

Part I: Crisis-Driven Federal Action from World War I through the Great Depression, 1914-1940

The period from World War I through the Great Depression and the New Deal marked the first large-scale influx of African American workers into the nation's industrial workforce. It also saw the initiation of significant federal involvement with and assistance to African American workers. It was a period of mostly *ad hoc* government responses driven first by the emergency of World War I and then by the Depression. The intervening period of peace and prosperity during the 1920s produced relatively little federal action in this area.

Chapter 1, "World War I and After," focuses on several factors that came together in this period to affect black workers. First was the widespread institution of discriminatory Jim Crow practices in the Administration of President Woodrow Wilson, prompting a strong backlash from the black community. At the same time that black workers began migrating from the rural South to fill industrial jobs in the North, the supply of white immigrant labor from Europe was drying up because of the war. The migration and America's entry into the war in Europe, combined with pressure from black leaders, led to federal efforts to assist black workers and fully integrate them economically into the war effort. The principal federal vehicle for these efforts was the Department of Labor's Division of Negro Economics, a temporary wartime agency headed by black sociologist George Haynes.

Chapter 2, "Depression and New Deal," covers a period of remarkable efforts by the government to assure full and equal

participation by African Americans in the work and relief programs of the New Deal. The leadership of the Administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt included racial progressives like Harold Ickes, Harry Hopkins, and the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt. They were joined by an unprecedented number of senior black appointees who organized themselves into an unofficial “Black Cabinet” that guided and promoted equal treatment efforts.

Depression era equal opportunity efforts largely expired with the demise of their host agencies. However, new laws like the Wagner Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act, and the Social Security Act, which instituted Unemployment Insurance, left a long-term legacy of benefits to the African American workforce.

Chapter 1: World War I and After

On July 28, 1914, Austria-Hungary invaded Serbia and World War I began. This conflict set in motion a chain of events that would have profound consequences for the African American workforce and for federal government policies toward them. For several decades before the war, the flow of European immigrants was the main source of labor fueling America's burgeoning industrial economy. According to the federal Dillingham Immigration Commission's reports of 1907-1910, workers from Eastern Europe virtually monopolized employment in many sectors of industry. By 1915 the flow was reduced from a torrent to a trickle. In 1914, more than 1.2 million Europeans came to America; in 1915 only 327,000 entered the country.¹ European armies soaked up conscription-age workers, and many immigrants returned to their homelands from the United States.

The Great Migration

While the influx of new laborers dwindled, the demand for U.S. agricultural and industrial products soared. In response, the country turned to its main underused domestic source of labor: the black population. Concentrated largely in the rural South, African Americans at that time were subjected to "Jim Crow" laws in that region. Discriminatory practices instituted in the decades after the end of Reconstruction in 1877 segregated them socially and severely limited their economic opportunities. Consequently, the allure of jobs

and better lives outside of the South prompted massive numbers to move north.

The groundwork for this large-scale relocation had already been laid by decades of the temporary movement of southern black laborers, as they took seasonal jobs in the North and then returned home.² But the growing threat of racial violence, including lynching, along with heavy flooding and boll weevil infestations that routinely combined to ruin the cotton crops of black share-croppers and tenant-farmers, provided African Americans with a strong motivation to relocate permanently. During the 1910s, more than half a million of them left the South for good, beginning the “Great Migration” of African Americans that endured for the next half century and more.

These migrants settled mainly in the large cities of the Northeast and Midwest. They found employment in industries that had formerly relied on European immigrants, such as railroads, packing houses, steel mills, and heavy manufacturing. Significant numbers also moved to non-urban areas, such as the coal fields of the southern Appalachians.³

The search by large numbers of African Americans for better economic and social opportunities in the cities of the North and Midwest brought them into contact with white workers and white society in a much freer environment than existed in the Jim Crow South. The result was often racial friction and, occasionally, explosive violence. In their new homes, free of restrictions on their voting rights, African Americans increasingly exercised their franchise in a more balanced, two-party system, and thus they began to affect elections. The result of these social and political pressures was that the federal government was forced to pay serious attention to the issues raised by the presence of large numbers of blacks in the urban industrial workforce. Thus began fifty years of federal efforts, principally

through the Executive Branch, to assimilate African Americans into the industrial workforce and to attempt to satisfy, however gradually, their growing desire for fair treatment.

