



## Research Article

**Cite this article:** Milkis S, Rader K. The March on Washington Movement, the Fair Employment Practices Committee, and the Long Quest for Racial Justice. *Studies in American Political Development* 38, no. 1 (April 2024): 16–35. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X23000044>

Received: 19 January 2022  
Revised: 17 November 2022  
Accepted: 11 July 2023

**Corresponding author:**  
Katherine Rader;  
Email: [katherine.rader@cnu.edu](mailto:katherine.rader@cnu.edu)

# The March on Washington Movement, the Fair Employment Practices Committee, and the Long Quest for Racial Justice

Sidney Milkis<sup>1,2</sup>  and Katherine Rader<sup>1,2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, USA and <sup>2</sup>Christopher Newport University, Newport News, VA, USA

## Abstract

In the summer of 1941, the March on Washington Movement (MOWM), led by the civil rights and labor leader A. Philip Randolph, planned to march tens of thousands of African Americans on Washington, DC, to pressure President Franklin Roosevelt to abolish discrimination in the federal government and defense industries. After intensive negotiations, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, banning those forms of discrimination and creating a federal agency to oversee this work: the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). Randolph and his allies use of pioneering pressure tactics coincided with a critical period of institutionalization of the modern presidency, ultimately resulting in executive action that significantly advanced civil rights and economic opportunity for Black Americans. Many scholars, focusing only on civil rights activists' fraught relationship with Roosevelt and the Southern Democrats' stubborn defense of Jim Crow in Congress and the states, have seen the highly contentious battles over the authority and policies of the FEPC as constituting a major defeat for MOWM's state-centered civil rights strategy. Yet Randolph and his allies continued to believe that the most practical path to reform ran through the executive branch. In this article, we draw a contrast between the actions first taken by President Roosevelt with his wavering commitment to the FEPC and the stronger and more definitive actions taken by President Truman to desegregate the military and civil service, which broke open public-sector employment for African Americans. Beyond strategic considerations, the New Deal expansion of jobs in the national service and military made the modern executive an essential target of Randolph's campaign to join the battles for civil rights with economic freedoms. Randolph's decision to focus on employment in the rapidly expanding defense industries, federal workforce, and military thus marked a critical episode in the fight for the economic rights of Black Americans.

## 1. Introduction

On the eve of World War II, with storms brewing abroad, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was engaged in an epic clash back on the home front. Precipitated by anger about the exclusion of Black Americans from World War II defense jobs, A. Philip Randolph, a civil rights activist and president of the first all-Black trade union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, was organizing a massive march on the nation's capital. For months, the Roosevelt administration had given Randolph vague assurances that it would do something about racial discrimination in the defense industry and the military, but nothing happened. More than a few of Randolph's friends and advisors urged him to be cautious, especially during a wartime crisis, but he was determined to pressure the White House. To force the president's hand, Randolph launched a new organization, the March on Washington Movement (MOWM), to mobilize the support of more than 100,000 Black Americans throughout the country.<sup>1</sup>

President Roosevelt, fearful of fracturing the Democrats' fragile North–South alliance, resisted the MOWM's demands. But Randolph refused to budge—and a week before the March on Washington was set to occur, FDR blinked. Randolph's pressure tactics convinced Roosevelt to issue Executive Order 8802, which banned discrimination in the defense industries and the federal government. In pursuance of this order, Roosevelt established the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to enforce its mandate. Roosevelt's direct action against segregation was unprecedented; however, there were significant constraints on the FEPC. Southern Democrats in Congress and the Southern states fiercely resisted the agency's cases that challenged the Jim Crow South, and they also took the lead in thwarting civil rights activists and their

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

<sup>1</sup>Randolph to Eleanor Roosevelt, and attached call, "To March on Washington for Jobs and Equal Participation in National Defense," June 5, 1941, in *The Papers of Eleanor Roosevelt, 1933–1945*, ed. Susan Ware and William Chafe (housed jointly in Washington, DC: Library of Congress and Hyde Park, NY: Franklin D. Roosevelt Library).

trade union allies' efforts to turn the FEPC into a permanent government agency. Consequently, when Congress terminated its funding in 1946, at the behest of Georgia Senator Richard Russell, the FEPC expired.

Despite the FEPC's short life, Executive Order 8802 has had a lasting legacy. Building on momentum he and other civil rights activists gained during Roosevelt's third term, Randolph and his allies continued to pressure the White House to take executive action in the service of their objectives during the Truman administration. Their credible threat to mount a boycott of the Jim Crow military resulted in Executive Order 9981, which desegregated the armed forces. While the order did not explicitly single out racial segregation, President Harry Truman established a committee, headed by Solicitor General Charles Fahy, that set the stage for the integration of the armed forces. In addition, Randolph and other civil rights organizations pressured Truman to issue Executive Order 9980, which built on the work started by Roosevelt and the FEPC to uproot discriminatory federal employment. It forbade racial and ethnic discrimination in the federal civil service and established the Fair Employment Board to monitor hiring.<sup>2</sup>

This article seeks to explain why some civil rights groups turned their attention toward the president and administrative state during the New Deal Era, under what conditions Roosevelt and Truman succumbed to their pressure, and what the consequences of this uneasy institutional partnership were for the economic and social rights of Black Americans. While many scholars have highlighted the failures of the FEPC to deliver on the promises they made to end racial discrimination in the defense industry, we argue that the MOWM's efforts to found and shape the FEPC marked a pathbreaking episode that created new openings in public-sector employment for Black Americans. Moreover, Randolph's more fruitful relationship with Truman suggests that the executive–movement nexus had become a critical dimension of civil rights activists' persistent struggle to join civil rights and basic economic freedoms. The desegregation of the military was not only important to fulfilling the civil rights of Black soldiers, but also to enhancing their social and economic mobility when opportunities in the private sector were diminished by the decline of private-sector unions and the stubborn tumor of Jim Crow. As the historians Michael Katz, Mark Stern, and Jamie Feder demonstrate, government jobs were “one of the most important mechanisms for reducing black poverty” and particularly for increasing pay parity between Black and white workers.<sup>3</sup> Randolph's decision to focus on employment in the rapidly expanding defense industries, federal workforce, and armed forces thus marked a critical episode in the fight for the economic rights of Black Americans.<sup>4</sup>

It was this enduring legacy of the MOWM that Langston Hughes commemorated in the poem he wrote for Randolph's seventieth birthday. Hughes prepared the tribute for a 1960 Carnegie Hall birthday celebration organized by Martin Luther King, Jr., who

praised the “dedicated and courageous” civil rights leader for his refusal “to sell his race for a mess of pottage”:

*Poem for a man  
Who plays the checkered game  
Of king jumps king  
And jumps a President  
That order 8802  
For me and you*<sup>5</sup>

This remarkable joining of a lyric tribute to a social activist and an executive order gives poetic expression to an important development: the forging of a contentious but meaningful partnership between the White House and civil rights activists.

The high-stakes checker game between Roosevelt and Randolph was not the first episode of presidents and activists for racial justice squaring off in a struggle over racial justice. It was anticipated by the fraught but formative alliance between Abraham Lincoln and the Abolitionists. But the uneasy partnership between presidents and racial justice advocates became more regular with the ascendance of the modern executive. During the Progressive Era, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson exploited the emergence of the mass media and the growing responsibilities of the national government to establish the “rhetorical presidency,” creating a direct, unmediated relationship between the executive and public opinion.<sup>6</sup> Sensing this shift, the NAACP—the vanguard of a fledgling civil rights movement—viewed the president as the new “barometer of national public opinion” and, through local demonstrations, petitions, and personal appeals, sought to make the office a critical ally in its effort to change hearts and minds with its antilynching campaign.<sup>7</sup> Yet the nascent civil rights movement failed in its efforts to get Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson to take direct action against white supremacy; indeed, Wilson, the first Southern-born president since the Civil War, actually extended Jim Crow to the civil service.<sup>8</sup>

Franklin Roosevelt, leading the nation through domestic and international crises, expanded and gave institutional form to the modern executive, most notably by strengthening the “administrative presidency,” which increased the opportunities for presidents to exercise domestic and foreign policy power unilaterally.<sup>9</sup> Randolph and his political allies were determined to pressure FDR—whose New Deal program represented a more fundamental departure than did Wilsonian progressivism from traditional Democratic commitments to individual autonomy, limited government, and states' rights—to use that power to advance the civil rights and economic opportunities of Black Americans.

What most distinguishes the joust between FDR and the MOWM is that it took place during the consolidation of the modern presidency, which was codified by the enactment of the 1939

<sup>5</sup>Langston Hughes, “Poem for a Man: To A. Philip Randolph on Achieving His Seventieth Year, 1959,” in *The Papers of A. Philip Randolph*, ed. John H. Bracey and August Meier (Washington, DC: Library of Congress).

<sup>6</sup>Jeffrey Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

<sup>7</sup>Civil Rights leaders pushed Roosevelt, Wilson, and Warren Harding to make strong statements against lynching. Megan Ming Francis, *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 96; also see Sidney M. Milkis and Daniel J. Tichenor, *Rivalry and Reform: Presidents, Social Movements, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 80–113.

<sup>8</sup>Francis, *Civil Rights*, 63–69; Milkis and Tichenor, *Rivalry and Reform*, 100–11; Eric S. Yellin, *Racism in the Nation's Service: Government Workers and the Color Line in Woodrow Wilson's America*, Reprint ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

<sup>9</sup>Richard Nathan, *The Administrative Presidency* (New York: Wiley, 1983).

<sup>2</sup>Executive Order 9981, “Establishing the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services,” July 26, 1948, [https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=84;Executive\\_Order\\_9981](https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=84;Executive_Order_9981), “Regulations Governing Fair Employment Practices within the Federal Establishment,” July 26, 1948, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=78208>.

<sup>3</sup>Michael B. Katz, Mark J. Stern, and Jamie J. Feder, “The New African American Inequality,” *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 1 (June 2005): 78, 75–198.

<sup>4</sup>Recent research has shown that reform of the military, civil service, and federal contracting system created critical opportunities for Black Americans' economic and social mobility; see Isabel Perera and Desmond King, “Racial Pay Parity in the Public Sector: The Overlooked Role of Employee Mobilization,” *Politics & Society* (May 2020): 1–22.

Executive Reorganization Act. It enabled Roosevelt to create the Executive Office of the President (EOP), which included the newly formed White House Office (the West Wing) and a strengthened Bureau of the Budget, thus enhancing the president's control of the expanding activities of the executive branch. This act represents the genesis of the institutional presidency, which was then better equipped to govern independently of the constraints imposed by the regular political process. The creation of the EOP and the advance of administrative power enabled a reform-minded president like Franklin Roosevelt to grudgingly forge a partnership with civil rights activists that defied the Southern wing of the Democratic Party and instead served a fledgling liberal coalition.<sup>10</sup> Among the major changes the act ushered in, the creation of the FEPC was as an important signpost of an emerging partnership between the White House and the civil rights movement. Pressured by the MOWM, Roosevelt acted in advance of his party, even while his support for civil rights was granted "reluctantly, tardily, inadequately, and under conditions of coercion."<sup>11</sup>

These developments provide important insights not only into the consolidation of an executive-centered administrative state, but also into the fomentation of the early civil rights movement. A significant but underexamined pattern of development in the politics of civil rights during the middle of the twentieth century is that successive American presidents, starting with FDR and going through President Lyndon B. Johnson, used the powers of the modern executive to support civil rights. A case study of the MOWM and its aftermath, we contend, sheds light on why an uneasy partnership between presidents and the civil rights movement became so critical to the battle for racial justice—especially to the dedication of Randolph, and his great successor, Martin Luther King, Jr., to combine civil rights and economic opportunity.

Some scholars attribute this contentious but fruitful partnership to the Great Migration after World War II, which enabled Black voters, as White House advisors warned Truman prior to the 1948 election campaign, to hold the "balance of power" in presidential elections.<sup>12</sup> We agree that this massive demographic change, and the growing support among Northern Democrats for economic and civil rights reform during Roosevelt's presidency, helps explain why civil rights activists found Truman a more cooperative partner than Roosevelt had been.<sup>13</sup> But the balance-of-power argument does not explain why the executive–civil rights movement nexus had its origins in the Progressive Era or how the MOWM was able to get Roosevelt to create a pathbreaking administrative agency prior to the start of World War II. Nor does it adequately account for why the executive orders of Roosevelt and Truman, rather than legislation or court action, were, as the distinguished civil rights

historian John Hope Franklin stated in a 1968 address, "the crucial turning point in viewing the problem of race as a national problem."<sup>14</sup> Finally, the electoral connection cannot explain why these executive orders focused on government employment and the military to advance the civil rights and economic opportunities of Black Americans. For as Steven White shows, there was little public support for these measures.<sup>15</sup>

Other scholars, most prominently Mary Dudziak, have argued that the Cold War created an important set of incentives for presidents to propagate at least the appearance of progress toward racial equality on the international stage.<sup>16</sup> Dudziak also argues that Truman was more willing than previous presidents to pursue civil rights reform; however, his desegregation of the armed forces and support for the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* was due less to the actions and pressure of civil rights groups than to changes in world politics.<sup>17</sup> Dudziak does credit the MOWM, the NAACP, Randolph, and other civil rights advocates for effectively exploiting American vulnerability on the race issue in the nation's all-consuming struggle with the Soviet Union. But our case studies emphasize that the pioneering tactics that Randolph and his political allies deployed were necessary to overcome the considerable resistance they faced from the White House—and how civil rights activists forged, in spite of this resistance, an enduring relationship with the modern presidency.

Significantly, the presidential–movement connection did not start during President Truman's administration; rather, our case studies reveal that they were a continuation of the strategy that Randolph and his allies began to develop during the MOWM's campaign for Executive Order 8802. Combining the mass action of civil rights advocacy and the sit-down strike strategy of industrial unionization, Randolph and the MOWM gave concrete substance to reform commitments, especially private- and public-sector employment, organizations, and tactics that had a significant influence on the trajectory of the Civil Rights Movement and its relationship to the White House. Moreover, the interplay between civil rights activism and the administrative state during World War II and the Cold War was an opening wedge to a broader civil rights agenda. As the MOWM proclaimed in its call for a peaceful assault on the capital, "In this period of power politics, nothing counts but pressure, more pressure, and still more pressure, through the tactic and strategy of broad, organized, aggressive mass action behind the vital and important issues of the Negro."<sup>18</sup>

We are not the first scholars to highlight the MOWM as an important juncture in the development of civil rights politics and policy. There is a rich literature on the employment-centered civil rights activity of the 1930s and 1940s. Scholars such as Ira Katznelson stress that New Deal employment programs and policy, strongly influenced by Southern Democrats, discriminated against

<sup>10</sup>Milkis and Tichenor, *Rivalry and Reform*, 113–34.

<sup>11</sup>William Leuchtenburg, *The White House Looks South: Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Lyndon Johnson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 65.

<sup>12</sup>Clark Clifford to Harry Truman, memorandum, November 19, 1947, Harry S. Truman Library, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/memo-clark-clifford-harry-truman?documentid=NA&pagenumber=1>. See also: Stephen White, *World War II and American Racial Politics: Public Opinion, the Presidency, and Civil Rights Advocacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 129–30; Morton Sosna, "Introduction," in *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1997), xv; John Modell, Marc Goulden, and Sigurdur Magnusson, "World War II and the Lives of Black Americans: Some Findings and Interpretation," *Journal of American History* 76, no. 3 (1989): 839.

