new measure designed to protect federal workers from the early 1960s onward.

On Labor Day, 1970, President Nixon held a dinner attended by seventy top labor leaders and their wives, but Alliance president Robert White was not among the gathering. The Alliance interpreted the non-invitation as yet another slight since his union included over 40,000 black postal workers, more than any federal union in the country at the time. “[W]e cannot help but wonder Mr. President,” White remarked in protest, “is it because we’re black?”

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70 National Alliance 20, no. 5 (May 1971), 5.
71 Rubio, 274.
CHAPTER SIX
“LIKE A HEAVY LOAD”:
BLACKS IN GOVERNMENT RespondS TO DEFERRED OPPORTUNITIES, 1971-1980

WE’VE ONLY JUST BEGIN

Since joining the federal rolls in large numbers during and after WWII, black federal workers had continuously struggled against white colleagues and administrators’ perceptions of them as not up to the demands of their jobs. Even three decades after WWII, this prejudice still helped legitimate lower GS-ratings and slower promotion rates. In 1971, President Richard Nixon declared, “with blacks, you can usually settle for an incompetent, because there are just not enough competent ones, and so you put incompetents in and get along with them, because the symbolism is vitally important. You have to show you care.”¹ A year later, Arthur Parks, a lab technician at the National Institutes of Health told a Civil Service Commission hearing board that most of the NIH’s 3,000 black employees were “suffocating in thankless, low-paying, dead-end jobs, without any real prospects of meaningful advancement.”²

Unfortunately, Parks’ pronouncement was not limited to NIH. 81% of all black federal employees on the General Schedule or GS wage system in 1972 held rankings of GS 8 or lower. Similarly for the USPS’ separate, but similar wage system, 87.4% of all black workers were

ghettoized, or slotted at level 5 or below whereas only three-tenths of one percent were at level thirteen or above.\(^3\)

In 1975, these stubbornly persistent conditions served as the impetus for a new advocacy group, Blacks in Government (BIG). Its mission was to force the consistent application of civil rights laws, while urging black workers to support one another as members of an oppressed racial group. Yet, BIG’s *modus operandi* differed from the National Alliance labor union in that individualistic success in one’s career was of paramount concern. Whereas the National Alliance fought vigorously for better wages and working conditions for black postal workers collectively, BIG emphasized education and empowerment of the individual so that he or she could accomplish their own personal goals, whatever they deemed them to be within the federal workplace.

**Federal White Flight**

BIG took formation at a Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) office in Rockville, Maryland, thirty minutes north of Washington, D.C. by a small group of frustrated black federal employees. Fueling their discontent was, in part, their agency’s decision to move from downtown Washington, D.C. to the nearly all-white suburb almost a decade earlier. Government officials explained that such moves had nothing to do with race but rather had everything to do

with “the high cost of land for plant operations in the central cities.”\textsuperscript{4} However, arguing that they imposed disproportionate hardships on black workers, several HEW employees filed lawsuits in 1970 to prevent the move.\textsuperscript{5}

The lawsuits were unsuccessful, but federal officials did admit they had not considered the difficulties the move required of black employees from D.C., many of whom did not own cars and would have to pay more for child care on lower salaries than most whites received.\textsuperscript{6} For these federal “working poor,” an additional $350 estimated in annual bus fare and a doubling of commuting time to five or six hours, round-trip, made the move to Rockville hard to bear. One unidentified black employee testified to the D.C. Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1970 that, at the new suburban facility, that “[w]e see our [black] men there, and most of our men we see are either in the mail rooms, they are messengers, or they are working machines. This makes us know that they are in grades 1 through 5. Then they’re telling us about how their families are breaking up. I’m real concerned.”\textsuperscript{7} The move underscored the fragile bonds of trust between white administrators and black workers most black HEW employees learned about the agency’s move three years after administrators had made the decision and more than a year after the agency had leased the new building.\textsuperscript{8} While the decision to relocate to the suburbs was not \textit{racist per se}, the decision had undeniable \textit{racial effects}.

\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Afro American}, “Hardships Plague Federal Employees,” May 19, 1970.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
By the early 1970s, at least forty-two different departments from eighteen different federal agencies which employed over 14,000 workers had moved away from Washington, D.C. Several reasons influenced moving decisions: 1) the higher costs associated with a more densely populated area, 2) the perception that inner-city Washington, D.C. had become more dangerous and unattractive – especially after the 1968 riots – and 3) the constant growth of black population made an escape to the predominately white suburbs a natural fit.

Most white federal administrators were well aware of the effect these relocations would have on black workers. In 1971, for example, the Executive Assistant to the Postmaster General noted that his agency’s move to the suburbs, “also means we are moving away from the urban centers where most of our black employees live. Blacks have expressed concern about this. They see the Postal Service moving to the suburbs moving without them, like the whites have done.”

The suburbanization trend was challenging for many blacks who were unable to find low to moderate-cost housing or reliable transportation to their new job locations. At a District of Columbia Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in May 1970, Washington, D.C. resident Charles Mahone testified that in Montgomery County, Maryland – site of the new headquarters for federal agencies such as the NIH, HEW and Atomic Energy Commission – housing “is almost non-existent for the black people who work for the Federal

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11 Internal memorandum from Executive Assistant to the Postmaster General circa July 2, 1971, RG 28, NARA. In the same memorandum under the subtitle “Possible Courses of Action,” the memo suggested: “We should develop some kind of response to the concerns of the blacks in those cities where we are moving the facilities to the suburbs. It might be possible to develop a program for busing black employees from the cities to the new plants.”

12 A postal service spokesman said “admittedly, the move to the suburbs works hardship on some employees, white and black. But we have tried to soften the impact when it does occur.” Bart Barnes, “Blacks Said Losing Jobs in Post Office,” *Washington Post*, August 3, 1971.
Government because, by and large, those people who work for the Federal Government are the lower paid employees.” Mahone went on to report that newly constructed homes were selling for “$40,000, and anyone that earns $15,000 or less cannot afford to buy a house today in Montgomery County.” And I know very, very few black people who earn $15,000 a year.”