The Woodrow Wilson Presidential Administration and Blacks

Ironically, Federal engagement in the issues of working African Americans developed under an Administration that was generally unsympathetic, and often openly hostile, to their plight. The White House was occupied by Woodrow Wilson, a Virginia Democrat who took office on March 4, 1913.⁴ During the 1912 presidential elections, the Wilson campaign made a strong bid for the support of the growing block of black voters. Black groups worked vigorously for Wilson's election and, late in the campaign, he was endorsed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). While it turned out that their support was not crucial to Wilson, many blacks felt it gave them influence in the Administration and they looked forward to turning campaign promises into action for black rights. However, the Executive Branch was still dominated by segregationist Southern Democrats. As a result, Washington remained resistant to meeting either the political or economic expectations of the black community.⁵

Despite his campaign promises for racial fairness, Wilson actually favored segregation. He shared the belief, widespread among white Americans, that African Americans were racially distinct from and inferior to white people. Wilson also needed the support of Southern Democrats, who were uninterested in a goal of racial justice, in order to win their support for his main priority: an ambitious program of economic reform.⁶

While the southern states began instituting segregation and discrimination in the 1880s, the federal government moved in the opposite direction, at least as regards its own employees. Blacks began to be appointed to diplomatic posts and political positions, and the government even held recruitment campaigns. Thirty years later, Wilson reversed that policy. He appointed only two blacks in his first two years in office, while allowing a total of 12 traditionally black positions to lapse into white hands.⁷ In perhaps the unkindest cut of all, Wilson's Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, broke with the tradition of appointing black ambassadors to Haiti, a tradition that had been initiated with the selection of black abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Bryan's naming of a white to that position aggrieved both American blacks and Haitians. Leaders from the National Colored Democratic League and the National Black Democratic League called on Wilson to resume the tradition of patronage appointments for members of their race.⁸

Before the Wilson Administration, black participation in career federal government employment had been even higher than in the political appointment realm. Under the Pendleton Civil Service Act of 1883, most federal jobs were gradually removed from patronage and brought under a competitive Civil Service. By law, hiring was now to be based solely on merit. The Civil Service Commission (CSC), which administered the Pendleton Act, saw to it that qualified blacks had a fair opportunity to be hired. While many obtained only menial positions, a significant number held managerial and professional posts. The CSC also promoted fair treatment after hiring. Segregation in federal offices was virtually nonexistent. As a result, the number of blacks in Civil Service positions grew steadily, from about 600 in 1883 to 12,000 by 1913.⁹

When the Wilson Administration took office in 1913, the National Democratic Fair Play Association objected to a federal landscape where white women were working alongside or even reporting to black men and women. Southern members of the Cabinet were very sympathetic to these concerns. At an early Cabinet meeting, several of them complained about alleged friction between black and white federal employees. As a proposed solution, they called for the introduction of segregation. Wilson went along with the idea, rationalizing it as being not only good for the government, but also in the best interest of blacks.

Secretary of the Treasury William Gibbs McAdoo (Wilson's son-in-law) and Postmaster General Albert S. Burleson were particularly strong proponents of segregation. Burleson claimed to have the support of moderate black leaders, including Bishop Alexander Walters, president of the National Colored Democratic League. Wilson's Cabinet, while not formally endorsing segregation, did not, as a body, oppose the racist efforts of Burleson, McAdoo, and others.¹⁰

Consequently, Jim Crow practices were soon widely adopted. Such institutionalized racism affected black federal workers adversely in three main ways: physical segregation in the workplace, numerous downgrades to lower paying jobs, and outright termination. Officially, there was no change in the CSC's merit-based hiring policies. But in May 1914, it began requiring that photographs be attached to all job applications, making it easier to discriminate against black candidates.¹¹

Some departments adopted Jim Crow practices more enthusiastically than others. Not surprisingly, Secretary McAdoo's Treasury Department instituted it widely. The impact of this endorsement was magnified by the fact that there were Treasury

auditors' offices in almost every department of the government. Because of this presence, segregation and other Jim Crow practices often existed in buildings occupied by departments that did not support these policies. The Treasury Department even took the extreme step of setting up partitions in some offices so that white and black employees would not be able to see each other. While other federal agencies instituted Jim Crow informally and through verbal orders, the Treasury Department was alone in issuing written orders.