<sup>13</sup>On the Democratic Party's transformation, see Eric Schickler, *Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism, 1932–1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>14</sup>John Hope Franklin, "Civil Rights and the Truman Administration," Public Address at the University of Chicago, April 5, 1968, in *Conference of Scholars on the Truman Administration and Human Rights*, ed. Donald McCoy, Richard T. Reutten, and J. R. Fuchs (Independence, MO: Harry Truman Library Institute, 1968), 134.

<sup>15</sup>White, *World War II*, 125, 141.

<sup>16</sup>Mary Dudziak, *War Time: Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); see also White, *World War II*, 131.

<sup>17</sup>For example, Dudziak argues that it was military necessity in the Korean War that finally pushed commanders to comply with the desegregation order. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 83–88.

<sup>18</sup>"Call to Nero America: To March on Washington for Jobs and Equal Participation in National Defense," July 1, 1940, attached to A. Philip Randolph to Eleanor Roosevelt, June 5, 1941.



African Americans.<sup>19</sup> Yet even while Roosevelt did not mount a direct campaign for racial justice, many African American workers and civil rights organizers viewed the New Deal as transformative.<sup>20</sup> Expanded job opportunities, in the form of labor protections and federal jobs programs, were significant developments that led many African Americans to shift their allegiance from the Republican Party to Roosevelt's New Deal Democratic Party.<sup>21</sup>

However, most of this scholarship that includes an evaluation of the FEPC, Roosevelt's most important executive action against Jim Crow, concludes that it was a noble but failed experiment in what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall called "civil rights unionism." The disappointments of this grand experiment resulted ultimately, according to these accounts, in a shift from an administrative to a legal strategy and to the disentangling of the struggles for civil rights and economic opportunity.<sup>22</sup> This view of a "long civil rights movement" highlights some of activists' principal legislative objectives during the late 1930s and 1940s: outlawing the white primary, eliminating poll taxes, passing antilynching and other antidiscrimination laws, and establishing the FEPC as a permanent agency.<sup>23</sup> But it also suggests the variety of aims (including jobs and economic opportunity) and avenues (including the executive branch) that they utilized for reform and the various trade-offs associated with these strategies. As Kevin McMahon has shown, despite civil rights advocates' frustrations with FDR for failing to pursue a comprehensive civil rights program for fear of alienating the Southern wing of the party—even refusing to support an antilynching bill—the president did deploy the Department of Justice, newly armed with a Civil Liberties Unit (later named the Civil Rights Section), to collaborate with the courts in developing a legal strategy that would advance civil rights in critical areas such as voting and mob violence.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup>While African Americans were recipients of federal relief and jobs programs, many faced barriers in participating in programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and Social Security and were denied protection in some labor laws. Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 176.

<sup>20</sup>For example, Roosevelt's support of collective bargaining, codified by the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, increased the number of Black union members by fivefold between 1935 and 1940. Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2009), 40.

<sup>21</sup>Schickler, *Racial Realignment*.

<sup>22</sup>Risa Goluboff, Sophia Lee, and Reuel Schiller have carefully documented the development of this legal agenda, and particularly the way in which broader concerns with economic inequality fell away as civil rights groups came to focus more explicitly on the antidiscrimination in the courts. Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012); Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press, 2009); Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy against Segregated Education, 1925–1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Risa Lauren Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Sophia Z. Lee, *The Workplace Constitution from the New Deal to the New Right* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Reuel Schiller, *Forging Rivals: Race, Class, Law, and the Collapse of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>23</sup>Francis, *Civil Rights*; Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005): 1233–63.

<sup>24</sup>In 1939, the president appointed Frank Murphy Attorney General and urged him to create the Civil Liberties unit, soon renamed the Civil Rights Section (CRS). The CRS was a small division, and its actual effects on racial problems were modest; however, its gifted lawyers, often in cooperation with the NAACP, pursued court cases—most notably, *Smith v. Allwright*, which declared the white primary unconstitutional—that "laid the foundational precedent for later Supreme Court decisions constitutionally undercutting southern democracy and white supremacy." Kevin J. McMahon, *Reconsidering Roosevelt on Race: How the Presidency Paved the Road to Brown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 144–45.

Within this broader literature, a number of scholars have acknowledged the lasting legacy of the MOWM and FEPC and how this episode fit into the development of a broader civil rights agenda in the United States. However, these accounts have largely focused not on the executive branch, but on the agency's influence and impact on Congress, the Democratic Party, the courts, and state governments. Anthony Chen shows that despite the failure of civil rights activists' persistent efforts to make the FEPC a permanent agency, the experience spurred states outside of the South to carry on the work of the agency by passing a number of fair employment laws.<sup>25</sup> Others have emphasized the role the FEPC played as a training ground for civil rights leaders.<sup>26</sup>

While each of these works illustrates important achievements, they also view the failure to establish a permanent FEPC as the end of the administrative-based strategy for civil rights organizers, turning their attention instead to the courts, Congress, and the states. However, these accounts overlook that Randolph and other leaders of the MOWM continued to devote significant attention and resources to pressuring Truman for further reforms. Rather than viewing the FEPC and MOWM as launching pads for state, judicial, and legislative politics, we focus on the significant developments that came from Randolph's intrepid efforts to influence executive action.

The dynamic relationship between Presidents Roosevelt and Truman and civil rights leaders led to executive orders and the establishment of presidential commissions that contributed to the desegregation of the defense industry, the military, and the civil service—including antidiscrimination measures for federal contracts. Although these executive actions are often viewed as tepid and temporary solutions to racial injustice, they were direct and practical responses to social and economic inequalities that proved to be of enduring significance. Randolph and his political allies in the civil rights movement concluded, not without reason, that efforts to pressure the White House were more likely to yield tangible results than would lobbying Congress, still under the sway of Southern Democrats. Moreover, they recognized that braiding economic and civil rights would not have been viable through the courts. As other scholars have shown, civil rights and labor unions increasingly found themselves in conflict and working at cross purposes in the courts. The FEPC's railroad discrimination investigation, which was ultimately resolved in the courts—not by the fledgling agency—is a case in point. The outcome of the case, while a victory for civil rights advocates, became a significant precedent the courts used to intervene in collective bargaining agreements and to restrict unions' power.<sup>27</sup>

Randolph's view that the road to racial equality went through the executive branch was not merely strategic. The importance of the New Deal programs for Black and white workers was not lost on organizers like Randolph, who navigated a new federal bureaucratic landscape to further the goal of civil rights. As he explained in an essay on the MOWM's program, "no greater wrong has been committed against the Negro than the denial to him the right to

<sup>25</sup>For example, see Anthony S. Chen, *The Fifth Freedom: Jobs, Politics, and Civil Rights in the United States, 1941–1972* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>26</sup>For example, see Shamira Gelbman, *The Civil Rights Lobby: The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and the Second Reconstruction* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2021) and Shamira Gelbman, "From Protest to Politics' Revisited: Lobbyist Careers and the Institutionalization of the Civil Rights Movement," presented at the 2021 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association.

<sup>27</sup>Schiller, *Forging Rivals*; Paul Frymer, *Black and Blue: African Americans, the Labor Movement, and the Decline of the Democratic Party* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

work. The question of the right to work is tied up with the right to live.<sup>28</sup> In fact, African Americans in the 1930s and 1940s were more supportive of the New Deal's federal jobs and social welfare programs than their white counterparts.<sup>29</sup> These programs spurred the mass entrance of Black voters into the Democratic Party by 1936, even before the party agenda evolved to include civil rights.<sup>30</sup> The task of the MOWM, Randolph argued, was to pressure the White House to take direct action against discrimination in the millions of jobs controlled by the Arsenal of Democracy.

Randolph's commitments as a civil rights leader were clearly influenced by his equally committed position within the trade union movement, which also led him to develop novel tactics that fused militance and economic rights. He did not differentiate between the ultimate needs and goals of Black and white workers but saw economic rights as a prerequisite to the freedom of African Americans, a position that at times fostered key alliances and at others put him at odds with some other groups and organizations pushing for civil rights and racial equality.<sup>31</sup> For example, the NAACP's engagement with the FEPC was significantly less enthusiastic—because they were concerned that fair employment would take priority over their campaigns for antilynching and anti-poll-tax legislation. But the FEPC was also an important ground for forging alliances with labor unions; notably, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was among the most vocal and ardent in its support for the agency and resistance to the influence from Southern conservatives.

In the following sections, we trace the relationship between the Roosevelt and Truman administrations and civil rights activists that led to the issuing of executive orders to proscribe racial discrimination in the military, civil service, and private-sector jobs. Unlike most studies of these executive orders, we show that civil rights activists' unrelenting pressure on the FEPC, the Fahy Committee, and the Fair Employment Board significantly influenced the enforcement of presidential directive in the face of fierce resistance from Southern Democrats. Civil rights activists' efforts to influence national administration made nascent agencies like the FEPC hotbeds of contestation and the target of conservative efforts to dismantle the New Deal administrative state. However, advocates for racial justice never accepted setbacks in these conflicts as cause for surrender; rather, reversals aroused determined efforts to keep pressure on the executive branch—to force them to keep moving down the hard road to progress.

<sup>28</sup> A. Philip Randolph, "March on Washington Movement Presents Program for the Negro (1944)," in *For Jobs and Freedom: Selected Speeches and Writings of A. Philip Randolph*, ed. Andrew E. Kersten and David Lucander (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 211–31, 216.

<sup>29</sup> See Schickler, *Racial Realignment*, p. 140, fig. 6.2.

<sup>30</sup> Schickler has argued that the reason for this electoral shift was not the liberal economic policies Roosevelt pursued, but rather the extension of liberalism to civil rights in the Northern and Western wings of the Democratic Party. The federal nature of the two-party system aided labor and civil rights groups in the North and Midwest, especially the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and NAACP, in securing political support at the state and local level, in opposition to national leadership—a struggle between Democratic Party regulars and social activists that would reverberate through the 1960s. While Schickler effectively documents the incorporation of civil rights into the mainstream Democratic Party agenda, his account also indicates that the mass influx of African Americans into Roosevelt's New Deal Democratic Party actually predated the "racial realignment." Schickler, *Racial Realignment*, ch. 3.

<sup>31</sup> While Randolph tends to play a less central role in many civil rights accounts, scholars are increasingly examining his legacy. For example, in a recent article Jared Clemons connects Randolph and Martin Luther King Jr.'s political programs to contemporary antiracist politics. Jared Clemons, "From 'Freedom Now!' To 'Black Lives Matter': Retrieving King and Randolph to Theorize Contemporary White Antiracism," *Perspectives on Politics* (June 8, 2022): 1–15.

The consolidation during the New Deal of an executive-centered administrative state made the White House a critical target of mass direct action for racial equality and economic justice during the civil rights revolution of the 1960s. As we discuss in the conclusion, Randolph's agitation for economic rights persisted as a leading objective of social activists during the postwar years both with the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which Randolph and a younger generation of social activists viewed as the culmination of work that began on the eve of World War II to enlist the White House's support in the cause of comprehensive civil rights reform, and later efforts to promote a Freedom Budget that would fulfill the objectives highlighted by the mass demonstration in the capital. Randolph and his longtime associate Bayard Rustin were the principal architects of both efforts, influencing other leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Many fail to remember, as historian Kate Sampsell-Willmann notes, that King was assassinated while supporting striking sanitation workers.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, we contend, the case studies in the next two sections of this article confirm that civil rights unionism was "not just a precursor of the modern civil rights movement" but "a decisive first phase."<sup>33</sup>

## 2. Organizing for Fair Employment During World War II

The formation of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) was a great victory for Randolph and the MOWM coalition, and the agency's work over the next several years gave rise to a new form of relationship between civil rights organizations and the president. This new agency gave those groups a foothold to intervene in national administrative debates over jobs and economic opportunities for African Americans. Randolph's threat and Roosevelt's reaction created a blueprint for a call and response between social movements and the presidency that sparked real, tangible action on the civil rights front during the 1940s and 1950s, especially within the federal government.

This section traces the major stages in the development of the FEPC and its efforts to eliminate discrimination within private-sector employment, which composed the vast majority of the agency's work and gave rise to the most public scrutiny and opposition. In addition, this section highlights the importance of the FEPC's work within the federal government examining discrimination in public-sector employment. The FEPC's lesser-known efforts to document and eliminate discrimination within the federal workforce created an infrastructure for civil rights activists to draw on under Truman's presidency, when they pressed for full desegregation of the armed forces and civil service. This legacy emphasizes that the influence of the FEPC did not end with the failure to pass legislation that would form a permanent committee. Rather, the agency shaped later organizing efforts and influenced important dynamics and developments within civil rights groups that impacted the overall strategy and direction of the pressure campaign on the White House.

World War II created a potent opportunity for civil rights leaders to press for fair employment in the war industries.

<sup>32</sup> Kate Sampsell-Willmann, "Image and Labor in a Longer, Broader Civil Rights Movement," *Reviews in American History* 40, no. 3 (September 2012): 492–99.

<sup>33</sup> Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement," 1244–45, 1223–63; for a review of the vast literature on racial justice activism during the 1940s, see Eric Arnesen, "Reconsidering the Long Civil Rights Movement," *Historically Speaking* 10, no. 2 (2009): 31–34; and Cornelius Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois, 2010), 31–34.

The economic expansion necessitated by the war had increased the demand for workers in many skilled production jobs, and civil rights organizations fought to break down barriers to employment in these sectors for Black workers.<sup>34</sup> In the lead up to the war, activists and organizations were engaged in a Double Victory campaign: calling both for victory over fascism abroad and victory over racial discrimination at home. Many thought that by supporting the war effort, African Americans would prove to white Americans that they were worthy of full citizenship.<sup>35</sup> The NAACP's Walter White and the Urban League's Lester Granger sought progress on the home front through elite contacts and private outreach.<sup>36</sup> But others insisted that more direct and militant action was needed, highlighting the tensions and diversity of ideological and strategic positions within the early civil rights movement.

Randolph fell into this second camp. He worked to mobilize African Americans and channel their massive resistance in order to force President Roosevelt to use his executive authority to address discrimination in "all Government Departments, Army, Navy, Air Corps, and National Defense Jobs."<sup>37</sup> Despite their misgivings and disagreements over tactics and strategy, White and Granger did join the MOWM's crusade, tempering Randolph's more militant tactics. Indeed, White helped persuade Roosevelt that the MOWM could mobilize a mass rally in the national's capital. Although his tactics were more militant than other prominent civil rights leaders, Randolph was careful to characterize the protest as widely reflective of shared American values and assured the president that "the Negroes of America are deeply stirred over the question of their receiving equal opportunity to share in the benefits and responsibilities and duties and sacrifices incident to [the] great and tremendous effort to build a defense machinery for the protection of our country and to safeguard the cause of democracy."<sup>38</sup> Roosevelt was not easily assuaged; he feared that a march of that magnitude could lead to violence and a backlash that would threaten the fragile North–South Democratic alliance. As Eleanor Roosevelt wrote to Randolph, she and the president were fearful that a mass protest in the nation's capital would "create in Congress even more solid opposition from certain groups than we have had in the past."<sup>39</sup> The president was also concerned that the march would set a dangerous precedent that would "stimulate other groups to plan marches on Washington."<sup>40</sup>

However, Roosevelt was sympathetic to Randolph's criticism of the Democratic Party's Faustian bargain with white supremacy. Frustrated by the South's resistance to extending New Deal programs during his second term, he began to take aggressive action against conservative Democrats, most dramatically the "purge" campaign during the 1938 midterm elections. While the purge

effort ultimately failed—all but two of the incumbent Democrats whom Roosevelt opposed were renominated—it did help to advance changes in the Democratic coalition that shifted the center of power to the party's Northern urban wing.<sup>41</sup>

Randolph praised Roosevelt's attempt to liberalize the South in 1938 as "courageous"; at the same time, he expressed disappointment that the president's diagnosis of the Southern "caste system" championed economic liberalism but did not directly condemn Jim Crowism. "It is our own opinion," he wrote in the *Chicago Defender* in the midst of Roosevelt's purge campaign, "that the great prestige and power of some President of the United States must be thrown into the balance against the nefarious terrorization of black Americans below the Mason-Dixon line."<sup>42</sup> Executive Order 8802, which Roosevelt reluctantly issued in response to the MOWM's credible threat to stage an unprecedented mass protest, did not lead to a comprehensive civil rights program. Nevertheless, as the historian Merl Elwyn Reed has observed, this extension of executive power into labor markets made the FEPC "the most controversial federal agency in the nation during the war and perhaps in modern American history."<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, this new agency represented an unprecedented government attempt to address racial inequality and discrimination in employment—a pioneering measure justified by the imperatives of a wartime economy. Echoing the MOWM's call to action, Executive Order 8802 emphasized the necessity for all American to participate fully in the war effort, "in the firm belief that the democratic way of life within the Nation [could] be defended successfully only with the help and support of all groups within its borders." Citing evidence that "available and needed workers [had] been barred from employment in industries engaged in defense production solely because of considerations of race, creed, color, or national origin, to the detriment of workers' morale and of national unity," the order established the FEPC in the Office of Production Management (OPM), with authorization to investigate complaints of racial, religious, and nativist discrimination in defense industries and government agencies and to mediate changes to discriminatory hiring and promotion practices.<sup>44</sup> The order also provided expansive targets for the new committee: the federal government, government contracts, as well as unions and companies engaged in defense industries.