In 1970, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights condemned the racial impact of the move of agencies to the suburbs. Although “equal employment opportunity and equal housing opportunity are cornerstones of national policy,” the Commission found that “the Federal Government has been inadequately concerned with the impact of its site selection policy in achieving these related goals.” Many federal agencies, such as the General Services Administration (GSA), routinely disregarded explicit directives to avoid harmful moves to suburban locations. The U.S. Civil Rights Commission report thus concluded that if black federal workers “are to keep their jobs, black employees of federal agencies moving to the suburbs will face increasing housing and transportation difficulties.”

In early 1970, President Nixon issued Executive Order 11512, which put pressure on federal agencies to find new locations that would not cause hardships on employees with lower

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13 In contrast to the affluent Montgomery County, blacks populated more heavily the neighboring suburb of Prince George’s county, a county that bordered Northeast and Southeast D.C., or the two areas of the nation’s capital with the highest concentrations of working class and poor blacks. From 1960 to 1970, Prince George’s county population grew 84.8% to 661,719 and was 15% black. In contrast, Montgomery County, which borders the outgrowth of the majority-white, more affluent Northwest D.C. neighborhoods, grew 53.8% in population size from 1960 to 1970 to 522,809, but only 5.5% of its residents were black. From 1970 – 1990, due to accelerated white flight, new civil rights and fair housing laws, and stable salaries from sources such as the federal government, the black population inside Prince George’s County mushroomed from 15% to over 60%. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Maryland: Population of Counties by Decennial Census, 1900 – 1990, http://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/md190090.txt (accessed June 23, 2013).


16 Ibid.
pay grades. Entitled “Planning, Acquisition, and Management of Federal Space,” the order called for heads of executive agencies to consider “the need for development and redevelopment of areas and the development of new communities, and the impact a selection will have on improving social and economic conditions in the area” in addition to weighing the “availability of adequate low and moderate income housing,” and “adequate access from other areas of the urban center.”

But black federal employees were often dissatisfied with the government’s reluctance to state the racial implications of suburban moves. In 1974, HEW employee William Jenkins complained, “If I am an employee of…HEW which supposedly is the watchdog of the nation’s social conscience, and I am a participant to or an observer of my agency’s indiscriminate, inconsiderate, ill-planned moves to the suburbs…I think that’s a violation of my civil rights.”

GO FIGURE: MEASURING RACIAL PROGRESS

By 1970, while black workers struggled against the new trend of federal offices moving to suburban locations, they also continued to cope with their black collar status on the job. Despite the existence of civil rights laws and agencies to enforce them, eighty percent of blacks still were at the GS-8 or below. And it was still rare to find a top manager or administrator in federal ranks.

19 “The positive impact of race on probability of employment, together with the low Black/White earnings ratio, suggests that discrimination against black males occurs mainly in upgrading or in hiring to fill relatively well-paying
Nonetheless, black government employees, on average, were better off financially than African-Americans working within the private sector. The 1970 median household income for black families was only $6,279 in contrast to the GS 5-8 salaries that ranged from $7,178 - $10,987. Thus, any black federal employee compensated between grades GS 5-8 was either close to or slightly above the national median of $9,867, while being as high as 50% above the black national median.20

However, black federal workers still earned significantly less, on average, than did their white colleagues. Most blacks in the government made less than the 1970 white national median of $10,236. And white federal workers dominated positions from grades GS 9 and above, and the highest salaries in GS 18 were nearly nine times the black national average.21 Meanwhile, Washington D.C.’s black population grew to a peak of 71.1% (537,712) of the city’s population in 1970, up from 28.2% (187,266) in 1940.22 The number of black federal workers in Washington, D.C. grew apace: of the 360,058 blacks working in the city, 28.3% (101,923) were

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working for the federal government in 1970. Yet, only 2% of all black workers employed in the District of Columbia commanded salaries of $15,000 or more.

The subjective evaluation standards that black federal workers had to meet contributed to their difficulties in advancing their careers. In 1971, HEW commissioned a report by the Urban Institute to analyze whether federal testing had a discriminatory impact. The report recommended suspension of the Federal Service Entrance Examination (FSEE). Only 8.6% of black applicants passed the exam in contrast to 42.1% of white students. FSEE results were a key determinant in deciding an applicant’s eligibility into the middle pay grades (e.g., GS 5 – 9). The Urban Institute concluded its report, “that the use of the FSEE is unfairly discriminatory to many black applicants seems unavoidable. It is unfortunate that this test has been used extensively for so many years.”

These disparate results were also corroborated in the federal Court of Appeals case *Douglas v. Hampton*, where in 1971, eight black interns filed for an injunction against the FSEE test after failing to pass sufficient for permanent placement. While test administrator Civil Service Commission did not maintain pass/fail data according to race, it did maintain records according to the racial make up of applicants’ schools; schools with predominately white populations (i.e., more than 99%) held a passage rate of 57.8% while majority black schools had

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passage rates of 11.5%. While the court did not cite specific evidence showing how the test content was discriminatory, it observed that once it finds a test harbors a racially discriminatory impact, the burden then shifts to the employer to demonstrate that the test is germane to predicting successful performance on the associated job. The court determined the FSEE to have the equivalent effect of an “intelligence test” since the government administered the FSEE broadly to approximately 150,000 applicants yearly, using it to fill roughly 10,000 positions in over 200 federal job categories.

The injunction was later ruled moot since a new exam, the Professional and Administrative Career Examination (PACE), replaced the discontinued FSEE. As constructive proof of successful black advocacy through legal pressure, a Civil Service Commission spokesman stated that, “the PACE test was created in response to criticism of the FSEE, largely along the lines of alleged racial bias” – criticism that undoubtedly was heightened as a result of the public lawsuit along with the legal process that otherwise forced the CSC to demonstrate and defend the FSEE’s legitimacy.

