

Epilogue

There are many facts and ideas that a reader might take away from this book. Each reader's list may be slightly different. However, there are three central points that will, hopefully, appear on everyone's list: first, there were significant, measurable advances for African American workers; second, the concept of affirmative action was born and underwent significant development before the Civil Rights Act; and third, most major actions by the executive branch were taken only in response to pressure, direct or indirect, from the African American community. It bears repeating some key facts from the preceding nine chapters that buttress these points.

First, while data on black employment is fragmentary, there are enough examples of progress to indicate that the general tendency was towards advancement. Federal employment, including hiring, promotions, and working conditions, was the brightest area. The Jim Crow practices introduced during the Wilson Administration gradually loosened their hold, beginning with the desegregation of the Commerce Department in the 1920s, and were virtually eliminated by the 1950s. During World War II, the number of black civil servants more than tripled and their percentage rose to approximate the black percentage in the general population. The push to hire African Americans accelerated greatly during the early 1960s. Between 1961 and 1963, 19 percent of new federal hires were black. Also, the representation of African Americans in supervisory and professional job series, while always lagging that of whites, grew from virtually nil to a respectable level by 1964. In the period 1956-1960 alone, black

employment in the middle and upper civil service grades grew from 3.7 percent of all employees to 5.9 percent.

Beginning with the New Deal, government-funded projects and government contractors began to incorporate principles of fair employment. It is true that New Deal racial fairness policies set in Washington were often thwarted in the segregated South, and legislation such as the Social Security Act and Fair Labor Standards Act were crafted to exclude large numbers of black citizens.¹ Nevertheless most New Deal work-relief programs had some success in providing equal treatment for unemployed African Americans. The Public Works Administration (PWA), for example, specifically banned discrimination on the basis of race or religion. Fourteen percent of all Works Progress Administration beneficiaries were African Americans. Under fair employment executive orders, the black proportion of employment by defense contractors more than doubled during World War II, and black employment in white-collar jobs in the defense industry gained significantly in the 1960s. Some 10.65 percent of new hires in 1962 and 1963 in this area were African Americans.

Second, affirmative action, while not usually touted under that name, began to manifest itself during the New Deal. Harold Ickes set racial hiring goals for the PWA, requiring that blacks be hired in proportion to the population. Failure to meet what amounted to a quota was deemed *prima facie* proof of discrimination. After World War II, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing came under pressure from the civil rights community to open its skilled jobs to blacks. When the Bureau did not act, Truman ordered it to begin placing well-qualified blacks in its apprenticeship programs. In 1961 E.O. 10925 included the phrase “affirmative action” and required federal government contractors to ensure fair treatment of their workers. The Department of Labor’s historic apprenticeship regulation of 1963,

while specifically banning quotas, required affirmative action in appointments to apprenticeship programs.

Lastly, most federal action, and therefore most progress, resulted from direct petitions by African American groups, civil rights activism, dramatic violence against blacks, or all of the above. The NAACP, William Monroe Trotter, and others objected strongly to Woodrow Wilson's imposition of Jim Crow racial strictures in Washington. As a result, the tide of segregation within the federal government was stemmed, although it did not fully recede for many years. The Division of Negro Economics in World War I was created only after civil rights groups demanded establishment of a government agency devoted to black problems. African American watchdog groups monitored the New Deal's National Recovery Act and denounced it for discriminating against black workers. A. Philip Randolph's mere threat to mount a march of 10,000 blacks on Washington convinced FDR to issue E.O. 8802. Post-war violence against blacks in the 1940s, including several shocking murders, prompted protests by civil rights leaders and led President Truman to establish the Committee on Civil Rights. Black leaders clamored for another Fair Employment Practices Committee when the defense industry started gearing up to meet the Korean War emergency. In response, Presidents Truman and Eisenhower established committees to promote equal treatment in that area.

Both black pressure and the government's responses escalated during the Kennedy Administration. In the late 1950s, the NAACP and other civil rights groups had called on the Department of Labor to open up more apprenticeship opportunities for black youths. Initially it had resisted, but in the early 1960s, it took a number of steps on apprenticeship, culminating in Secretary Wirtz's affirmative action order of 1963. The explosion of the civil rights movement in 1960

prompted the Kennedy Administration to establish the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity (PCEEO). In 1961, as a result of discrimination complaints filed by the NAACP, the PCEEO initiated Plans for Progress. When this program did not live up to expectations, black civil rights leaders denounced it. Their denunciation led to the Kheel Report and a revamping to orient the program toward compulsory, rather than voluntary, compliance. In response to extreme violence against civil rights marchers in Birmingham and to the murder of Medger Evers, the government accelerated its anti-discrimination efforts. It also began to seek enactment of a comprehensive civil rights law. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, at which Martin Luther King Jr. gave his immortal "I have a dream" speech, provided a further push towards passage. President Kennedy's assassination in 1963 and a strong effort by LBJ contributed to enactment in 1964.

In his 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King Jr wrote, "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." Perhaps some day the federal government will routinely do the right thing before African Americans and other oppressed racial minorities have had to march, pressure, protest, and beg for their rights. Only when America has reached that point will we be able to claim, with any validity, that we have finally become a color-blind society.