Despite the FEPC's significant investigatory powers, its enforcement mechanisms were notably vague, leading some to downplay the significance of the FEPC in civil rights organizing.<sup>45</sup> However, with civil rights groups' persistent pressure, the agency made progress. In its first eighteen months, the FEPC resolved about one-quarter (1,723) of the nearly 6,000 cases of racial, religious, and

<sup>34</sup>Schickler, *Racial Realignment*, 80–82.

<sup>35</sup>Both Lester Granger of the National Urban League (NUL) and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, two of the most prominent racial advocacy organizations at the time, argued that channeling Black support for the war efforts would help to shift white attitudes about the "caste system" after the war. Lee Finkle, "The Conservative Aims of Militant Rhetoric: Black Protest during World War II," *The Journal of American History* 60, no. 3 (December 1973): 703–704.

<sup>36</sup>White, *World War II*, 120.

<sup>37</sup>A. Phillip Randolph to Eleanor Roosevelt, June 5, 1941.

<sup>38</sup>A. Philip Randolph to Franklin Roosevelt, May 29, 1941," in *For Jobs and Freedom: Selected Speeches and Writings of A. Philip Randolph*, ed. Andrew E. Kersten and David Lucander (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 206–207.

<sup>39</sup>"Eleanor Roosevelt to A. Phillip Randolph, June 10, 1941," in *The Papers of Eleanor Roosevelt, 1933–1945*, ed. Susan Ware and William Chafe (housed jointly in Washington, DC: Library of Congress and Hyde Park, NY: Franklin D. Roosevelt Library).

<sup>40</sup>Transcript, A. Philip Randolph Oral History Interview I, interview by Thomas H. Baker, October 29, 1969, LBJ Library.

<sup>41</sup>During the lead up to the 1938 midterm elections, Roosevelt intervened in one gubernatorial primary and several congressional primaries in a bold effort to replace recalcitrant Southern and border-state Democrats with candidates who were "100 percent New Dealers." For a detailed account of the purge campaign, see Sidney M. Milkis, *The President and the Parties: The Transformation of the American Party System Since the New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), ch. 4; Susan Dunn, *Roosevelt's Purge: How FDR Fought to Change the Democratic Party* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>42</sup>"President's Remedy for a Sick South Does Not Go Far Enough Says Randolph," *Chicago Defender*, August 27, 1938.

<sup>43</sup>Merl Elwyn Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941–1946* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 1.

<sup>44</sup>The authority of the committee also extended to government defense contracts and subcontracts.

<sup>45</sup>Frymer, *Black and Blue*, 38–40.



nativist discrimination it considered.<sup>46</sup> The vast majority of these cases (81 percent) were concerned with discrimination based on race.<sup>47</sup> Analysis by the economist William Collins indicates that the FEPC was markedly effective in resolving disputes outside of the South. Although the agency was less effective below the Mason-Dixon line, civil rights advocates successfully resisted Southern Democrats' efforts to dismantle the agency. Moreover, the progress it made in other regions of the country "accelerated the pace of black economic advancement [during the 1940s] by challenging ... discriminatory practices and opening doors for black workers in industries, occupations, and firms that had previously excluded them."<sup>48</sup>

That the FEPC was able to make such progress, without direct recourse to penalties, testifies to the relentless pressure the MOWM applied to the White House and the industries and organizations that engaged in discriminatory behavior. The placement of the FEPC in the OPM and within the newly created Executive Office of the President (EOP) gave the agency autonomy and greater access to the president, creating a new opportunity for administrative action on civil rights. Bureaucratic appointments and federal government jobs had been an important terrain of civil rights struggles since the Civil War. Many Black Americans had been able to secure appointments and good-paying federal jobs through the patronage system, which came under attack during the end of the nineteenth century. Efforts to get rid of the "spoils system," ostensibly motivated by reformers' ambition to establish a merit-based national service, were undermined by the Wilson administration's "racial bureaucracy," which diminished the gains Black Americans had made over the previous four decades.<sup>49</sup> During Roosevelt's first two terms, under the auspices of the so-called Black Cabinet, a new "complaint-driven race management system" was heralded as an effective strategy for resolving disputes regarding discriminatory behavior against African Americans.<sup>50</sup> It also aided Democrats in crafting an appeal to Black voters, which helped Roosevelt win an unprecedented third term in the 1940 election against Republican Wendell Willkie.

<sup>46</sup> July 1, 1943–December 31, 1944, as reported in the first report: "Division of Review and Analysis, First Report, 1944–1945, Drafts, Workpapers, Proofs," May 1, 1945, RG 228, box 432, section 34, folder 1, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

<sup>47</sup> The remaining 20 percent of the caseload considered discrimination against religious minorities and foreign workers. About one-third of cases came from the industrialized east, with particularly high numbers in New York and Philadelphia. The majority of FEPC cases (69.4 percent) dealt with discrimination by employers, 24.5 percent concerned the federal government, and only 6.1 percent considered trade unions. These figures are of the cases docketed and considered by the FEPC, the report does not indicate how many of the complaints that were rejected as out of scope or having insufficient evidence fell into each of these categories. Charges against unions were more prevalent in the South, which the report attributed to lower levels of integration in unions. Despite the low number of cases that involved trade unions, some of the most prominent and public-facing cases of the FEPC dealt with union practices. Part of this was likely due, not only to the importance of unions to the New Deal coalition, but also to these being more difficult and time-consuming cases to resolve. The FEPC's first report stated that cases against businesses were "received, closed, and satisfactorily adjusted" much faster than those concerning government agencies and labor unions. "Division of Review and Analysis, First Report, 1944–1945, Drafts, Workpapers, Proofs," 2, 31, 41–42.

<sup>48</sup> William J. Collins, "Race, Roosevelt, and Wartime Production: Fair Employment in World War II Labor Markets," *The American Economic Review* 91, no. 1 (2001): 272–86.

<sup>49</sup> Yellin, *Racism in the Nation's Service*, 3; Desmond S. King and Rogers M. Smith, "Racial Orders in American Political Development," *The American Political Science Review* 99, no. 1 (2005): 85–86; Desmond S. King, *Separate and Unequal: Black Americans and the US Federal Government* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1995), ch. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Daniel Kryder, *Divided Arsenal: Race and the American State During World War II* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 35.

By the early 1940s, however, many African Americans had grown skeptical that simply securing a few Black appointments in the executive branch, while of great symbolic importance, was an effective or meaningful path toward racial equality. National civil rights organizations, and many rank-and-file Black workers, were beginning to favor more militant strategies to demand action on the part of the federal government. The FEPC was one outcome of these efforts; it provided a much more effective mechanism for resolving complaints and represented a partial departure from the administration's deference to the discriminatory practices of business and labor.<sup>51</sup>

The FEPC also afforded civil rights advocates unprecedented access, giving them a platform for negotiations with unions and employers. The original FEPC included representatives not only from unions and employers but also from Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) and other civil rights groups.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, civil rights organizations were able to play a more active role in negotiating changes to union and employer practices. In one of the FEPC's most prominent cases, against the West Coast International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, the National Urban League (NUL) allied with the progressive CIO to press the union to eliminate auxiliary union structures, which relegated Black members to separate locals with fewer protections than full union members.<sup>53</sup>

Scholarship examining the FEPC tends to focus on the challenges and limited success in signature defense industry cases, like the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers and the case against the southern railroad industry. Arguing it was stymied at the national level, some have focused on the more concrete reforms and success the FEPC spurred at the state level.<sup>54</sup> However, these accounts fail to recognize the throughline from civil rights groups' administrative strategy under the FEPC to later efforts to desegregate the military and civil service under Truman. The following discussion documents how civil rights groups mobilized against frequent reorganizations of the agency that threatened to diminish its influence, pushed for a stronger commitment to the landmark southern railroad case, and supported the agency's internal examination of discrimination in federal employment, all of which provided an important foundation for later advocacy.

## 2.1 Bureaucratic Reorganization, the Southern Railroads, and the Civil Rights Groups' Administrative Strategy

Among the most significant challenges for civil rights groups were frequent reorganizations of executive agencies charged with wartime mobilization. These changes, reflecting resistance to the newly forged alliance between the modern presidency and

<sup>51</sup> Kryder, *Divided Arsenal*, 25–26, 35, and 46–53.

<sup>52</sup> The five original members appointed to the FEPC were David Sarnoff of the Radio Corporation of America, William Green of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), Phillip Murray of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and two African Americans: Chicago Alderman Earl Dickerson and BSCP Vice President Milton Webster. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 22–23.

<sup>53</sup> For more on the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers case, see "The Boilermakers Challenge on the West Coast" in Merl Elwyn Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941–1946* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), ch. 9.

<sup>54</sup> For more on the southern railroad case, see Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). For discussions of the state-level fair employment developments, see Andrew Edmund Kersten, *Race, Jobs, and the War: The FEPC in the Midwest, 1941–46* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000); and Chen, *The Fifth Freedom*.

civil rights organizations, sorely tested Roosevelt's support for fair employment. As a result, civil rights advocates and their labor union allies developed strategies to pressure Roosevelt, who needed constant prodding to support the mission of the FEPC. In particular, the importance of this pressure in the wake of executive reorganizations is clear from the agency's efforts to investigate and address discrimination by the southern railroad industry.

The agency went through its first major bureaucratic reorganization during the early months of 1942. Civil rights groups had celebrated the original administrative structure that Roosevelt's executive order created, which established the FEPC as an independent body that reported directly to the president. They were greatly alarmed, therefore, by the president's administrative maneuver in May 1942, which placed the FEPC under the War Manpower Commission (WMC) and brought it under the direct supervision of Chairman Paul McNutt.<sup>55</sup> Civil rights leaders were apprehensive that placing the FEPC in the WMC created a conflict of interest: The Manpower Commission, charged with accelerating production, they feared, would be very unlikely to take action against employers. The MOWM, NAACP, and NUL strongly opposed this reorganization, expressing fear that it minimized their direct access to the president as well as the committee's autonomy and effectiveness.<sup>56</sup> It was no accident, they charged, that this reorganization took place after the FEPC scheduled hearings in Birmingham, Alabama, starting in June to investigate whether Black workers were being hired into jobs commensurate with their skill level. No sooner had its field office opened there than stories appeared claiming that Roosevelt's ultimate plan was to establish "social equality." As labor and civil rights advocates recognized, this was the same propaganda long deployed to keep unions out of the South.<sup>57</sup>

Roosevelt's administrative reorganization, civil rights activists charged, appeared to undermine the FEPC in the face of Southern resistance. As Walter White wrote to the president in August, "following as it does the bitter opposition of reactionary Southern politicians to the Birmingham and proposed El Paso [Texas] hearings indicates that the principle of Executive Order 8802 is in danger of being surrendered to Southern political considerations."<sup>58</sup> Roosevelt's sensitivity to the demands of the Southern Democrats also did not bode well for congressional authorization of the FEPC. Earl Dickerson, one of the FEPC's two Black members who frequently advocated for more forceful (sometimes radical) tactics,

made this point in protesting the agency's move to the WMC.<sup>59</sup> In a letter to Lester Granger of the NUL in October 1942, Dickerson echoed White's concern that the reorganization would mean the end of the "vigorous prosecution" of those who violated the executive order. While Dickerson had hoped that the FEPC would become permanent, he feared that could not happen if it were "to be under the supervision of the Manpower Commission throughout the period of duration."<sup>60</sup>

While the MOWM leaders did not give up the hope of attaining a permanent agency with legislative authority, Southern Democrats seized on the party's considerable losses in the 1942 election to try to permanently dismantle the FEPC.<sup>61</sup> Their opposition centered on the FEPC's investigation of southern railroads, which it had begun in early 1942 and set initial hearings for the winter of 1942. In January 1943, McNutt pressured FEPC's Executive Director Lawrence Cramer to cancel the hearings. Cramer, acting on the wishes of the full committee, refused to do so.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, McNutt, acting with President Roosevelt's approval, announced on January 11, 1943, that the railroad hearings would be postponed indefinitely. McNutt claimed that the railroad case was out of the FEPC's scope of authority and that the agency needed more time to gather evidence. However, he was relatively vague about his reasoning and grounds for these claims. This was a major blow to the civil rights organizations, which had spent thousands of dollars and months of careful preparation for the FEPC hearings.<sup>63</sup>

McNutt's announcement caused a massive outcry from members of the committee, civil rights groups, and organized labor, especially the CIO. In their view, postponing the case indefinitely was tantamount to outright cancellation. The entire legal team that had been secured to aid the FEPC on the railroad case resigned in protest. Charles Houston, who had been part of the railroad case legal team in addition to serving as a prominent NAACP lawyer, was among those who resigned, claiming:

Mr. McNutt's action followed the traditional pattern of sacrificing the Negro whenever an attempt to do him justice antagonizes powerful reactionary forces in industry and labor. The railroad industry, the railroad unions and government itself are afraid to permit these public hearings because they know the charges of discrimination are true.<sup>64</sup>

Houston argued that the cancellation confirmed civil rights leaders' fears that Roosevelt's reorganization order revealed his wavering commitment to the FEPC's autonomy and activities. Other representatives of civil rights organizations penned many articles arguing that the cancellation portended the end of Roosevelt's nascent

<sup>55</sup>President Roosevelt had created the WMC in 1942 to be a specific entity within the war bureaucracy dedicated to allocating scarce labor resources to particular sectors of the economy. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 54–55; Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 22.

<sup>56</sup>Lester Granger (NUL) and Walter White (NAACP) communicated with Director McNutt about their hope that the FEPC would maintain an independent budget and more control over the field staff. McNutt's response was that the consolidation was meant to reduce duplicative efforts between the WMC and FEPC and instead consolidate the field staff into one unit. Lester Granger to Chairman McNutt, letter, September 29, 1942, box 1, A16, folder 9: Fair Employment Practices Commission, 1942–Feb 1943, National Urban League Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Chairman McNutt to Lester Granger, letter, October 1, 1942, box 1, A16, folder 9: Fair Employment Practices Commission, 1942–February 1943, National Urban League Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Walter White to Chairman McNutt, letter, October 13, 1942, box 1, A16, folder 10: Fair Employment Practices Commission, 1942–Feb 1943, National Urban League Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>57</sup>Paula F. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 91.