**Examples of the Continued Black Collar Struggle**

One reason why black federal workers joined Blacks in Government was the conflicting and confusing messages they received from white administrators. New laws, procedures, and jobs meant to dismantle discrimination within the workplace often failed to produce the desired

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result. The experiences of black federal employees Ruth B. Harris and John E. Womack demonstrate the problem.

*Lost in Space: Theory vs. Practice*

In the early seventies, NASA hired a specialist to improve black employment at the higher-grade levels. There was, at the time, just “one minority person at the GS 16-18 level, out of 640 positions.” That "one minority person," Ruth Bates Harris, was also one of the few black female employees at NASA. But Harris’ unique status was short-lived; she lost her job after submitting a report pointing out the failure of the agency to adhere to equal employment goals.

Harris had graduated from Florida A&M and was “a self described ‘Harlem Princess’ whose first marriage had been to a [former] Tuskegee Airman.” In 1971, NASA hired Bates as NASA’s first woman Deputy Assistant Administrator for Equal Opportunity. Ominously, her bosses at NASA demoted her before she had even begun her job. One week after announcing her hire, and before she officially left her previous position as Director of Human Relations with Montgomery County Public Schools, NASA administrator Dr. James C. Fletcher re-hired her as

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28 “Whites are much less likely to support concrete implementation of principles than principles themselves…the principles have some force but often lose out when they conflict with other principles (such as ‘individualism’), with personal goals or with personal preferences.” See Howard Schuman, et al., *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 205.


an assistant deputy director rather than the promised post as director of the department. Harris started her new job that October and immediately encountered resistance from white colleagues who viewed her as a civil rights activist with a political agenda.

NASA administrators were well aware that their hiring rate for blacks was low. However, while NASA felt it did as well as the private sector in hiring only 3.5 percent of minorities in technical positions, it lacked an effective answer for why it hired only six percent of minorities in all non-technical positions. Administrators blamed poor education for the gap. But, during the mid-1970s, the proportion of blacks and whites attending college was roughly equal, although the total amount of students was not.

In 1973, after two years of conflict with administrators, NASA terminated Harris. She and two aides had just issued a hard-hitting, forty-page report entitled “NASA’s Equal Opportunity Program is a Near-Total Failure.” The report detailed how the agency was “dragging its feet in hiring minority and women workers.” Other agencies were equally at fault. At the Government Printing Office (GPO) in Washington, D.C. in 1973, only twenty-three percent of skilled workers were black, compared to ninety-five percent of the unskilled workers.

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32 Harris, *Harlem Princess*, 4. See also Kim McQuaid, “Racism, Sexism, and Space Ventures,” 428.
34 Sociologist Robert Hauser finds that, “The college entry chances of white men declined in the last half of the 1970s and then rose by 1988 to a peak above that of the 1970s. In the mid-1970s, about 53 percent of white men entered college; the college entry rate dropped to 50 percent by 1980 but increased to 60 percent in 1988. The series shows growth in black college entry chances relative to those of whites during the 1970s, with a peak late in the decade. At the peak, the college-going chances of blacks were almost equal to those of whites.” Robert M. Hauser, “Trends in College Entry among Whites, Blacks and Hispanics,” *Studies of Supply and Demand in Higher Education*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 70. See also Steve Curwood, “Harmful Effects Feared as Enrollments Drop,” *Boston Globe*, May 20, 1986.
NASA administrator Dr. James Fletcher claimed that Harris was “not dismissed because of the critical report.” He insisted that, since most of the data cited was already on the public record, “the time they spent preparing it should have been devoted to more positive kinds of things.” Another NASA spokesman said that the agency’s termination decision was free from racial motivation since the direct agency official who recommended Harris’ dismissal was himself black – in fact, “physically blacker” than Harris.

Harris earned a Masters in Business Administration and was NASA’s highest-ranking black female at the time of her dismissal, earning an annual salary of $32,000. Yet, Harris seemingly bore punishment for merely publicizing the facts surrounding low minority participation. Her firing symbolized the varied frustrations that black federal workers endured while working for the space agency. Black workers contended blatant racism in both hiring and promotion methods within the agency and in protest formed MEAN, or Minority Employees at NASA. Although MEAN sent its first formal communication to NASA chief Fletcher in the spring of 1974, the Harris firing during the previous fall had probably stirred the workers into action. The complaints MEAN raised in its letter to Fletcher formed the basis of a class action lawsuit filed that same year – part of a growing trend of black federal workers seeking redress in the courts.

Harris quickly took her firing to the local district court as well. “I'm never just talking about people being nice to each other,” she explained. “I'm talking about changing the system.

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39 After several lengthy appeals, the last of the MEAN plaintiffs finally obtained a settlement for their demands nearly a decade later in 1983. Minority Employees at NASA (MEAN) v. James M. Beggs, 723 F.2d 958 (D.C. Cir. 1983).
We ought to have one big coalition” of blacks and “all our minorities” (including women) with which “we could change anything in this system.”

The NAACP Legal Defense Fund took up her case and almost immediately had her salary reinstated while her status was under review. The major legal question concerned whether she was a political appointee eligible for firing at will. Meanwhile, NASA administrators searched in vain for evidence that Harris was a radical who intended to disrupt daily operations, hoping to rebut the negative publicity they were receiving.

By filing her suit and garnering press attention, Harris and her lawyers successfully highlighted how few women and blacks of both genders participated in the space program.

Eight months after her initial dismissal, NAACP lawyers sat down with NASA attorneys to negotiate a settlement. While NASA administrators conceded the need for additional hiring of minorities and better anti-bias training of current employees, they resisted centralizing such oversight, claiming that the agency operated more efficiently without it. As with other national funding programs that disbursed funds locally, decentralization allowed southern NASA regional centers to continue racist practices.