<sup>58</sup>Walter White to Franklin Roosevelt, letter, August 6, 1942, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series B: Cooperation with Organized Labor, 1940–1955, 001434-018-0962, Papers of the NAACP, History Vault.

<sup>59</sup>Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 33–34.

<sup>60</sup>Earl Dickerson to Lester Granger, letter, October 8, 1942, box 1, A16, folder 9: Fair Employment Practices Commission, 1942–February 1943, National Urban League Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>61</sup>Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 193.

<sup>62</sup>"McNutt Calls Off Hearing on Hiring," *New York Times*, January 12, 1943, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series B: Cooperation with Organized Labor, 1940–1955, 001434-012-0295, Papers of the NAACP, History Vault.

<sup>63</sup>"Employment Discrimination, Railroad Brotherhoods, and Use of the Black Press for Publicity," press release, January 23, 1943, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series B: Cooperation with Organized Labor, 1940–1955, 001434-019-0261, Papers of the NAACP, History Vault; Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 92.

<sup>64</sup>Charles Houston to Chairman MacLean, letter, January 16, 1943, RG 228, box 61, section 6, folder H: Office of the Committee, Office Files of the Chairman, Carbon Copies of Letters sent, February 1943–May 1945, A-1, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.



civil rights program.<sup>65</sup> Randolph, on behalf of the MOWM, proclaimed that calling off the hearings indicated “that FEPC is useless and that it can no longer be looked to for help.”<sup>66</sup>

Civil rights organizations connected the postponement with their inability to affect national-level policy, a concern reflected in internal debates among civil rights groups on tactics and strategy. Two issues loomed large in these debates: the value of aligning with white liberal groups and, more specifically, the consequences of forming ties with the labor movement. In an internal NAACP memo from Walter White to Roy Wilkins, White listed the cancellation of the railroad hearings, among other significant policy defeats, as evidence that civil rights groups must assume the responsibility to lead the fight for economic opportunity. As Randolph argued in his statement on the MOWM’s program, Black Americans were “the only people who are the victims of Jim Crow, and it is they who must take the initiative and assume the responsibility to abolish it.”<sup>67</sup> It was this concern that had led Randolph and many members of the MOWM to restrict their organization’s membership to African Americans.<sup>68</sup>

However, Wilkins and many Black columnists believed that Randolph’s all-Black-membership rule went too far. They warned that this rule risked “racial isolation” by refusing membership to their white allies.<sup>69</sup> Yet Roosevelt’s relegation of the FEPC to McNutt’s superintendence showed that there was some truth to Randolph’s admonition that “white liberals and labor may sympathize with the Negro’s fight against Jim Crow, but they are not going to lead the fight.” Despite their differences, these groups did form a united front in rallying to the FEPC’s defense. At the “Save the FEPC” Conference in Washington, DC, in February 1943, roughly 150 delegates—representing forty-two organizations, including civil rights groups, labor unions, religious organizations, and socialists—convened in the nation’s capital to protest what they perceived as a fatal weakening of the FEPC and to argue for its mandate to be reaffirmed and expanded.<sup>70</sup> Labor unions, particularly leaders of the CIO, were among the most ardent defenders of the FEPC during this time.<sup>71</sup>

Some of these groups also participated in a similarly revealing meeting in February 1943, called by McNutt and Attorney General Francis Biddle: the Conference on Scope and Powers of Committee on Fair Employment Practice.<sup>72</sup> The meeting was an opportunity for groups with a stake in the operations of the FEPC to share their thoughts about how to resurrect its administrative authority. The major issues considered were the independent status of the FEPC, the necessity of holding public hearings that could impose sanctions, the question of payment for committee members, trade union practices, rescheduling of the railroad hearings, and the need for a permanent FEPC.

The conference concluded with a lackluster pronouncement by Fowler Harper, an administrator with the WMC. To give the appearance of broad support from those gathered, Harper pleaded with attendees of the meeting not to issue individual statements on the proceedings or future of the FEPC. When he was pressed by Walter White, Harper also denied that the Roosevelt administration had reached any backdoor agreements on the future of the FEPC. White insisted that the FEPC had clearly been the victim of backdoor appeals, expressing civil rights leaders’ lack of faith that conversations behind closed doors, without a meaningful resolution of its supporters’ grievances, would buttress the FEPC.

Despite the skepticism of many racial justice organizations and the tepid administrative commitments made at the conference, President Roosevelt once again succumbed to activists’ pressure politics and recommitted his support for fair employment. Following the meetings, the president called McNutt to the White House in late February 1943, and he informed the WMC director of his intention to restore the FEPC’s administrative status and directed him to reschedule the railroad hearings. The president also indicated what he believed to be the most important weakness of the committee: the part-time and voluntary status of the committee members.<sup>73</sup>

Civil rights groups continued to organize events and send letters to Roosevelt and McNutt over the following month as the

<sup>65</sup>James Wechsler, “CIO Assails McNutt for Gaggling FEPC,” January 13, 1943, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series B: Cooperation with Organized Labor, 1940–1955, 001434-012-0295, Papers of the NAACP, History Vault.

<sup>66</sup>“Randolph Says President Sacrifices FEPC to Southern Race Hatred,” press release, January 12, 1943, box 29, folder 1: MOWM Press Releases 1942–1946 and undated, A. Philip Randolph Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>67</sup>Randolph, “March on Washington Movement Presents Program for the Negro.”

<sup>68</sup>The MOWM Constitution included such a provision Constitution of the MOWM, “MOWM Minutes of Meetings 1941–1943,” January 14, 1942, box 28, folder 11, A. Philip Randolph Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Randolph also articulated the reasoning for this provision in his 1942 speech to the MOWM at their meeting in Madison Square Garden: “We planned the March on Washington to be all Negroes because we wanted the President and the country not to be left in any doubt that this March was the symbol and expression of discontent and resentment of Negroes themselves against discrimination in the Army, Navy, U.S. Marine, Air-Corps, defense industries and the Government and not some outbursts artificially stirred up and manipulated by the artful Communists.” Randolph’s Keynote Address, MOWM at Madison Square Garden, “MOWM,” June 16, 1942, box 1, folder 4, Jessica B. Davis Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Collection.

<sup>69</sup>Pfeffer, A. *Phillip Randolph*, 58.

<sup>70</sup>Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 196–97.

<sup>71</sup>Leaders of both the AFL and CIO called upon the administration to reschedule the railroad hearings. CIO Secretary James Carey called the cancellation a “serious blow” to Black workers’ morale and a setback for the war effort overall. On January 12, 1943, just a day after the announcement, John P. Lewis of the CIO wrote an open letter to Paul McNutt, published in *PM*. Lewis called on McNutt to reverse course and pointed to progress made to integrate Black workers into war efforts, notably with “little or no friction.” Lewis argued that victory abroad necessitated action for all workers at home and called the actions of the southern Congressional members antithetical to the war efforts. Wechsler, “CIO

Assails McNutt for Gaggling FEPC,” and “Epstein, FEPC Council, Quits,” originally published in *PM*, January 13, 1943, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series B: Cooperation with Organized Labor, 1940–1955, 001434-019-0261, 001434-012-0295, Papers of the NAACP, History Vault; John P. Lewis, “An Open Letter to Paul V. McNutt,” originally published in *PM*, January 12, 1943, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series B: Cooperation with Organized Labor, 1940–1955, 001434-012-0295, Papers of the NAACP, History Vault.

<sup>72</sup>The participants included the major civil rights organizations (NAACP, NUL, BSCP, MOWM) as well as representatives of the AFL and CIO, religious and civil organizations, and many other liberal organizations. The roster is listed here in full: Paul McNutt (WMC), Francis Biddle (U.S. Attorney General), Charlotte Carr (WMC/ Fowler Harper and Edith Keyes), Roger Baldwin (ACLU), Maudell Bousfield (Women’s Advisory Committee), Warren Brown (Council for Democracy), John P. Davis (Southern Conference on Human Welfare), John W. Davis (Conference on Negro Land Grant Colleges), Dorothy Funn (Negro Labor Victory Committee of Greater New York), Israel Goldstein (National Conference of Christians and Jews), Lester Granger (National Urban League), Abner Green (American Committee for Protection of Foreign Born), Sidney Hollander (Coordinating Committee of Jewish Organizations), W. S. Johnson (MOW Committee), Willard Johnson (National Conference of Christians and Jews), Francis McPeck (Federal Council of Churches), Morris Milgrim (Workers Defense League), I. N. Ornburn (AFL), Randolph (BSCP, MOW Committee), Samuel Rosenwein (National Lawyers Guild), John Ryan (National Conference of Christians and Jews), G.I. Sanchez (League of United Latin American Citizens), George Segal (Coordinating Committee of Jewish Organizations), Willard Townsend (CIO), Walter White (NAACP), P. B. Young (Southern Conference on Race Relations, *Norfolk Journal and Guide*), and Gordon Hansock (Southern Conference on Race Relations, *Norfolk Journal and Guide*).

<sup>73</sup>Kenneth G. Crawford, “FDR Orders Reopening of FEPC Rail Case,” originally published in *PM*, February 4, 1943, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series B: Cooperation with Organized Labor, 1940–1955, 001434-012-0295, Papers of the NAACP, History Vault.

committee's reorganization was taking shape.<sup>74</sup> In May and June 1943, the president released a new Executive Order 9346 that restored the FEPC's independent status and placed it in the Office for Emergency Management, the catchall agency for coordinating war efforts in the White House. However, the agency was not granted additional sanctions beyond conducting hearings, and the order included the same vague reference to "appropriate steps."<sup>75</sup> Also troublesome was Roosevelt's appointment of new leadership and members to the FEPC who seemed to signal the weakening, not the strengthening, of civil rights groups' influence over the agency. The appointments of Father Francis Haas as FEPC chairman and Malcolm Ross as executive secretary garnered skepticism from civil rights groups. While Walter White and Lester Granger had expressed reservations about the first FEPC chairman, the Southern liberal Mark Ethridge, they ultimately formed relatively favorable impressions of him.<sup>76</sup> Civil rights groups had been even more enthusiastic about the second chairman, Malcolm MacLean.<sup>77</sup> Both Ethridge and MacLean included civil rights leaders in the committee meetings, despite their not being on the official committee rosters.<sup>78</sup>

All of this shifted quite dramatically when Haas and Ross came on board. Despite Earl Dickerson's request to remain on the committee, which was supported by the NUL and the MOWM, the civil rights advocates' primary champion was not reappointed.<sup>79</sup> Dickerson had served as interim chair for many months after MacLean stepped down and had been intimately involved with pursuing union investigations, frequently clashing with other committee members. Milton Webster of the BSCP was reappointed to the FEPC. However, his relationship with the committee, especially its leadership, became increasingly strained during this period. The NAACP, NUL, and BSCP petitioned Haas and Ross to add representatives from civil rights organizations, but Chairman Haas relayed that committee members had been appointed on a "strictly labor-management basis."<sup>80</sup> Haas's appointments meant that the committee would be limited to representatives of industry and

organized labor, with fewer members from racial and social justice organizations.

The exclusion of Dickerson and representatives from civil rights organizations had significant consequences. Haas did seek to convene the NAACP, BSCP, and NUL for a meeting on the "Present and Future Work of the FEPC" in June and August 1943, but there is no record of whether such a meeting ever took place.<sup>81</sup> The shift to committee membership along "labor-management lines" also reflected the eclipsing of a left-labor commitment by a corporatist model of industrial relations, where a tripartite coalition of government, labor, and industry jointly agreed to conditions for economic growth and stability. Unions were becoming increasingly resistant to government control, determined to establish the autonomy of labor-management relations. As Randolph warned, this shift appeared to confirm that Black leaders could not expect labor to be a steadfast ally, let alone lead the fight against Jim Crow.<sup>82</sup>

The resolution of the southern railroad case, which by this point had become the agency's most prominent initiative, further exposed the pressure points in the civil rights-labor alliance. After months of delays and postponements, the FEPC hearings on the Southern railroad industry took place in September 1943. As civil rights advocates had alleged, these hearings revealed that many railway companies and one major railway union were in violation of Executive Order 9346.<sup>83</sup> While some companies and unions worked with the FEPC to change hiring and promotional practices, fourteen of the railroad carriers publicly declared that they had no intention of complying with the FEPC's ruling.<sup>84</sup> Roosevelt's comptroller general, Lindsay Warren, a North Carolina native, assured his Southern brethren that the FEPC's antidiscrimination orders were merely advisory.<sup>85</sup> Under pressure from the ever-vigilant civil rights advocates, Roosevelt supported the efforts of the MOWM protests to save "this prop to democracy in action."<sup>86</sup> In November 1943, Roosevelt overruled Warren, affirming strongly

<sup>74</sup>Walter White to Lester Granger, telegraph, March 11, 1943, box 1, A16, folder 10: Fair Employment Practices Commission, 1942–February 1943, National Urban League Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Press release, January 23, 1943, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series B: Cooperation with Organized Labor, 1940–1955, 001434-019-0261, Papers of the NAACP, History Vault; "McNutt Closes Door to Protests on FEPC," originally published in *PM*, January 20, 1943, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series B: Cooperation with Organized Labor, 1940–1955, 001434-019-0295, Papers of the NAACP, History Vault; "McNutt Consents to Meet FEPC Members Tomorrow," originally published in *PM*, January 21, 1943, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series B: Cooperation with Organized Labor, 1940–1955, 001434-019-0295, Papers of the NAACP, History Vault.

<sup>75</sup>Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 52–66, 112.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, 49–50.

<sup>78</sup>In September 1942, MacLean wrote to John P. Davis (National Negro Congress) stating his disappointment that Davis had not been able to join for the meeting. Charles Houston (Howard University and NAACP) was a frequent attendee as well, up until the cancellation of the railroad hearings in January 1943.

<sup>79</sup>Chairman Haas to A. Philip Randolph, letter, July 5, 1943, RG 228, box 62, entry 6, folder R: Office of the Committee, Office Files of the Chairman, Carbon Copies of Letters Sent, February 1943–May 1945, J–Z, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD; Lester Granger to President Roosevelt, letter, June 4, 1943, box 1, A16, folder 10: Fair Employment Practices Commission, 1942–February 1943, National Urban League Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>80</sup>Chairman Haas to William Ashby, letter, July 5, 1943, RG 228, box 61, entry 6, folder A: Office of the Committee, Office Files of the Chairman, Carbon Copies of Letters Sent, February 1943–May 1945, A–I, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD; Chairman Haas to Walter White, letter, July 5, 1943, RG 228, box 62, entry 6, folder W: Office of the Committee, Office Files of the Chairman, Carbon Copies of Letters Sent, February 1943–May 1945, J–Z, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD; Chairman Haas to A. Philip Randolph, letter, July 5, 1943.

<sup>81</sup>Chairman Haas to William Hastie, letter, August 2, 1943, RG 228, box 61, entry 6, folder H: Office of the Committee, Office Files of the Chairman, Carbon Copies of Letters Sent, February 1943–May 1945, A–I, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD; Chairman Haas to Walter White, June 27, 1943, RG 228, box 62, entry 6, folder W: Office of the Committee, Office Files of the Chairman, Carbon Copies of Letters Sent, February 1943–May 1945, J–Z, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

<sup>82</sup>Nelson Lichtenstein, "From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Postwar Era," in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 122–52.