Harris returned to NASA in August 1974 as the Deputy Assistant Administrator of Public Affairs for Community and Human Relations. The agency’s newsletter, the Astrogram, made no mention of the circumstances surrounding her initial departure and only hinted at her qualifications for her new role, “Mrs. Harris has an extensive background in human relations and


equal employment opportunity positions.”42 In her new job, Harris made recruiting visits to black colleges such as Bowie State University to talk frankly with students – “NASA has acknowledged its regret that up to and including the time of the Apollo program, very little has been done to encourage minorities and women to come to the agency” – and to persuade them to apply for a job at the agency.43

However, Ruth Bates Harris was still just a solitary individual with limited power and resources to alter hiring patterns and practices. And her legal fight and the continued frustrations of her job caused her much psychological pain. In 1976, Harris suffered a nervous breakdown caused by these pressures, as well as dealing with a failed marriage while caring for a morbidly ill son. Harris left her job at NASA soon after.44 The inability of lone black workers to “fight the system” prompted the founders of BIG to strategize upon a model that collectively supported individual achievement.

Right Result, Wrong Remedy

During the 1970s, other black federal workers also took their grievances to external outlets after exhausting internal protocols for resolving them. In 1972, the Equal Employment Opportunity Act brought federal employers and government agencies under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This gave black workers options to reduce their time waiting for a resolution of

their grievances. For example, in 1974 after a lengthy but successful fight for a promotion, black federal employee John E. Womack’s legal case finally was on a fast track towards financial resolution.

Again.

Womack, a black employee at the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) Washington, D.C. central office, had fought for six years to rectify racial discrimination on the job within his division at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). After clearing a series of administrative hurdles, Womack won a challenge in the United States Court of Appeals, District of Columbia Circuit. Instead of dismissal, the Appeals court remanded Womack’s case to Federal District Court for a new trial. Meanwhile, the financial relief for which he sued had to wait while the judicial process took its course.

Womack’s main legal fight centered upon his remedy for racial discrimination suffered while on the job, rather than proving the racial discrimination itself. Womack’s saga began in 1968 when a white coworker with a lower pay grade and less experience obtained a supervisory position over him – a position to which Womack had also applied. In response, he pursued a grievance through the proper channels within both his governing department at the HUD and with the Civil Service Commission. To Womack’s relief, a claims hearing officer substantiated his claims early in the process and found that his supervisors had wrongfully passed him over in violation of President Lyndon Johnson’s E.O. 11246, which prohibited discrimination by federal contractors.

45 Womack v. Lynn, 504 F.2d 267 (D.C. Cir. 1974).
Later on, in 1969, the Assistant Secretary for Equal Employment Opportunity at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Samuel J. Simmons, ordered Womack’s promotion. Simmons, however, declined to award him the seniority he should have accrued or the back pay he should have received. Womack then decided to take his case to court. In the five years preceding the 1974 appellate court’s decision to remand his case and start anew, Womack’s racial discrimination at the federal workplace was never in dispute. The only subject at issue was the adequacy of the remedy for the acknowledged discrimination.

In 1970, HUD made very slight concessions to Womack on the issues of back pay and the denial of seniority. When Womack appealed, the Civil Service Commission’s Board of Appeals and Review denied him again. The following year in 1971, Womack filed suit in Federal District Court under a creative cocktail of several different federal laws. In 1972, when the Equal Employment Opportunity Act gave federal workers the right to sue the government for Title VII violations, Womack tried revising his pending action. The district Court rejected Womack’s revision request outright and dismissed his case that same day.

Although Womack’s 1974 appeal was successful, the extent of his reward was still undetermined. Ironically, the court ruled in Womack’s favor; it found the FHA wrongfully passed over Womack for another white employee with less experience. Womack nonetheless waited years for an increase in salary while he allowed the official grievance process to “take its course.” The difficulty for Womack became in knowing what else to do. Now, in starting a new

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trial, Womack had the unenviable task of proving his case yet again. Finally, in 1978, he emerged victorious – with an award of $100,000.47

This long, frustrating narrative demonstrates the importance of time in judging whether a racial grievance succeeds or fails. During the ten years he pursued his case, Womack remained stuck in the same job and pay grade. His story demonstrates that, under federal anti-discrimination policy, it was the responsibility of each individual to prove his or her case – the federal government was not eager to indict itself – especially when large sums of money were at stake.

Class action suits, while attractive as a way to win redress for groups instead of just individuals – could take just as long to be resolved. By the 1970s, black employees of the Government Printing Office (GPO) had long protested the practice supervisors firing blacks to create job openings for whites.48 In 1972, 326 black GPO workers sued the government, resulting in the case of McKenzie v. McCormick.49 The suit arose from former Tuskegee Airman Alfred U. McKenzie’s boiling frustrations over the GPO repeatedly passing over him and other black employees for promotions. With the aid of over twenty attorneys from the Coalition of Minority Workers and the Washington Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, McKenzie navigated the lengthy appeals process.50

Finally, in 1977, U.S. District Judge Barrington D. Parker found a “lingering policy of racism” within the federal government. Specifically, within GPO, he stated, “without remarkable

exception, the higher-ranking better-paying positions in the section are held by whites, while blacks are clustered around the lower ranking and poorer-paying jobs.” While the GPO argued that available data did not necessarily reflect racial bias, Judge Parker found “in view of the record, the court is not convinced that there has been a radical departure from the past within the offset press section and that racial discrimination has been abated to any appreciable degree.”

The case had another happy conclusion, albeit of a personal nature. Less than a month after receiving the final judgment, Alfred McKenzie exchanged wedding vows with another former black federal employee: former NASA administrator Ruth Bates Harris. In 1977, the same year the McKenzie class action suit obtained an important legal victory, National Institutes of Health (NIH) gardener Hoover Rowel obtained resolution in an anti-discrimination case he had initiated more than twenty years before. While Alfred McKenzie privately celebrated victory with his new bride, Rowel celebrated his victory publicly, among such dignitaries as Senator Edward Kennedy, Congressman Don Edwards and Walter E. Fauntroy as the American Civil Liberties Union honored his remarkable patience and persistence.

Rowel’s settled his case out of court for $170,000. But he, twelve other men and the widow of three others received individual checks less than $10,000 apiece. This amounted to less than $500 for every year of discrimination. A paltry sum in view of the thousands of dollars Rowel missed had he received his timely promotion over two decades earlier.

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52 The federal court awarded the plaintiffs $2.4M in back pay in 1987, but McKenzie only received a few thousand dollars since he was retired by the time of the award. Simeon Booker, “Ticker Tape U.S.A.,” Jet Magazine 72, no. 26 (September 21, 1987), 10; Richard Goldstein, “Alfred McKenzie, who Fought for Rights, Dies at 80,” New York Times, April 11, 1998.
Rowel testified about the roadblocks he faced in obtaining promotions: “in order to really advance at NIH you either have to know someone or you just didn’t make it. It was just impossible for a black man to get a promotion. The jobs were not posted, it wasn’t posted on the bulletin board and although we knew that the job was available through the grapevine, as they say, we would go and apply for the job and the job was either taken or it wasn’t available.”\(^{55}\) One supervisor admitted that, based on his industriousness and craftsmanship, Rowel had qualified for a GS 9 promotion as early as 1958 but this would have meant advancing six slots at once from his GS 3 grade and was disallowed.\(^{56}\) As Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist William Raspberry of *The Washington Post* put it, Rowel “couldn’t be promoted because he hadn’t been promoted.”\(^{57}\)

The NIH gardener did find ways to preserve his dignity on the job. Rowel recalled, “I remember once they put out a rule that if a heavy equipment operator wanted to go to the bathroom, he had to get permission from a supervisor. If there was no supervisor around, he had to leave a note on the machine indicating where he was gone and why.” That rule was changed after “word got around that [Rowell] intended to park his machine right in front of the administration building with a huge cardboard sign saying: ‘GONE TO S---.’”\(^{58}\)

Since Rowel began his quest for justice in 1956, seven plaintiffs had either retired or resigned and three had passed away. Undeterred, Rowel declared: “[f]rankly, I’m not a well-


\(^{57}\) Ibid.

\(^{58}\) Ibid.
educated person, but I know what’s right and what’s wrong, and if I see something wrong, I’ll speak up about it.”\textsuperscript{59} The twenty-one years he spent seeking justice did take a toll on him, however: “Everyone comes to me and says, ‘you never got angry.’ Believe me, I was angry…I was hurting.”\textsuperscript{60}

\textbf{A \textsc{P}rofessional \textsc{O}rganization \textsc{i}s \textsc{B}orn}

\textit{Black Employees Work Together}

Frustration among black employees in the seventies was mounting. If dutiful employees like Rowel had to fight decades to receive promotions from lower GS 5 rankings, then black employees with their sights on the highest double-digit rankings had a severe challenge on their hands. In 1973, the Civil Service Commission released a report entitled \textit{The Federal Civil Rights Enforcement Effort, A Reassessment}. It reported, “minorities at the highest policy levels (GS-16-18) remain below 3%. Many agencies, including CSC (Civil Service Commission) have no minorities in such positions. None of the regulatory agencies have any minorities among their 418 GS 16-18 positions.” The \textit{Reassessment} also noted that, “Minorities held less than 1% of the 982 such positions in the Department of Defense. The Atomic Energy Commission and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) each have one minority person at the

GS 16-18 level, out of 640 positions.” Accordingly, Marxist economist Victor Perlo observed that, the more politically powerful the agency, the less likely blacks were to be integrated, while “less powerful agencies…by and large, have a less discriminatory hiring policy.”

Some black workers, concerned that meaningful change was growing more elusive, decided to take action. As the luster of civil rights legislation began to fade, black collective action was one of the only options left since federal protocols in place to address workplace discrimination were still evolving and had so far often proved inefficient and ineffective. Since the NAACP and the Urban League were busy helping workers in the private sector, black government workers needed a vehicle that addressed their specific problems.

In 1975, five black employees of the HEW in Rockville, Maryland took the initiative to form Blacks in Government, as a professional support group with the express mission of enabling members to develop their careers, contribute to their country, and support their families. The group began as a non-profit organization that met only in private spaces out of fear of retaliation by management. Early BIG meetings also remained private to protect the group from criticism of being racially exclusive.

A major figure in BIG from the start was James Pat Daugherty, a World War II veteran of the Army’s predominately black 92nd Infantry Division – nicknamed the Buffalo Soldiers. Like

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64 Johnny Scott’s Answers to Interview Questions about BIG National Training Conference, August 2010, RBIG.
Julius Hobson, he was unafraid of confrontation. Said Daugherty, “[h]ow dare they draft me and force me to go into a war when I was living in D.C. and had to go to segregated schools…I was fighting two evils, the Nazis in Germany and my own country that was doing the same kind of things.”

Similar to Hobson, in 1970, Daugherty moved on to elected office as the first African-American member of the Board of Education for the Montgomery County Public Schools.

Daugherty had joined the HEW in 1966, as an administrator of the United States Public Health Service (USPHS) in 1966, and stayed with that agency until his retirement in 1994. While there, he worked to increase access to health care for the poor and underserved, of which many were black. The USPHS honored Daugherty with its “Administrator’s Award for Excellence” for servicing rural and urban poor communities alike, as well as coal miners, migrant workers, and men and women in prison.

Daugherty’s negative experiences at USPHS inspired him to help start Blacks in Government, and he served as BIG’s first Chairman until a membership election took place on June 1, 1977. One of the goals of the new organization was to organize BIG chapters within the Washington, D.C. area and then to do so within federal agencies nationwide. Just as National Committee on Segregation in the Nation’s Capital founder Edward Embree had declared at his group’s founding in 1946, “the symbolic significance of the Nation's Capital [is] the repository

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of the American Creed,” BIG founders similarly saw federal agencies in Washington, D.C. as vital places from which to advance their cause.