<sup>83</sup>"Office of War Information, President's FEPC," press release, December 1, 1943, RG 228, box 508, entry 64, folder P–R: Information and Public Relations Division, Press Releases, 1941–1945, P–R, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

<sup>84</sup>These companies issued a response on December 13, 1943, declaring that they would not comply with the FEPC's directive. The joint letter pointed to the preeminence of the Railway Labor Act in structuring the relationship between railroads and their employees. It indicated an absolute interest in maintaining "peaceful and harmonious" relations with their union partners and customers. In that vein, then, the carriers claimed that any attempts to address the directives of the FEPC would constitute a violation of the autonomy of the union's collective bargaining arrangements. In a final flourish, the letter also challenged the constitutional and legal jurisdiction of the FEPC to issue such directives at all. Letter from Southeastern Railroad Carriers, December 13, 1943, RG 228, box 508, entry 64, folder P–R: Information and Public Relations Division, Press Releases, 1941–1945, P–R, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

<sup>85</sup>Lindsay Warren to James Byrnes, letter, October 7, 1943, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series B: Cooperation with Organized Labor, 1940–1955, 001434-018-0962, Papers of the NAACP, History Vault.

<sup>86</sup>"Letter from A. Philip Randolph to Eleanor Roosevelt, November 18, 1943," in *The Papers of A. Philip Randolph*, ed. John H. Bracey and August Meier (Washington, DC: Library of Congress).

that the antidiscrimination language of the executive order was “mandatory.” Several civil rights activists, including MOWM’s major leaders, expressed their “deep gratitude” to Roosevelt in a public letter.<sup>87</sup>

The president’s renewed support for the FEPC’s mission illustrated how a government agency made possible a constructive—if contentious—collaboration between the White House and civil rights activists. At many junctures, Roosevelt, facing significant resistance from the Southern ramparts of Jim Crow, required relentless pressure from civil rights advocates to reaffirm his commitment to the agency. With the backing of the White House, the second FEPC established regional offices in sixteen cities, substantially increasing the staff’s ability to investigate and resolve complaints of discrimination. Although the second committee still held hearings for especially resistant employers, cases in California, Cincinnati, Chicago, and New York were handled effectively through negotiation and persuasion. Yet the reconstituted FEPC demonstrated its mettle in a Philadelphia transit case that erupted in August 1944. When white workers went on strike following the FEPC’s order to employ Black trolley operators, the agency appealed to its ultimate recourse to power: President Roosevelt. Living up to his admonition that the FEPC’s rulings were mandatory, Roosevelt ordered the Army to take over the transit system. Threatened with the loss of their jobs and a reconsideration of their draft status, white workers returned to work almost immediately—and the transit authority complied with the FEPC’s mandate.<sup>88</sup>

Ever fearful of rupturing the Democratic Party’s North–South alliance, Roosevelt did not show the same fortitude in the FEPC’s most important initiative against Jim Crow. Rather than allowing the FEPC to take direct action against the railroad industry, he opted to hand the case over to a new quasi-administrative and judicial agency. The president convened the Stacy Committee, headed by Judge Walter Stacy from North Carolina, to resolve the “impasse” between the FEPC’s findings of discrimination and the refusal of carriers and unions to comply.<sup>89</sup> Roosevelt called on the FEPC to make recommendations to the Stacy Committee, but Malcolm Ross, the FEPC’s executive secretary, failed to go through appropriate committee channels in doing so, a move that upset Webster of the BSCP, as well as the representatives of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and CIO.<sup>90</sup> The Stacy Committee met with the railroad carriers and brotherhoods in early 1944 and released a report in May of that year. The meetings were quite different from those held by the FEPC—they were not publicized, and they were uncontroversial. Perhaps most critically, no Black railroad workers were called to testify.<sup>91</sup> The FEPC continued to try to raise the issue of inaction by the Stacy Committee throughout 1944, but no decisive action was ever taken.<sup>92</sup>

Ultimately, it was not presidential action that provided the most concrete solution to the plight of the Black railroad workers. Instead, it came through the courts. Charles Houston of the NAACP, who had assisted in preparation for both the FEPC’s Boilermakers case and the railroad case, had also been working since the early 1930s to challenge racially discriminatory workplace practices as violations of Black workers’ Fifth Amendment due process rights. Up until a major reversal in late 1944 by the Supreme Court, lower courts refused to hear these cases, claiming that union seniority rights were “contractual, not federal” in nature. The Court distinguished wrongful acts committed by railway unions and railroads from injuries under federal law.<sup>93</sup>

Randolph and BSCP were instrumental in getting the judiciary to act—most notably launching the Provisional Committee to Organize Colored Locomotive Firemen, representing workers who were singled out during the FEPC railroad hearings as needing relief from the industry’s discriminatory practices. Using BSCP funds, the committee began suing the lily-white Brotherhood of Locomotive Fireman and Enginemen for damages. This legal work was linked to grassroots efforts led by Randolph, who had organized the Citizen’s Committee to Save Colored Locomotive Firemen’s Jobs to solicit contributions, gain publicity, and increase pressure. He was able to persuade Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia of New York to serve as chair and Eleanor Roosevelt as honorary chair. With this support on the ground, the FEPC’s backing, and the NAACP’s able representation before the bench, Randolph’s provisional committee began to win legal cases against southern carriers and white unions.<sup>94</sup> These legal victories paved the way for a more decisive victory against southern railroads.

In December 1944, the Supreme Court reversed decisions in the lower courts in two decisive cases that challenged white bargaining units under the Railway Labor Act (RLA).<sup>95</sup> The Supreme Court ruled that the RLA imposed on unions the duty to “protect equally the interests of the members of the craft as the Constitution imposes on a legislature to give equal protection to the interests of those for whom it legislates.”<sup>96</sup> The *Steele* and *Tunstall* cases vindicated the directives which the FEPC issued to the Southeastern railroads and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen;<sup>97</sup> however, they came at a steep price for labor unions. In particular, the *Steele* decision set a damaging precedent for unions fighting for collective bargaining rights in the courts and became “a prolific source of litigation in cases having nothing to do with race discrimination.”<sup>98</sup> The schism between collective bargaining and civil rights posed a major challenge to Randolph’s belief that civil rights for Black Americans without

<sup>87</sup> “Thank FDR for Letter on FEPC,” *Chicago Defender*, November 30, 1943.

<sup>88</sup> Collins, “Race, Roosevelt, and Wartime Production,” 273; “Army Returns PTC to Private Operation,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 18, 1944.

<sup>89</sup> Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 200.

<sup>90</sup> Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 137–39.

<sup>91</sup> Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 200–201; May 1944 Minutes, May 27, 1944, RG 228, box 1, folder 1: Headquarters Records/Office of the Committee Summary Minutes, 1942–1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD; Malcolm Ross to Justice James Wolf, February 28, 1944, RG 228, box 62, entry 6, folder W: Office of the Committee, Office Files of the Chairman, Carbon Copies of Letters Sent, February 1943–May 1945, J–Z, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

<sup>92</sup> October 1944 Minutes, October 11, 1944, RG 228, box 1, folder 1: Headquarters Records/Office of the Committee Summary Minutes, 1942–1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

<sup>93</sup> Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 205–207.

<sup>94</sup> Pfeffer, A. Phillip Randolph, 93–94.

<sup>95</sup> In both the *Steele* and *Tunstall* cases, Houston represented Black railroad workers who charged that changes to the promotional and seniority systems in the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen with respect to two different railroads (the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company and the Norfolk Southern Railway Company) violated their Fifth Amendment rights. Both companies were part of the Southeastern Carriers Conference Agreement. Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*, 201.

<sup>96</sup> *Steele v. Louisville & Nashville Railway Co.*, 323 U.S. 192.

<sup>97</sup> “Unfair Labor Practice,” *St. Paul Recorder*, January 12, 1945.

<sup>98</sup> The ruling became a key part of the “Duty of Fair Representation” law, which has been the primary tool by which courts justify intervention in internal union affairs. These cases underscore some of the incompatibilities of the labor rights and civil rights legal regimes, which legal historians Reuel Schiller and Karl Klare, along with political scientist Paul Frymer, have carefully documented. Karl E. Klare, “The Quest for Industrial Democracy and the Struggle Against Racism: Perspectives from Labor Law and Civil Rights Law,” *Oregon Law Review* 61, no. 2 (1982): 187; Schiller, *Forging Rivals*; Frymer, *Black and Blue*, 96.



meaningful economic opportunity fell well short of full citizenship and social justice. Randolph never gave up his conviction that race and class were inextricably connected and would continue to work within and alongside the labor movement. But some of the tensions between unions and civil rights activists would persist and continued to push Randolph and his political allies to focus on discriminatory practices in the federal government amid the growing importance of civil service jobs and federal contracts to Black Americans' economic rights. Inevitably, this required civil rights organizations to keep pressure on the White House and bureaucratic agencies—in the face of fierce resistance from the Southern Democrats, who still held considerable sway over their party, even as its core support shifted to the North and West.

The battles over the southern railroad case in the FEPC underscore an important reality of that political moment—conservatives and opponents of the New Deal program were waging war over the newly empowered modern presidency. They sought both to challenge signature administrative initiatives, like the railroad case, and to apply consistent pressure on Roosevelt to reorganize and restrict the agency's discretion and power. But civil rights activists were not deterred by the Southern Democrats' resistance. They continued to push Roosevelt to deploy the levers of the modern executive that circumvented segregationists' influence in Congress and the states. In the face of powerful headwinds, Randolph and the MOWM once again employed mass pressure and worked through the civil rights advocates on the FEPC to demand that Roosevelt recommit himself to the agency and its work. Consequently, the FEPC retained the power to keep the southern railroad case alive, made great progress against discriminatory employment practices in the North and West, and, as we discuss in the next section, began to free the civil service from the reign of Jim Crow that had prevailed since the Wilson administration.

## 2.2 Discrimination in the Federal Government

While the vast majority of the FEPC's work was focused on the private sector and only involved the federal government as an intermediary in negotiations among industry, labor, and Black workers, the agency also established a framework for investigating discrimination within the federal government itself, which would be further expanded under President Truman. Because it did not directly intrude on private companies' labor practices, this area of the FEPC's work generated much less opposition from conservative Republicans and Southern Democrats. Randolph and other civil rights leaders recognized the importance of federal government jobs and refused to call off the March on Washington until Roosevelt agreed to include discriminatory practices in the department and agencies in Executive Order 8802. In fact, according to Randolph, the federal government was the "worst offender" of discriminatory employment practices.<sup>99</sup> Like the expanding war industries, the federal workforce grew significantly in the early 1940s, from roughly one million employees in 1940 to nearly three million by 1943.<sup>100</sup> A 1943 FEPC report—and the actions civil rights organizations took in response to it—not only helped to increase the number of Black workers on the federal payroll but also laid significant groundwork for future administrative battles

civil rights activists fought to desegregate the civil service as well as the military under Truman.<sup>101</sup>

The FEPC's role in facilitating antidiscrimination practices in the federal government in the 1940s is often overshadowed by the more prominent and public-facing work in the private sector. But this was a critical period in establishing the federal government as an equal opportunity employer. As Eric Yellin has argued, after the Civil War the federal government served as a "laboratory" for expanding and experimenting with approaches to civil rights.<sup>102</sup> That possibility was curtailed for decades by the enduring legacy of Woodrow Wilson's extension of Jim Crow into the federal service. According to Yellin, "the federal government remained a model for managerial white supremacy"—and was not seriously challenged—until Randolph and his political allies pressured Roosevelt and Truman to redress the color line that segregated the "nation's service."<sup>103</sup> Further, Desmond King has argued that rather than working to eliminate segregation and discrimination, particularly in employment policy, the federal government largely tolerated and worked to reproduce racial exclusion.<sup>104</sup>

A reversal of Wilson's racial regime in the federal government would not take place until the 1960s. But civil rights activism and mass mobilization against forced discrimination in the federal service had a critical beginning with Randolph and the MOWM in the 1940s. Significant industrial changes underscore the importance of this period, creating new opportunities and opening up employment possibilities for Black workers. Economists like William Collins have pointed to the "magnitude of change in the 1940s as the turning point in African American economic history."<sup>105</sup> On the other hand, Katz, Stern, and Fader argue that racial pay disparities, particularly between Black and white men, actually widened significantly starting in the early 1940s as a result of the transition of many Black laborers out of agricultural and domestic jobs. Those industries had employed the vast majority of African Americans prior to the Great Northern Migration, but after the 1940s, many moved into a more limited pool of industrial jobs, which severely constricted their opportunities in the private sector.<sup>106</sup> Given these changes, Randolph's decision to focus on employment in the rapidly expanding defense industries and federal workforce was unsurprising and marked an important episode in the fight for the economic rights of Black Americans.

A major contribution of the FEPC in this struggle, which is often overlooked, was the agency's pioneering work in tracking and collecting raw data about discrimination in federal employment. In September 1941, just a few months after signing Executive Order 8802, President Roosevelt issued a directive to the heads of federal agencies and independent establishments in the federal government. He instructed agencies to conduct a "thorough examination of their personnel policies and practices to the end that they may be able to assure me that in the Federal Service the doors of employment are open to all loyal and qualified workers regardless of creed,

<sup>101</sup>Technically, there were two reports contained within the December 1943 publication: the first included information collected prior to November 1942 and the second contained information collected between November 1942 and July 1943. Recent analysis has confirmed the FEPC's findings that it was a significant factor in improving African Americans' economic fortunes during the 1940s. See Collins, "Race, Roosevelt, and Wartime Production."

<sup>102</sup>Yellin, *Racism in the Nation's Service*, 18.

<sup>103</sup>*Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>104</sup>King, *Separate and Unequal*, 9.

<sup>105</sup>Collins, "Race, Roosevelt, and Wartime Production," 272.

<sup>106</sup>Katz et al., "The New African American Inequality," 81 and 84–85.

<sup>99</sup>A. Philip Randolph Oral History Interview I, transcript, p. 5.

<sup>100</sup>Elmer W. Henderson, "Negroes in Government Employment," *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* 21, no. 3 (July 1943): 120.

race, or national origin.” He also instructed agencies to make specific modifications to the Civil Service Rules and Regulations to counteract discrimination in hiring, for example, by removing any reference to race or color on federal employment applications.<sup>107</sup>

This information was collected and reviewed by the FEPC under the supervision of Elmer W. Henderson.<sup>108</sup> Henderson was the field director for the FEPC’s Region VI in Chicago but also served as acting chief of the Government Section of the FEPC. In this role, he authored the FEPC’s 1943 “Report on Employment of Negroes in the Federal Government,” which included an assessment of the status of African American employment in the federal government.<sup>109</sup> In addition, Henderson was a public spokesperson for the FEPC’s government work, publishing articles in the *Monthly Labor Review* and the NUL’s publication *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*.<sup>110</sup>

The 1943 report on African American employment in the federal government served as the first effort to track and record Black employment among federal agencies. This centralized information produced by a federal agency provided civil rights advocates with an important tool. In testimony before Congress on the Social Security Act and the National Labor Relations Act, civil rights groups frequently tried to make the case that Black Americans were being systematically barred from employment. However, they had no documentation to support their claims. The FEPC’s work, especially concerning federal employment, was a valuable resource to be deployed in future legislative and political battles.