The founders of Blacks in Government’s made a powerful statement; they were not content to wait for “the system” to correct itself. They had read the Civil Service Commission report, released earlier in 1975, which analyzed federal employment data and synthesized its findings under the title, *To Eliminate Employment Discrimination*. Although delivered almost three decades after the report of the Truman committee, *To Secure These Rights, To Eliminate Employment Discrimination*, it was remarkably and depressingly similar, in both tone and findings.

*To Eliminate Employment Discrimination* provided a candid assessment of the government’s inability to end racial inequities in the wake of the new civil rights legislation passed a decade earlier. The report concluded that “although there has been progress in the last decade,” federal anti-discrimination efforts within the federal workplace were “fundamentally inadequate.” One of the sticking points was the diffusion of anti-discrimination responsibilities to several different agencies.

The 1975 report, while far less known than *To Secure These Rights*, was no more reassuring to black employees. While no one expected new 1964 Civil Rights Act legislation to provide instantaneous results, black federal workers reasonably expected more improvements a decade later. In the absence of formal barriers to progress, the continued pattern of “black collar”

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status for black employees prompted black federal workers like James Daughtery to take a proactive stance and start a new pattern.

No Small Mission

Initially, BIG members met during their lunch break as mostly a “crisis-oriented” group, providing emotional support for employees experiencing discrimination and informal career counseling. But local BIG chapters quickly sprang up in various regions, with the majority located in urban centers. Membership reached 4,000 quickly, spread across eighty-seven chapter by 1981. BIG quickly gained a reputation as a knowledgeable, problem-solving organization for black civil servants with their chapters spread throughout the nation in eleven regions, based on the branches of the Federal Reserve system, and likely as homage to the existing organizational rubric with which federal workers were readily familiar.

BIG representatives used both their professional and personal relationships to schedule meetings with department heads and White House officials. Common topics included the disproportionate impact of reduction-in-force moves on black workers, equal employment opportunities, performance appraisals, and employee rights and protections. In 1976, BIG also became an active participant in “Operation BIG Vote,” a nationwide campaign to educate blacks and other Americans about their rights and responsibilities in the electoral process.

BIG members were diverse in their backgrounds, interests, and occupations. They included executives, managers, supervisors, administrative assistants, secretaries, police officers,


city managers, council members, state legislators, military personnel, and rank-and-file
government workers of all kinds. This breadth gave BIG an advantage over the National Alliance
for Postal and Federal Employees (NAPFE), which was primarily concerned with the rights of
postal workers (despite its efforts in the mid-sixties to expand its base).

Moreover, NAPFE, as a labor union, was often in conflict with management. But
BIG saw itself as an ally to management merely seeking to improve worker productivity and
social relations on the job. As such, it worked with similarly organized groups such as Federally

_Self-Sufficiency through Self-Advocacy_

Rather than rely on aid from external civil rights organizations, BIG members wanted to
address the specific needs of black government workers themselves. For instance, in a March,
1977 letter addressed to the administrators of HEW, BIG Chairman Daugherty complained that,
“despite high quality educational and professional accomplishments and previous government
positions of authority,” black workers at the department were subject to “some unwritten rule
against appointing blacks to executive and management positions; certainly – except occasional
tokenism – to positions of power.”73 BIG specifically objected to the trend to “take career
employees with authority to manage programs…and reduce them to ‘special assistant to’
positions of power, without the staffs, authority or budgets to justify their grades.”74

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73 Letter from BIG Chairman Pat Daugherty to Thomas McFee, Acting Assistant Secretary for Administration and Management, DHEW, March 16, 1977, RBIG.
74 Ibid.
Such tailored advocacy demonstrates an advantage BIG had over existing anti-discriminatory groups. Whereas the EEOC had to conduct an investigation into every complaint, Daugherty could quickly synthesize the experiences of his fellow federal workers and take them to the authorities. One example of BIG’s influence was that HEW’s Assistant Acting Secretary Thomas McFee responded just two weeks later to Daugherty’s 1977 letter stating, “I have decided to meet with you...to discuss those concerns.”75

Concrete Tools

BIG chapters based at federal agencies primarily met at the workplace, making it relatively easy for members to participate. In keeping with their practical mission, BIG organizers designed a curriculum to assist members with their career development. An eighteen-page, typed booklet entitled the BIG “Winning Ways Employee Development Kit” was a key part of that project. The kit contained specific advice on how blacks could challenge discrimination on the job that prevented them from advancing their careers. Specific advice under the section “Documenting Your EEO Complaint” included, but was not limited to:76

- Keep a diary of events
- Generate responses in writing
- Respond to disputes in writing

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75 Letter from Thomas McFee, Acting Assistant Secretary for Administration and Management, DHEW to BIG Chairman Pat Daughtery, March 30, 1977, RBIG.
76 “Documenting Your EEO Complaint,” n.d., RBIG
Discrimination was a very personal experience; it was conceivable that not only might it take time to realize that one was the victim of racially motivated treatment, but one might react emotionally upon making such a discovery. Hence, the suggestions listed in “Documenting Your EEO Complaint” helped position the black worker to better articulate and advance his or her cause. More blacks were pursuing higher education, but overall, black employees still failed to benefit financially from their degrees. A 1979 study about income inequality within the federal government showed that blacks still received a lower return on their education than whites.77 Thus, the Winning Ways Kit dispensed collective wisdom resulting from the sum total of shared black employees’ experiences.

The advice in the Winning Ways Kit also underscored a troubling, if ironic, trend facing black federal employees: more institutional anti-discriminatory measures meant more work on the individual victim to prove discrimination. Advice to keep a journal and document and respond in writing alerted black workers to maintain a heightened awareness and sensitivity level in the event that isolated negative incidents become part of a larger pattern. Such thinking puts the black federal worker in a difficult position of having to choose loyalties; the black federal worker must trust and communicate with the other members of his team while maintaining a skepticism about the sincerity of a (white) colleague’s actions.

BIG’s national leadership also included in the Winning Ways Kit documents such as “Coping with Discrimination in the Federal Workplace,” where members received specific advice on how to spot discrimination outside of the garden-variety epithets that any employee could more easily recognize. For instance, under the heading “Recognizing Discrimination,” BIG

leadership provides four different examples: disparate treatment (when black employee is treated less favorably than another similarly situated employee), adverse impact (where business policies and practices adversely impact blacks and are not justified by business necessity), reprisal/retaliation (where black employees are punished after voicing grievances or concerns) or perpetuation of past discrimination (where past discrimination is maintained through the present operation of a seemingly neutral employment practice). BIG leadership buttressed each discrimination strand with scenario examples and case law where applicable. Here, BIG educated its members so that if and when they interacted with the bureaucracy, members would likely be more efficient in resolving their disputes as they would be more clear on what was happening to them and what case law could resolve it.

Other included documents in the kit number “How to Get a Government Job,” “How to Complete a Federal Job Application Form,” and “Making Your [Job] Appraisal Work for You.” Management notified employees about the increasing use of Performance Improvement Plans as a tool to raise an employee’s performance back up to a satisfactory level. Performance Improvement Plans represented the first step in initiating streamlined terminations within federal agencies. Here, BIG chiefly advocated high performance as the best defense against an unwanted Improvement Plan, but also provided concrete tips on how to document, follow through and clarify new expectations for job performance to improve the black employee’s chances of keeping their jobs.

The effectiveness of the Winning Ways Kit came from the ability of black federal workers to reduce victimization through isolation. By pooling resources and sharing information, black federal workers no longer felt alone in tackling overwhelming administrative processes all
by themselves. Said BIG National President Rubye Fields in the *Winning Ways* explanation letter, “The advice does not represent short cuts, but they are ‘sure things.’ That is, they work for other blacks and they will work for you.”

**PREPARING BLACK WORKERS FOR FUTURE BATTLES**

Hiring a lawyer was a strategy financially available to only some black workers. While attorney fees were recoverable in some instances, not all firms took employment discrimination cases on contingency for what was still a new area of the law. Thus, black federal employees required training on how to become more adept at reading and interpreting social scenarios as they developed. To avoid another grueling twenty-year saga like Hoover Rowel’s, the chief way in which Blacks in Government prepared its members and other black federal employees for the increasingly sophisticated fight for civil rights was through its National Training Conference.

The first of these took place from October 18-20, 1979 at the Shoreham Hotel in Washington, D.C. For the event, BIG billed itself as “a nonprofit organization concerned with the professional and cultural development” of black government employees while the training conference was pitched as “designed for individuals at all levels of government service.”

Yet, many of the black federal workers who attended felt pressure to remain in good graces with their white managers. Many black workers wanted to take care and avoid a stigmatizing label as a militant or separatist despite exercising their free speech to attend the

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78 Internal National Memorandum from BIG President Rubye Fields, “A Message from BIG,” *Blacks in Government Winning Ways*, circa 1979, RBIG.

Training Conference. The *BIG News* reported that a “substantial number of conferees used their annual leave and funds to attend,” while only a few black employees obtained agency sponsorship for their training.\(^80\)

It was, nevertheless, an impressive and well-attended event. More than 2,200 registrants heard keynote speeches by EEOC chairwoman Eleanor Holmes Norton and Rep. Parren J. Mitchell, a Democrat from Baltimore, and a speech by First Lady Rosalynn Carter. They took part in seventeen workshop sessions focused on three themes: “Blacks and the 1978 Civil Service Reform Act,” “Employee Problem Clinics,” and “Strategies for Black Survival.”\(^81\) Organizers reported that employees came from twenty-eight states, as well as Guam and Puerto Rico. Employees from twenty-five different federal agencies attended; the largest cohorts came from HEW, the Department of Labor, and the Department of Commerce.\(^82\)

If acceptance from the political establishment was BIG’s goal, the conference certainly achieved it. It received pledges of support from the NAACP and the Urban League, as well as Washington, D.C. mayor Marion Barry. President Jimmy Carter also sent a welcome letter to conference attendees. Not missing an opportunity to curry favor with voters, the President declared: “I applaud and fully support the provision in the recently enacted civil service reform

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\(^80\) *BIG News*, “First National Conference Attracts over 2,200,” 1, no. 1, (Dec., 1980), 1. Also underscoring the sensitivity around attendance, BIG National Historian Jacqueline Beatty relays the following anecdote: BIG published two separate conference programs: one listing the daily workshops and another listing the social activities. Conference organizers feared that any mention of social activities would diminish the legitimacy of the conference. BIG National Historian, C. Jacqueline Beatty’s Answers to Interview Questions about BIG National Training Conference, August 2011, RBIG.


law which directs new efforts to eliminate the underrepresentation of minority groups in the Federal work force.”

Such mainstream political support from President Carter and his wife illustrated the evolution of a collective strategy. Much like the National Alliance or Julius Hobson wanted, Blacks in Government sought to eradicate disparities in rank and pay for black workers. Yet, by the end of the seventies, in packaging the same thrust for black empowerment within a voluntary professional organization that catered to the needs of black federal workers, BIG successfully obtained mainstream support for its cause without unduly compromising its mission to advocate for blacks. Rather than be seen as an all-black pressure group with militant aims, Blacks in Government unwittingly (or consciously) appealed to the American Dream narrative that emphasized self-improvement as the primary means for career advancement. In this respect, BIG successfully positioned itself as a partner with the federal government in seeking to develop maximum human potential in its members, and therefore would require access and information to facilitate upward career trajectories.

New Jobs, Same Deficiencies at Work

But one conference could not win full equality for blacks in the federal government. By the 1980s, although the numbers of senior black administrators had grown, it was still uncommon for them to supervise large numbers of white workers. In 1978, President Carter had signed a Civil Service Reform Act that created a new classification of higher-paying pay grades

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– the Senior Executive Service (SES) – to recognize valuable, high-ranking employees (i.e., policy-making or managerial) and dissuade them from pursuing higher salaries within the private sector. Starting in July 1979, the SES effectively eliminated the “super grades” of GS-16, GS-17 and GS-18. When given the option, more than 98.5% of eligible managers converted to the SES pay grade system from the GS super grades, creating a SES corps of roughly 7,000.  