The report documented some notable changes in Black federal employment. First, Executive Order 8802, the subsequent directive from President Roosevelt, and the expansion of the workforce to accommodate the war effort had all helped to increase the number of Black workers on the federal payroll. In November 1942, out of thirty-eight agencies and over 141,000 employees, 9 percent were African American. But by July 1943, in forty-four agencies representing almost two million employees, 12.5 percent of federal workers were African American. Some of the increase in recorded Black employees was due to the fact that the first collection effort in November 1942 did not include reports from the War and Navy Departments, which accounted for roughly one million workers.<sup>111</sup> Henderson also noted that some agencies had a long track record of employing Black workers, specifically the Post Office, the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, and the Census Bureau.<sup>112</sup> These increases in Black employment were undoubtedly the result of multiple factors, including the expansion of the data collection project and the general growth of the federal workforce as a result of the war in the early 1940s. However, while the federal workforce had expanded by two and a half times by the end of 1942, there had been a fourfold

increase in African American employment.<sup>113</sup> This suggests that concrete gains were the result of the FEPC’s work.

But the report and Henderson’s public discussion of the FEPC’s progress in reducing discrimination in federal employment also point to some of the challenges in federal desegregation efforts. The federal workforce at this time comprised departmental staff (who worked in Washington, DC, agencies and made up about 10 percent of the federal workforce) and field staff (who worked outside of the capital and made up 90 percent of the federal workforce). As of July 1943, 18 percent of departmental staff were African American compared to 11 percent of field staff. This was an improvement over the 5 percent African American field staff that was reported in November 1942.<sup>114</sup> A major conclusion of the report was that “discriminatory employment practices are more prevalent in the field rather than in departmental services.”<sup>115</sup> The delineations among field and departmental positions were, in part, the result of Wilson’s resegregation of the federal government. Unsurprisingly, racial resegregation did not create a “separate but equal” national service, as Wilson claimed. As Yellin has effectively shown, the positions available to Black federal workers were lower-skilled and lower-paying jobs.<sup>116</sup>

The legacy of Wilson’s invidious civil rights practices continued into the 1940s. The FEPC report indicated that increases in the overall number of African Americans employed by the federal government were primarily concentrated in low-skilled, custodial jobs.<sup>117</sup> There was some progress reported among higher-skilled occupations. In 1938, roughly 10 percent of those in clerical, administrative, and fiscal positions were Black; by 1942, this number had risen to 48 percent. These were semiskilled jobs and paid better than the custodial positions. Still, the report indicated very little change among higher supervisory and administrative leadership posts. And once again, there were differences between departmental and field staff: “an outstanding fact which should be noted is that in departmental service, an increasing number of Negroes are being employed in clerical and administrative positions, while in field service the majority are still in the custodial classifications.”<sup>118</sup>

In addition to documentation of the federal workforce, Henderson also indicated that the FEPC had been involved in pressing for early changes in the Civil Service Rules and Regulations. In an article written in *Opportunity*, the NUL’s journal, Henderson reported that several recommendations of the FEPC had been implemented, including eliminating references to race or color from government applications and abolishing a limit on the number of applicants, both of which, Henderson argued, placed Black applicants at a disadvantage.<sup>119</sup>

There is very little additional documentation of these changes and Henderson’s work on behalf of the FEPC. It is not clear that Henderson and the Government Section of the FEPC were active beyond the reports produced in 1943, and scholars have paid very little attention to this segment of the FEPC’s work. But given the rapid expansion of the federal workforce during this time and the valuable resource that categorical data provided civil rights activists, the FEPC’s information gathering on the employment

<sup>107</sup> Henderson, “Negroes in Government Employment,” 119.

<sup>108</sup> Henderson was best known as Chicago’s Region VI field director and as the plaintiff in a case that was a major civil rights victory in 1950. In *Henderson v. United States* (1950), the Supreme Court ruled that segregated train cars violated the Interstate Commerce Act, sidestepping the question of the separate-but-equal doctrine established by *Plessy v. Ferguson*. David Stout, “Elmer Henderson, 88, Dies; Father of Major Rights Case,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2001, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/19/us/elmer-henderson-88-dies-father-of-major-rights-case.html>.

<sup>109</sup> Report on Employment of Negroes in the Federal Government (December 1943), President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice, Division of Review & Analysis.

<sup>110</sup> Henderson, “Negroes in Government Employment”; Elmer W. Henderson, “Employment of Negroes by the Federal Government,” *Monthly Labor Review* 56, no. 5 (May 1943): 888–903.

<sup>111</sup> President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice, Division of Review & Analysis, *Report on Employment of Negroes in the Federal Government* (December 1943), 1.

<sup>112</sup> Henderson, “Employment of Negroes by the Federal Government,” 889.

<sup>113</sup> Henderson, “Negroes in Government Employment,” 121.

<sup>114</sup> President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice, *Report on Employment of Negroes*, 1.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>116</sup> Yellin, *Racism in the Nation’s Service*, ch. 5.

<sup>117</sup> Henderson, “Employment of Negroes by the Federal Government,” 890.

<sup>118</sup> Henderson, “Negroes in Government Employment,” 121.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 119–20.

of African Americans was a significant contribution. While most scholars have viewed the FEPC as an ephemeral and disappointing experiment in civil rights reform, this aspect of the agency's work documenting the status of discrimination in employment in the federal government makes clear that it helped to forge an important collaboration between the modern executive and civil rights activists. Moreover, the formation and activities of the FEPC embodied the view of Randolph and his collaborators that the long struggle for civil rights had to include desegregation of the federal workplace. Civil rights advocates would pursue this vision with more vigor and with more support from the White House during the Truman administration.

### 3. Civil Rights Insurgency and Presidential Leadership in Cold War America

Despite its limitations, the FEPC was recognized by Randolph and other civil rights activists as a major step forward for African Americans in the struggle to end discrimination in employment. However, Randolph's actions clearly indicate that he considered the desegregation of the armed forces and civil service unfulfilled aspirations of the MOWM, and he saw the executive as a viable path toward reform. Rather than shift focus to Congress and the courts, he steadied his gaze on the White House. Just as the MOWM had targeted Roosevelt to create the FEPC, so Randolph recognized that by pressuring Harry Truman, he could obviate the Southern veto in Congress, which blocked permanent FEPC legislation, and leverage the power of the modern presidency consolidated during the New Deal.

Truman proved to be a less recalcitrant ally of the civil rights leaders than his predecessor. He was a border-state politician with close ties to Southern legislators and strong sympathy for the region they represented. But he saw himself as Roosevelt's heir and the steward of the executive-centered New Deal state. To the surprise of Southern politicians and civil rights leaders, Truman maintained the FEPC, which had seemed doomed at the end of Roosevelt's tenure. Indeed, he argued in a letter to Illinois congressman Adolph J. Sabath, Democratic chairman of the powerful House Rules Committee, that "the principle ... of fair employment practice should be established permanently as part of our national law."<sup>120</sup>

Like Roosevelt, Truman had little hope of getting major civil rights legislation through Congress. But armed with the political and administrative weapons Roosevelt bequeathed to him, he staked out a substantial sphere for independent presidential action in support of racial justice. On December 5, 1946, Truman established by executive order the President's Committee on Civil Rights, which was authorized "to determine whether and in what respect current law enforcement measures and the authority and means possessed by Federal, State, and local governments may be strengthened and improved to safeguard the civil rights of the people."<sup>121</sup> The committee's recommendations shaped Truman's message to Congress on February 2, 1948, when he called for a ten-point civil rights program that would provide federal protection against lynching, protect the right to vote, prohibit discrimination in interstate transportation facilities, and restore the FEPC,

which Congress, ignoring Truman's protest, had eliminated in June 1946.<sup>122</sup>

Truman's unprecedented attention to racial justice was attributable in no small part to the strength of the civil rights movement and its close ties to the modern executive office. Building on the momentum it gained during Roosevelt's third term, the movement's cachet was enhanced by the migration of more than a million African Americans to large northern and western states, such as Michigan and California, that were rich in electoral votes. To counteract defections in the 1948 election on the left (where former Vice President Henry Wallace was preparing an independent Progressive Party campaign to challenge Truman's Cold War policy) and the right (where Southern bourbons, deeply disaffected by Truman's civil rights program, were hoping to block his nomination), presidential aides counseled a campaign dedicated to securely joining civil rights to Roosevelt's New Deal charter: Freedom from Want and Freedom from Fear. The regular party organization, White House aides James Rowe and Clark Clifford claimed, had been supplanted in large measure by "pressure groups," and the "support of these must be wooed since they really control the 1948 election." Clearly, labor, which had become a crucial "anchor" of the New Deal coalition since 1936, was a critical constituency.<sup>123</sup> But the Truman administration elevated civil rights organizations to a more important place in the New Deal political order than had Roosevelt.<sup>124</sup>

Nevertheless, Randolph's experience during the struggle to establish the FEPC confirmed his long-held view that direct confrontation with the White House was an essential tactic in the fight for civil rights. Truman may not have been a "reluctant champion" of Civil Rights, as Harvard Sitkoff charged, but, anxious not to accelerate the defection of Southern Democrats, he had to be pressured by civil rights activists to act aggressively against Jim Crow in the military and civil service.<sup>125</sup> Randolph believed not only that was there a direct connection between fair employment and ending discrimination in the national service, but also that desegregating the armed services also was essential to securing economic rights for Black Americans. How, he wondered, could the FEPC "criticize job discrimination in private industry if the federal government itself [was] simultaneously discriminating against Negro youth in military installations all over the world."<sup>126</sup> More practically, with the consolidation of the welfare and national security states during the Roosevelt years, public-sector jobs had become a critical source of economic opportunity.

#### 3.1 The Fight to Desegregate the United States Military

To spearhead the fight against Jim Crow in the national civil and armed forces, Randolph created a new organization in November 1947—the Committee Against Jim Crow in Military Service and Training. He was particularly agitated when a draft law bereft of any

<sup>122</sup> Harry S. Truman, Special Message to Congress on Civil Rights, February 2, 1948, in Goldsmith, *Growth of Presidential Power*, 3:1586–92.

<sup>123</sup> Daniel Schlozman, *When Movements Anchor Parties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>124</sup> Clark Clifford to Harry Truman, memorandum, November 19, 1947.

<sup>125</sup> Harvard Sitkoff, "Harry Truman and the Election of 1948: The Coming Age of Civil Rights in American Politics," *The Journal of Southern History* 37, no. 4 (November 1971), 598–616.

<sup>126</sup> Randolph quoted in Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph*, 186.

<sup>120</sup> William Leuchtenburg, *The White House Looks South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 163.

<sup>121</sup> Harry S. Truman, Executive Order 9308, "Establishing the President's Committee on Civil Rights," December 5, 1946, in *The Growth of Presidential Power: A Documented History*, 3 vols., ed. William Goldsmith (New York: Chelsea, 1974), 3:1568–69.



civil rights protections was enacted in early 1948.<sup>127</sup> Randolph and Grant Reynolds, the prominent New York Republican appointed co-chair of the new Civil Rights Committee, requested a meeting with Truman in January, hoping to persuade him that the success of his foreign policy, consumed by the Cold War, “required the elimination of, rather than the extension of, segregation and discrimination in military training and armed forces.” At first, the White House refused to set up the meeting, a rebuff that Randolph claimed showed that Truman knew the civil rights leader would ask him to take action he was not prepared to take: issue an executive order abolishing segregation in the military.<sup>128</sup>

Randolph and Reynolds were finally received at the White House on March 22, but only after David Niles, Truman’s liaison with minority groups, assured the president that “the head of the Negro Pullman Porters” was “an important” leader of the civil rights movement, not a “left-winger,” and one who had taken “pretty conservative positions” on the Cold War.<sup>129</sup> Like Roosevelt, Truman and his advisors wanted to avoid the perception that the president could be pressured by social activists. Niles suggested the meeting be postponed until after the Truman’s February 2nd message to Congress, in which there “would be some mention of Jim Crow in the military, and these people will not be able to say that the message is the result of their visit.”<sup>130</sup> In fact, Truman’s otherwise strong defense of civil rights said nothing about desegregating the military, thus ensuring a contentious Oval Office session with Randolph and Reynolds.

During this meeting, the president learned that Randolph’s “conservative” anticommunism was joined to a fierce determination to force the country to live up to the ideals it presumed to support in its all-consuming struggle with the Soviet Union. Randolph told the president how he had learned in a recent trip around the country “that black Americans today are in no mood to shoulder a gun again in defense of this country so long as they are not full-fledged citizens of the country and recognized in the armed services.” Insisting that his call for civil disobedience was not an idle threat, Randolph emphasized that his observations of unrest in African American communities “was a definite statement ... on the mood of the Negroes throughout the nation with respect to the manner in which they were treated in the armed forces. They are insisting upon total abolition of discrimination in the armed services.” Truman took offense to Randolph’s demands, resenting the pressure to move further and more quickly on civil rights than he believed was politically prudent.<sup>131</sup>

When Randolph’s personal appeals to Truman to remedy the deficiency of the draft law with an executive order failed to persuade the president, he and other civil rights activists maintained a

steady drumbeat of criticism, determined to force Truman to live up to the principle stated in his Civil Rights Committee’s report that the elimination of the Jim Crow military was a fundamental right that must be fulfilled. “Prejudice in any area is an ugly, undemocratic phenomenon,” the report read. “In the armed services, where all men run the risk of death, it is particularly repugnant.”<sup>132</sup> The campaign to desegregate the military resembled the fight to end discrimination in the defense industry. However, in challenging the Jim Crow military, Randolph prescribed a more militant strategy: civil disobedience. Appearing before a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on March 31, Randolph threatened to organize a mass demonstration of civil disobedience by mobilizing young African Americans to resist the draft. Although Randolph made his statement before Congress, his real target was the White House and the African American community. Realizing the publicity potential of a public hearing conducted before the principal congressional military oversight committee, he alerted the widely read columnist Drew Pearson that he would raise the specter of a mass civil disobedience campaign. For effect, Randolph, who was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi’s tactics, told the startled Senators that the failure to address the injustices of the Jim Crow military would result in a “mass civil disobedience movement along the lines of the magnificent struggle of the people of India against British imperialism.”<sup>133</sup>

When the White House continued to resist Randolph’s demands—attempting instead, unsuccessfully, to recruit more moderate civil rights leaders to cooperate in a reform effort within the framework of the segregated military—Randolph organized the League for Non-Violent Civil Disobedience in late June and planned protest marches in major northern cities.<sup>134</sup> Despite the obvious connection between the threatened March on Washington and the campaign against Jim Crow in the military, therefore, Randolph’s conception of civil disobedience marked a significant development in his position on civil rights protest—one that would have a profound influence on the evolution of civil rights activism in the 1950s and 1960s. Randolph continued to stress the theme that underlay the MOWM: American democracy was a “hollow mockery and belies the principles for which it is supposed to stand ... if it will not insure equality of opportunity, freedom and justice to its citizens black and white.” However, his postwar protest placed equal emphasis on the need for African Americans to engage in nonviolent resistance to Jim Crow laws and practices—on the notion “that freedom is born of a struggle which strikes at oppression rather than at oppressors.”<sup>135</sup>

To pressure Truman to make desegregation of the U.S. military a central theme of the 1948 campaign, Randolph also led a march in front of the White House, carrying a sign that read, “If we must die for our country let us die as free men—not as Jim Crow slaves.” Demonstrators distributed buttons inscribed, “Don’t join a Jim Crow Army.” Randolph followed up this protest with a picket line in front of the 1948 Democratic National Convention, which met in mid-July, where he carried a new sign that read, “Prison is better than Jim Crow.” Not all civil rights activists agreed with Randolph’s civil disobedience campaign, but his appeal resonated with many Black Americans, especially those of draft

<sup>127</sup> A. Philip Randolph to Harry Truman, December 28, 1947, Truman Library, Online Documents, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/philip-randolph-harry-s-truman-attached-white-house-memos?documentid=1&pagenumber=4>.

<sup>128</sup> A. Philip Randolph to Harry Truman, January 12, 1948, Truman Library, Online Documents, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/philip-randolph-harry-s-truman-attached-white-house-memos?documentid=1&pagenumber=2>.