SES salary inducements notwithstanding, black federal workers still viewed public sector employment favorably as a career. As competition continued to increase within the private sector, the federal government was one of the few sectors where black employees could routinely gain good white-collar jobs without having to earn a college degree. For example, in 1975, federal employees without college degrees occupied nearly two-thirds of all administrative positions. Federal mid-level administrative pay ranged from $8,000 to $12,000 (i.e., GS-4 to GS-8) while the national median income for black Americans in 1980 was $12,674.

As proof of the American democratic process in progress, Congress addressed the correction lag by embedding stronger enforcement provisions in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Unlike E.O. 8802 in 1941, Congress better designed later legislation to aid black workers still struggling to gain access to the higher ranks. Improved grievance procedures now allowed black federal workers to pursue individual claims of discrimination. After decades of negotiation,

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struggle and resistance, black federal workers slowly saw their legal relationship with the federal government change as they in turn changed the federal government workplace for the better. Title VII created an unprecedented legal mechanism with the power to hold agencies financially liable for proven violations.

Changes came about slowly because while new legislation such a Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act created an unprecedented legal mechanism with the ability to hold agencies financially liable for proven violations, it initially excluded four-fifths of the nation’s operating businesses and did finally include federal employees nearly a decade after enactment. While the resulting Equal Employment Opportunity Commission provided aggrieved employees with a concrete means to seek restorative justice for racial indignities endured while on the job, it did very little to serve as a deterrent to discriminatory behavior. While flagrantly offensive behavior was becoming less socially acceptable as the eighties approached, data demonstrate that stubborn patterns of racial segregation nonetheless persisted.

In 1978, the percentage of black federal workers slotted in GS 8 positions or below still held steady at 74% (down from 81% in 1972), which meant that three out of every four black workers was removed from an upper level, supervisory position. In contrast, in 1978 all minorities combined still occupied less than five percent of the highest GS rankings of GS 16-18, (with blacks weighing in at 3.5%), which maintains the overarching historical narrative of whites dominating the most powerful and prestigious positions within the federal power structure.  

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More importantly, the perception of racial progress made continued advocacy for black federal workers challenging. In 1981, Blacks in Government publicly condemned a proposal published quietly in the Federal Register to exempt nearly three-quarters of all 200,000 business firms with government contracts from complying with regulations requiring preparation of written affirmative action programs.⁸⁹ BIG president Lonis C. Ballard declared that the reduction proposal to exempt federal contractors “sends out a signal...that there will be an easing up with regard to the gains we have made in the last two decades.”⁹⁰ The reduction maneuver reflected growing sentiment as articulated by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce that “equal employment opportunity should not be paved with new varieties of discrimination against other groups.”⁹¹ Thus, advocating that blacks had federal jobs, but could have better federal jobs, was a tough argument for many outside the black-collar paradigm to understand and accept.

While racial discrimination and segregation were well-practiced social conventions within America’s history before WWII, innovative postwar interventions suffered from inconsistency since they were unprecedented and untested. Yet, the Civil Rights Act and subsequent legislation were no immediate panacea for black federal workers. The EEOC was inconsistent and understaffed, and legal cases often took lengthy periods, which delayed or denied relief for plaintiffs even further. Although potentially more rewarding, fighting

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⁸⁹ Businesses with less than 250 workers or with a federal contract less than $1 million in value would be exempt from generating written summaries of their affirmative action programs. This plan was eventually abandoned two years later thanks in part to pressure from Congress and the EEOC. Frank Dobbin, *Inventing Equal Opportunity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 136.

⁹⁰ Kathy Sawyer, “Proposal to Ease Job Bias Rules Draws Criticism from Both Sides,” *Washington Post*, August 26, 1981. Also note, the affirmative action reduction proposal came only three weeks after President Ronald Reagan’s administration communicated its hard line stance against federal workplace improvements when he fired over 11,000 striking air traffic controllers. See also, McCartin, *Collision Course*.

⁹¹ Quote from U.S. Chamber of Commerce attorney John B. Brandenburg. Ibid.
discrimination cases through the court system usually cost black federal workers more time than the final judgments were worth financially.

Hence, black federal workers answered the challenge of confronting workplace discrimination within an officially non-racist environment by forming professional organizations like Blacks in Government. BIG’s mission, its reason for founding and points of advocacy all provide insight on how federal workplace discrimination against blacks stubbornly persisted despite ongoing improvements and changes within the federal workplace. In the postwar era, black federal employees shifted their goals from increased access to secure jobs to struggling to gain an equal share of higher positions to which their experience and skills entitled them. All the while, they remained committed to the goals of a federal government that was still learning how to reciprocate these black collar workers’ efforts.

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Much like the Statute of Liberty symbolized hope for incoming immigrants after the turn of the twentieth century, in the eyes of incoming black Southern migrants, the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. perhaps symbolized both the promise of political stability and economic growth for America. This pilgrimage northward to the nation’s capital symbolized a hopeful return to the original precepts of domestic freedom, dignity and respect often articulated but seldom applied to blacks as Americans – especially those from the South. While many progressive blacks and like-minded whites challenged the resulting majority-white power dynamic, ultimately it remained unchanged.
The research conclusively illustrates that throughout the postwar era, black federal workers consistently struggled against systemic marginalization – chiefly within pay and promotion rates. Yet, the irony is that the federal public sector sustained a constant rate of change, attempting numerous times to create, protect and preserve an integrated workforce deemed unimaginable before WWII. Both the government’s actions and shortcomings speak volumes about the private sector and equal accessibility for blacks when considering the government led the private sector in anti-discriminatory workplace reform from 1941-1981. Still, the postwar era demonstrated that it was possible but not always plausible that blacks would find equitable opportunities for career advancement within the federal government. Wherever whiteness was subtly preferred, American Dream Deferred.
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