<sup>129</sup> A long-time supporter of democratic socialism, Randolph fought aggressively against alliances with communists and Soviet sympathizers. When communist party members took control of the National Negro Congress (NNC) and positioned it as a supporter of Soviet foreign policy in 1940, Randolph, then NNC president, severed all ties with the civil rights group. “The Danger of Communists and Communism to Labor and the Negro,” *The Black Worker* (December 1948): 5.

<sup>130</sup> David Niles to Matt Connelly, memorandum, January 20, 1948, Truman Library, Online Documents, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/philip-randolph-harry-s-truman-attached-white-house-memos?documentid=1&pagenumber=11>.

<sup>131</sup> Randolph, Interview with John Slawson; Pfeffer, *A Philip Randolph*, 137–38.

<sup>132</sup> “To Secure These Rights,” The Report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/to-secure-these-rights>.

<sup>133</sup> Randolph, Testimony Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, in Kersten and Lucander, *For Jobs and Freedom*, 307–310.

<sup>134</sup> Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 139–40.

<sup>135</sup> Randolph cited in Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, 195.

age. The NAACP's Walter White, who took a less militant stance than Randolph in the MOWM's confrontation with Roosevelt, did not counsel civil disobedience but instead insisted that African Americans "must willingly share the burdens as well as the benefits of citizenship." Yet, reprising the mediating role he played in forming a partnership with Randolph in the campaign against discrimination under the FEPC, White voiced a clear warning to the president that "Mr. Randolph's blunt threat to lead a non-violent campaign of civil disobedience ... points up in dramatic fashion the necessity for the United States to muster courage enough to face and solve this problem." Importantly, although the NAACP did not "advise" young men to follow Randolph, it did announce it would give legal aid to those who did.<sup>136</sup> A poll showed that 71 percent of Black college students were sympathetic to Randolph's plan; moreover, on the eve of a special session of Congress, over thirty draft resisters were arrested.<sup>137</sup>

Randolph's League for Non-Violent Civil Disobedience also received support from the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. Even as he had insisted that Black activists must be the leaders of direct civil rights action, Randolph recognized the importance of collaborating with his liberal allies. The benefit of forging a variegated movement became clear in the battle to end Jim Crow in the armed forces. Civil rights activists were supported inside the gates of power by the crusading efforts of Minneapolis mayor Hubert Humphrey and Andrew Biemiller, a former Wisconsin Congressman, who, with the support of the liberal Americans for Democratic Action, won a much stronger civil rights plank at the convention than the president, facing the threat of a Dixiecrat rebellion, had proposed.<sup>138</sup>

While Truman resented both the civil disobedience that Randolph prescribed and the contentious platform fight, he felt that the civil rights activists' credible threat to boycott the Jim Crow military required a response. In forming the President's Committee on Civil Rights, he had gone on record expressing sympathy for the cause they fought for, especially as he learned of discrimination and brutal acts of mob violence against veteran Black soldiers in Southern and border states. Soon after the Democratic convention, Truman issued two executive orders in the service of civil rights. One directly responded to the demands of Randolph, decreeing that "there should be equality of treatment and opportunity in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin." Truman's other executive order built on the work started by Roosevelt and the FEPC to uproot discriminatory federal employment. It forbade racial and ethnic discrimination in the federal civil service and established the Fair Employment Board to monitor hiring.<sup>139</sup> Neither order explicitly condemned racial segregation; however, Truman established enforcement procedures that made progress on both fronts, especially in ending Jim Crow practices in the military.

Although the struggle to reconstruct the armed forces continued for decades, Truman's executive order was a critical step in making the military among the most integrated institutions of American society, thus contributing extensively to economic

gains and social mobility for African Americans.<sup>140</sup> Contrary to the unsteady enforcement of the FEPC, the implementation of the executive order calling for the desegregation of the armed forces was resolute. Headed by former Solicitor General Charles Fahy, the Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity for the Armed Services (the "Fahy Committee") achieved impressive results. As civil rights activists pushed so hard for, during the creation and early development of the FEPC, the Fahy Committee reported directly to Truman, who gave it steadfast support. He appointed what appeared to Randolph to be a "strong body" of five whites and two Blacks, who had a clear mandate to desegregate all branches of the armed services.<sup>141</sup> Southern Democrats in Congress, not to mention the military, resisted the White House's program to desegregate the armed services, especially when it intruded directly on life below the Mason-Dixon line. In fact, white public opinion was overwhelmingly opposed to military integration.<sup>142</sup> Nevertheless, the president's control over defense and the distinctive hierarchical structure of the military insulated the Fahy Committee from the sort of political pressures that constantly threatened the FEPC.

Progress came swiftly in the Air Force and Navy. By January 31, 1950, for example, 1,301 Air Force units had been integrated, leaving only fifty-nine predominantly Black units, as compared with 106 Black units and only 167 mixed units when the policy began.<sup>143</sup> The Navy was equally cooperative with the Fahy Committee. Besides integrating its units, the Navy made substantial progress placing Black seaman in higher positions. At the close of World War II, almost 95 percent of Blacks in this branch of the service were in the Stewards Branch, relegated to serving meals to officers. By 1950, that percentage was reduced to 54 percent, with the rest assigned to more attractive positions throughout the general service, from radiomen to gunners, airplane pilots, mechanics, and bookkeepers.<sup>144</sup> Central to the success of the Navy's desegregation plan was the vast expansion of its recruitment program, carried out at the behest of the Fahy Committee. The committee concluded that the Navy's initial unsuccessful efforts to expand opportunities for African Americans was a result of its failure to overcome their belief that it was a "white man's service in which the Negro was welcome as a messman." In response, the new edition of its public relations pamphlet, *Life in the Peacetime Navy*, contained pictures of Black and whites working together. Moreover, the Navy enlisted the Urban League to help it attract more African Americans into the ROTC.<sup>145</sup>

<sup>140</sup> Cornelius Bynum, "How a Stroke of the Pen Changed the Army Forever," *Washington Post*, July 26, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/07/26/how-a-stroke-of-the-pen-changed-the-army-forever/>; Katz et al., "The New African American Inequality."

<sup>141</sup> In addition to Fahy, the Committee included William E. Stevenson (President of Oberlin College); Dwight R. G. Palmer (president of General Cable Corporation); business executives Alphonsus Donahue and Charles Luckman; E.W. Kenworthy (free-lance journalist); and the two Black members John H. Sengstack (publisher of the *Chicago Defender*) and the National Urban League's head Lester Granger. Donald R. McCoy and Richard T. Reutten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2021), 221.

<sup>142</sup> White, *World War II and American Racial Politics*, 141.

<sup>143</sup> Monroe Billington, "Freedom to Serve: The President's Committee on Equality of Treatment in the Armed Forces, 1949–1950," *The Journal of Negro History* 51, no. 4 (October 1966): 265, 262–374.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 267; McCoy and Reutten, *Quest and Response*, 221–28.

<sup>145</sup> Initial Recommendations by Fahy Committee, May 24, 1949, Truman Library, Online Documents, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/initial-recommendations-fahy-committee?documentid=NA&pagenumber=7>; McCoy and Reutten, *Quest and Response*, 225.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 194; Pfeffer, A. Philip Randolph, 149.

<sup>137</sup> L. D. Reddick, "The Negro Policy of the American Army since World War II," *Journal of Negro History* 38 (April 1953): 194–215; Pfeffer, A. Philip Randolph, 147.

<sup>138</sup> Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), ch. 1.

<sup>139</sup> Executive Order 9981, "Establishing the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment"; Executive Order 9980, "Regulations Governing Fair Employment Practices."

The Army, with the largest percentage of Black personnel, was less cooperative. "The Army is not out to make social reform," General Omar Bradley, the newly appointed chief of staff, insisted. Bradley was particularly adamant that his service should maintain its 10 percent quota on Black enlistments, a racial limitation targeted only at African Americans, to prevent, Army brass insisted, "excessive numbers of Negroes in the Army."<sup>146</sup> When Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson appeared to compromise in the face of the Army's recalcitrance, civil rights advocates, who had generally exhibited patience with the Fahy Committee as it struggled to get the Army's cooperation, aroused a storm of protest.

Randolph and other leaders sent urgent telegrams to the White House, while their allies in the Americans for Democratic Action publicly denounced Secretary Johnson's "sellout on Jim Crow in the army." The *Amsterdam News*, a Black newspaper, viewed the Army's resistance as an "insult" to fifteen million Black Americans and "insubordination" to the president.<sup>147</sup> When the secretary spoke in New York City to the local Lawyers' Association, reporting on successful efforts to unify the different services of the armed forces, Randolph's Committee Against Jim Crow in the Military Services and Training picketed outside, denouncing Johnson for his failure to end segregation in the Army. The demonstration was widely publicized by the *Chicago Defender*, the most prominent Black newspaper, which drew attention to the story with a banner above-the-fold headline.<sup>148</sup>

Under the pressure of civil rights organizations and the intrepid efforts of the Fahy Committee, the Army eventually agreed to a plan of integration, which included ending the 10 percent quota. The outbreak of the Korean War put additional pressure on the Army brass to implement the integration order. In August of 1953, as the war ended, the Army reported that it was 90 percent integrated, with only ninety-six Black units remaining. A year later, the Army reported that all units were integrated, except for a few small detachments that were still undergoing reform. In part, the Army's resistance was weakened by the success of the integration of the Air Force and Navy, which stripped it of its defense that desegregation would hurt service morale and arouse racial tension that would weaken national security. Indeed, Army commanders of Korean troops found that integrating units increased the fighting effectiveness of their divisions. No less important, however, was the work of Black activists, who kept unrelenting pressure on the secretary of defense and Army officers to comply with President Truman's executive order.<sup>149</sup>

Notably, as Randolph hoped, the desegregation of the military began to spill over to other areas of contestation. For example, the Army's efforts to end Jim Crow in the military included progress to desegregate schools in the South for the children of military personnel. Progress was slow, but civil rights activists were pleasantly surprised when the elementary school at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, opened in the fall of 1951 on an integrated basis and included a Black member of the faculty. "This army post has the distinction of operating the South's first unsegregated elementary schools," rejoiced the *Chicago Defender*. "What's more it's working out beautifully with no incidents!" Southern Democrats, unhappy with the integration of schools at Fort Bragg and three other Army

schools, managed to get a bill through Congress requiring the commissioner of education to operate military schools in conformance with the laws of the state in which the federal property was located. The bill moved rapidly through Congress, without any organized resistance; remarkably, liberals in the Senate permitted its passage with a simple voice vote. Yet the buck stopped with Truman and the president's veto message, echoing the *Chicago Defender's* report on the success of the integrated school at Fort Bragg, argued that the bill "would constitute a backward step in the efforts of the federal government to extend equal rights and opportunities to all our people."<sup>150</sup> Truman's veto anticipated the *amicus curiae* brief his administration would submit in the *Brown* desegregation case.

Although Truman might have indulged in hyperbole in celebrating the integration of the armed forces as "the greatest thing that ever happened in America," it was a remarkable achievement. As the historian Paula Pfeffer wrote, "ironically, from the most segregated institution in the nation, the integrated military became the realm wherein Afro-Americans enjoyed the greatest equality in America."<sup>151</sup> Dismantling Jim Crow in the military, Randolph stressed, was a critical step in bestowing full citizenship on Black Americans; moreover, it served his commitment to join civil rights and economic opportunity. By 1965, research showed, for all four branches, the military had become a major avenue of career mobility for many Black men, evidenced by the overrepresentation of African Americans at the noncommissioned officer (NCO) levels. Notably, Black soldiers were approximately twice as likely as white servicemen to reenlist. Indeed, about half of all Black servicemen chose to remain in the armed forces for at least a second term. As sociologist Charles Moskos, Jr., wrote, "Such an outcome would reflect not only the 'pull' of the appeals offered by a racially egalitarian institution, but also the 'push' generated by the plight of the Negro in the American economy." Indeed, Black soldiers found the Army to be much more racially egalitarian than civilian life. Not surprisingly, this was especially true of Black servicemen from the South, where 93 percent saw the military as more racially just; however, even a great majority of Black soldiers from the North (75 percent) saw the desegregated military as more egalitarian than their home region. In less than two decades, Moskos concludes, the military had "leapt into the forefront of racial equality."<sup>152</sup>

### 3.2 Fighting Jim Crow in the National Service

Truman's Executive Order 9980, which pledged to achieve the same results in the civil service, was less successful. The Fair Employment Board (FEB) faced greater obstacles than the Fahy Committee confronted. Whereas the Fahy Committee negotiated with three services, which commanded disciplined and hierarchical organizations, the FEB had to scrutinize all the departments and agencies in the sprawling New Deal bureaucracy. Moreover, the Fahy Committee enjoyed a more direct relationship with the White House, which greatly abetted its work. Its members were appointed by the president and reported directly to him, which insured the continual involvement of the White House in its most difficult negotiations, most notably the fraught interactions with the Army. In contrast, the Civil Service Commission appointed and oversaw the FEB's work, which meant that the White House

<sup>146</sup>Initial Recommendations of the Fahy Committee, May 24, 1949; Billington, "Freedom to Serve," 172.

<sup>147</sup>McCoy and Reutten, *Quest and Response*, 228–29.

<sup>148</sup>"Picket Defense Chief: Say Johnson Failed To Act On Army Bias," *Chicago Defender*, December 31, 1949.

<sup>149</sup>McCoy and Reutten, *Quest and Response*, 233–38; Pfeffer, A. Phillip Randolph, 161–68.

<sup>150</sup>"Mix Schools at Fort Bragg – No Riots," *Chicago Defender*, October 27, 1951; McCoy and Reutten, *Quest and Response*, 243–44; Pfeffer, A. Phillip Randolph, 166.

<sup>151</sup>Pfeffer, A. Phillip Randolph, 166.

<sup>152</sup>Charles C. Moskos Jr., "Racial Integration in the Armed Services," *American Journal of Sociology* 72, no. 2 (September 1966): 132–48.



only received reports from the board after they had cleared the commission.

Nevertheless, the Truman administration exercised more control over the national service than it did over the private sector; consequently, the FEB, with cooperation from various agencies, established machinery that made some progress on loosening the grip of Jim Crow on national service and set precedents for reforms that subsequent administrations took up. In December 1951, the FEB reported that 488 complaints had been filed in twenty-seven agencies that employed 97 percent of the total personnel in the federal service. In nearly 60 percent of these cases, no discrimination was found to exist. Still, the board heard sixty-two appeal cases and found discrimination in thirteen. The board and the fair employment program continued into the Eisenhower administration: by July 30, 1954, formal complaints reached 865, 12 percent of which required corrective action.<sup>153</sup>

In addition, the FEB's work was amplified by several agencies that made diligent efforts to comply with the order; others responded when civil rights groups applied pressure. A good case in point is the Post Office Department, which employed a large number of Black workers. When the NAACP demanded a Senate investigation of discriminatory practices in southern postal facilities in early 1948, an investigator subsequently found several cases where eligible Black employees were denied appointment and promotion. The FEB responded quickly, issuing a directive to correct the situation. After holding its own hearings, the board also ordered Post Offices in New Orleans, San Antonio, and Memphis to employ Black workers as clerks. Other agencies, with substantial Black personnel, such as the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, were more resistant to the FEB's entreaties. However, there was steady progress in one of the civil rights activists' most prized targets of opportunity: the Department of State.<sup>154</sup>

Since the start of the Cold War, the State Department had been very concerned about the charges of discrimination, especially in underdeveloped and neutral countries that were viewed as the front lines in the struggle to contain Communism. In early 1951, Randolph and White led a delegation of civil rights leaders to meet with Truman; they made several "requests," with a point of emphasis on Black appointments to policymaking decisions at home and to diplomatic posts abroad. With the cooperation of Secretary Dean Acheson and Director of Personnel Haywood Martin, civil rights activists achieved noteworthy results. A progress report from March 1953 indicated that nearly sixty Blacks were employed in prestigious positions in the foreign service, with seventeen serving in posts that had not previously been available to African Americans. Moreover, the department had at least fifteen Blacks in high-ranking positions in the Washington office. Recognizing the fruits of the civil rights activists' campaign to desegregate one of the most prestigious federal departments, Randolph wrote to Acheson thanking him and his staff for their "splendid attitude" and "cooperative efforts" in increasing Black Americans' job opportunities in the foreign service.<sup>155</sup>

Such progress, as important as it was, did not satisfy Randolph. Despite the significant advances made in the integration of the military and federal service, civil rights activists emphasized that Black Americans continued to face discrimination in employment, most

egregiously, in jobs funded by federal defense contracts. Randolph wrote an open letter to the president, insisting that Truman take more forceful action to support equal rights in the workplace. In particular, Randolph told the president that Black Americans would feel "let down" if permanent FEPC legislation was not enacted and that such a feeling could have an impact on future elections. "It is well-nigh axiomatic," he wrote, that "the instinct to live in human beings regardless of race or color ... is so strong that they will fight for the right to work in order to live."<sup>156</sup>

The contract system gave the White House some leverage over the private sector; however, as the rise and fall of the FEPC indicated, the private sector, even when subsidized by the federal government, proved more recalcitrant than government departments and agencies. To Randolph's dismay, the FEPC legislation was thwarted, as civil rights employment legislation would be until the 1960s, by a coalition of conservative Democrats and Republicans. The Fahy Committee and FEB appointments did not divert the National Council for a Permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee from its efforts to pressure Congress for authorizing legislation. Randolph's group allied with the NAACP's National Emergency Civil Rights Mobilization organization, formed in November 1949 to push for a broader civil rights program, including antilynching and anti-poll-tax legislation. As previously noted, some tension existed between the groups about which causes should take priority and what strategies should be employed. However, Randolph's stature and coordinating skills kept the focus on the fight for FEPC legislation, helping to organize a national gathering in Washington of four thousand delegates who staged an impressive three-day lobbying campaign. Truman met with the delegates and promised he was working hard to move legislation through Congress. But the legislation became a victim of the filibuster, leading to the formation of another new civil rights organization—the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights—animated by the slogan, "Abolish Rule 22 in '52."

After once again being thwarted by Southern Democrats, Truman made no further effort to secure legislation; however, Randolph, White, and other civil rights activists kept after the president, hoping they could use the leverage of the Korean War to get Truman to issue an executive order like Roosevelt's 8802.<sup>157</sup> Truman demurred for a time, not wanting to detract from "unity" in the Cold War and the Korean conflict. However, after suffering relentless pressure from civil rights and labor activists throughout the spring and summer of 1951, accusing the president, as *The Crisis* complained in a stinging editorial, of "turning his back on previous pledges," Truman finally acted in December.<sup>158</sup> He issued Executive Order 10308, which created the Committee on Government Contract Compliance (CGCC), "to examine and study the rules, procedures and practices of compliance procedures of the contracting agencies of government as they relate to ... prohibiting discrimination ... in order to determine in what respects such rules, procedures and practices may be strengthened and improved."<sup>159</sup> Because of the legislation sponsored by Georgia

<sup>153</sup> McCoy and Reutten, *Quest and Response*, 255–56.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 258–59.

<sup>156</sup> Randolph quoted in Jeffery L. Littlejohn and Charles H. Ford, "Truman and Civil Rights," in *A Companion to Harry Truman* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 287–302.

<sup>157</sup> Pfeffer, A. *Philip Randolph*, 104–107; McCoy and Reutten, *Quest and Response*, 206.

<sup>158</sup> Editorial, *The Crisis*, April 1951.

<sup>159</sup> Executive Order 10308: "Improving the Means for Obtaining Compliance with the Nondiscrimination Provisions of Federal Contracts," issued by President Harry S. Truman, December 3, 1951, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-10308-improving-the-means-for-obtaining-compliance-with-the>.

Senator Russell that constrained the president's authority to pursue job reforms through executive action and led to the demise of the FEPC, the CGCC's powers were limited to recommendations, leaving enforcement authority to contracting agencies led by federal officials who were not especially enthusiastic about the executive order. Consequently, its powers did not parallel those of the FEPC but of the less effective FEB.

Moreover, the CGCC only had the authority to deal with government contractors, lacking the FEPC's power to examine discrimination in transportation, labor unions, and other economic activities. Still, noting how the Truman administration had made progress against the Jim Crow national service, civil rights activists expressed some hope for CGCC, especially with the appointment of Dwight R. G. Palmer, a well-respected member of the Fahy Committee, as its chair. As the influential Black newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, editorialized, even though this was a compromised victory—"a half-loaf ... was far better than nothing at all"—a beach head had been established that could be used to secure further advances in civil rights and economic opportunity for Black Americans.<sup>160</sup>

However, the CGCC, mindful of the strong backlash against the FEPC and the lame-duck status of the Truman administration, was not as active as either the Fahy Committee or FEB. Since it held few hearings and did little outreach to workers, it received only 318 complaints, and only forty were received by the government contracting agencies. The CGCC's primary focus was on the future, presenting twenty-two recommendations for action to the Eisenhower administration. The Eisenhower administration did little to ramp up contract compliance; nevertheless, Truman's creation of the CGCC and the actions of civil rights activists made it impossible for subsequent administrations to ignore fair employment.<sup>161</sup> As the prominent columnist for the *Chicago Defender*, Ethel Payne, wrote in summarizing a detailed report on the Eisenhower administration's halting foray into discriminatory practices in businesses with federal contracts, "Beaten and battered and unwanted as it is in some quarters, Fair Employment is the anathema which remains with all of us."<sup>162</sup>

In August 1953, Eisenhower created the President's Committee on Government Contracts, headed by Vice President Richard Nixon, which the Kennedy administration replaced with the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, overseen with vigor by Vice President Lyndon Johnson. Abetted by the persistent pressure of a cresting civil rights movement, the government's responsibility to address discrimination in the growing private-sector industries dependent on government contracts eventually became a permanent responsibility of the White House. Although strongly resisted by conservative Republicans and Southern Democrats and never codified in legislation, White House fair employment directives—a hard-won achievement of the uneasy partnership between presidents and advocates for racial justice—set the foundation for affirmative action policies that became an enduring feature of civil rights policy by the 1970s.<sup>163</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion: The Legacy of A. Philip Randolph and the March on Washington Movement

The 1941 March on Washington, under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph, laid the foundation for nearly two decades of civil rights organizing that focused on creating private- and public-sector jobs and economic opportunities for Black workers. These decades are particularly notable for the kind of progress activists made by working through the presidency-centered administrative state, which Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Harry Truman consolidated as the institutional foundation of the New Deal political order. Thwarted by a conservative coalition of Southern Democrats and Republicans in Congress, Randolph and his political allies viewed the modern executive office, with expanded rhetorical and administrative power, as a way to achieve significant advances in civil rights and economic freedom. "Pressure power," he told his followers in preparing them for the battle against the Jim Crow military, "determines the action of the state."<sup>164</sup>

The uneasy alliance between the White House and civil rights activists created important opportunities and faced imposing obstacles. The possibilities of forging a formative partnership depended in large part on the leverage civil rights organizations had over the White House; but the reach of presidential power was also important. While the FEPC's private employment cases became a lightning rod for conservative opposition, Randolph and other civil rights leaders recognized the potential of modern presidents to influence the national service and military that were more squarely within the domain of executive action and thus more insulated from the pressure of party politics and interest groups.

Presidents were not always reliable partners during the 1940s and 1950s. Even Truman, a more willing ally than Franklin Roosevelt or Dwight Eisenhower, faced insurgent challenges from the left and right and had to be pressured throughout his presidency to take strong action against discrimination in the military, civil service, and government contract jobs in the private sector. In sustaining this pressure, Randolph and his allies in the NAACP, Urban League, and organized labor won significant victories and developed tactics that laid the foundation on which the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s could build. Knowing all too well that progress on civil rights did not come without a struggle, Randolph and a new generation of civil rights leaders pioneered various forms of nonviolent direct action that would have a major influence on the civil rights movement that crested during the late 1950s and 1960s. Many of the MOWM's core members would become significant figures in the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, which emerged as an important force for civil rights reform by the 1960s.<sup>165</sup>

Randolph's most distinctive contribution was to pioneer tactics and organizations that braided economic and civil rights. The MOWM and other initiatives he spearheaded in the 1940s and 1950s were rooted in his commitment to the "synthesis of civil rights activity with the interests of labor."<sup>166</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, encouraged by a prosperous economy, Randolph pressed an even bolder economic agenda. As Randolph told the massive crowd that attended the 1963 March on Washington, Black Americans had a special responsibility to advance economic justice for Blacks and whites, because their "ancestors were transformed from human

<sup>160</sup> McCoy and Reuten, *Quest and Response*, 276–77; Walter White, "Expresses Hope for Success of Contract Compliance Group," press release, December 10, 1951, NAACP Papers, Series 4; "Half a Loaf FEPC," *Pittsburg Courier*, December 15, 1951, p. 18.

<sup>161</sup> McCoy and Reuten, *Quest and Response*, 280–81.

<sup>162</sup> Ethel Payne, "After 12 Years, No Closer to Passage," *Chicago Defender*, August 7, 1954.

<sup>163</sup> William Collins, "African-American Economic Mobility in the 1940s: A Portrait from the Palmer Surveys," *The Journal of Economic History* 60, no. 3 (September 2000): 756–81.

<sup>164</sup> Randolph quoted in Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, 191.

<sup>165</sup> Gelbman, "'From Protest to Politics' Revisited."

<sup>166</sup> Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 281.

personalities into private property.” It fell to Black Americans “to demand new forms of social planning, to create full employment and to put automation at the service of human needs, not the service of profits. For we are the worst victims of unemployment.”<sup>167</sup> In 1964, to institutionalize his ideas and methods, Randolph founded a new organization: the A. Philip Randolph Institute. With his protégé Bayard Rustin as executive director, the institute fostered collaboration among labor unions, civil rights organizations, and other progressive groups.<sup>168</sup> Despite the tension between some civil rights activists and labor unions, Randolph and Rustin believed that Black Americans had to work through a broad coalition to achieve economic equality, the *sine qua non* of full citizenship.

The final chapter of Randolph’s career also signified an important change in the relationship between civil rights groups and the executive branch. President Lyndon Johnson, who surpassed previous presidents in his commitment to civil rights reform, awarded Randolph the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964 and made him the honorary chairman of the White House conference on civil rights, held in June 1966.<sup>169</sup> Johnson considered Randolph and other civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., critical partners in the pursuit of a Great Society—the culmination of a top-down, bottom-up partnership, rooted in the 1940s and 1950s, that resulted in the landmark Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts. Considering Johnson and the White House indispensable allies in the long march toward racial justice, Randolph refused to abandon his commitment to the uneasy partnership between the modern executive and civil rights activists.<sup>170</sup>

At the same time, Randolph and Rustin, unwavering in their belief that the struggle for racial justice required persistent pressure, criticized Johnson for a social reform agenda that was “less audacious and far-reaching than our international programs of a generation ago.”<sup>171</sup> In 1966, Randolph and Rustin sent A “Freedom Budget” for All Americans to Congress and the president, laying out an agenda for realizing a political economy, which, they insisted, would benefit both Black and white Americans who suffered from the “scourge of poverty.” An ambitious program, including commitments to full employment, decent wages, quality medical care, adequate educational opportunities, and measures that would protect the environment, the Freedom Budget envisioned a transformation of liberalism that would unite racial justice and the aspirations for social and economic justice that looked far beyond Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society policies.<sup>172</sup>

Despite wide support for the Freedom Budget among civil rights, labor, religious, and other progressive organizations, Randolph and Rustin failed to mobilize a national movement in support of their program. Most damaging, they faced significant opposition from President Johnson himself, whose attention had shifted from his call for a War on Poverty to the war in Vietnam, which drained resources and fractured the country. Pressure tactics had moved the White House to action at key moments during the past three decades; however, Johnson, facing the unraveling

of a liberal coalition and torn by Black militancy and the antiwar movement, resented the attack on his administration from erstwhile allies. When Randolph and other civil rights leaders sharply criticized him for cutting the War on Poverty, he directed a top White House aide to “tell them to cut this stuff out.”<sup>173</sup>

In essence, Johnson’s rift with Randolph and Rustin revealed important differences between the New Deal and Great Society. Most centrally, the Great Society and War on Poverty did not entail the same jobs programs that had been central to the New Deal program. As scholars Adolph Reed, Jr., and Touré Reed have argued, this change in post-World War II civil rights policy was rooted in “a steadily increasing disconnection of programmes of racial justice from political economy.”<sup>174</sup> The decoupling of civil rights and economic reform had significant consequences for the coalition Randolph had worked his whole life to build. The race-targeted measures of the War on Poverty program ultimately split the Democratic coalition, leading eventually to estrangement between the white working class and the Democratic Party remade by the Great Society.<sup>175</sup>

Furthermore, the schism between Johnson and Randolph and his allies also underscores the promise and peril of the core premise that motivated civil rights leaders during the Progressive and New Deal Eras: “the road to social equality went through the executive branch.”<sup>176</sup> Randolph’s campaigns from the 1940s to the 1960s aroused not only strong conservative resistance but also an ongoing rivalry with presidents to control the timing and substance of progress. Nevertheless, social activists had believed it necessary to keep pressure on the White House to obviate resistance to strong action against racial and economic inequality with executive action. Indeed, by the end of the Johnson presidency, the complex dance between social movement organizations and the White House had become an American tradition.<sup>177</sup> That A. Philip Randolph was a pioneer in establishing this tradition is a testament to his extraordinary legacy in advancing social justice and a poignant reminder of the powerful gravitational pull in American politics that make the climb to a “more perfect union” an elusive and exalted destination.

**Acknowledgments.** The authors would like to thank Paul Frymer and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive criticisms and helpful suggestions. In addition, we are grateful to the research support provided by Haley Stiles and insightful comments from Daniel Tichenor, Ann-Marie Szymanski, Sidney Tarrow, Isabel Perera, Desmond King, Shamira Gelbman, and Kumar Ramanathan.

**Competing interests.** The authors declare none.

<sup>167</sup>“Address of A. Philip Randolph at the March of Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” in *For Jobs and Freedom: Selected Speeches and Writings of A. Philip Randolph*, ed. Andrew E. Kersten and David Lucander (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 261–69.

<sup>168</sup>Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 281–82.

<sup>169</sup>*Ibid.*, 285–86.

<sup>170</sup>*Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>171</sup>Bayard Rustin, “Black Power’ and Coalitional Politics,” 40, quoted in Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 290.

<sup>172</sup>A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, A “Freedom Budget” for All Americans: A Summary, January 1967, <https://www.prrac.org/pdf/FreedomBudget.pdf>.

<sup>173</sup>Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 290.

<sup>174</sup>Adolph Reed, Jr. and Touré Reed, “The Evolution of ‘Race’ and Racial Justice under Neoliberalism,” *Socialist Register* 58 (2022): 113.

<sup>175</sup>Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945–1968* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 187.

<sup>176</sup>Francis, *Civil Rights*, 70.

<sup>177</sup>Milkis and Tichenor, *Rivalry and Reform*, chs. 5–7.