Albert Burleson's Jim Crow Post Office Department was the largest federal employer of African Americans, and it had a wide national reach, with post offices in virtually every county. Black employees in post offices and railway mail cars in the South suffered acutely from workplace discrimination. Elsewhere, rest rooms were segregated in such agencies as the Government Printing Office, the Marine Hospital building, and the Navy Department. In some cases, the black rest rooms had to be used by both sexes. Even more incredibly, at times bathrooms doubled as eating areas for blacks excluded from the regular dining rooms.¹²

Segregation was not universally adopted in the federal government, however. Secretary of Agriculture David F. Houston, a Southerner, did not impose it on the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), though racial practices were far from uniformly fair from one office to another within the USDA. Relatively few blacks were appointed as county agricultural agents, but these small numbers were due in part to the power of local offices to reject applicants on racial or other grounds. On the other hand, at the Office of Public Roads and the Bureau of Plant Husbandry, blacks and whites were allowed to work side by side. The Labor Department also remained relatively free of discrimination. Perhaps because adoption was not universal, the impact of Jim Crow on the federal workforce during the

Wilson Administration was somewhat mitigated. While the proportion of black civil servants declined from six to five percent of the government-wide total, their absolute numbers actually increased.¹³

The Response to Federal Segregation

The nascent black civil rights community did not take the wave of federal segregation lying down. In May 1913, Ralph Tyler, a black Treasury Department auditor and career employee working in the Department of the Navy, called on President Wilson to speak out against discrimination in the Bureau of Printing and Engraving and in the auditor's office of the Post Office. More influential voices soon joined Tyler's. Concerned about Jim Crow in the Wilson Administration, the NAACP concurrently authorized *New York Post* editor Oswald Garrison Villard, the chair of the body, to develop a plan for a "National Race Commission" and present it to the President. Villard was the leading white advocate of equal treatment for blacks and also a personal friend of President Wilson. In May 1913, Villard had an opportunity to present his plan to the President. At first, Wilson approved of the idea, but months passed and nothing happened. Villard repeatedly urged Wilson to appoint the commission, but finally Wilson informed him that he had decided against it because of opposition within the Senate.¹⁴

In the meantime, the NAACP collected substantial inside information on Jim Crow in Washington, based on reports from a special investigator and other sources. By August 15, 1913, when it seemed unlikely that there would ever be a National Race Commission, the NAACP sent Wilson a strong letter objecting to the growing Jim Crow practices in the government. They followed up with a comprehensive publicity campaign among sympathizers,

newspapers, members of Congress, and others, encouraging them to join the NAACP in opposition.¹⁵

On November 6, 1913, Wilson unenthusiastically received a delegation from the National Independent Political League (NIPL), headed by the *Boston Guardian's* crusading editor, William Monroe Trotter. On behalf of the NIPL, a black advocacy group operating independently of the NAACP, Trotter presented the "National Petition Against Jim Crow and Color Segregation in the Federal Government," signed by 20,000 supporters. At first, Wilson denied a formal Jim Crow effort. But when confronted with the documentation of segregation in his Administration, the president reluctantly acknowledged its existence and vaguely promised that the situation would be "worked out."¹⁶

The anti-Jim Crow campaigns continued and, on November 16, 1914, a year after the 1913 meeting, Trotter led an almost identical delegation to Washington, this time under the auspices of the National Independent Equal Rights League. Meeting with Wilson, the group presented resolutions from the Massachusetts legislature protesting segregation in the federal government. Members took turns addressing the President and urging an end to Jim Crow. Trotter spoke last and made an impassioned plea for racial justice. He eschewed the deference normally expected in addressing the President of the United States, boldly rebuking Wilson for allowing rampant unfair treatment of black employees in the federal government. Wilson responded that these employees were not being ill-treated in their separate work arrangements and claimed that segregation actually helped assure racial harmony. Trotter rejected the argument and asserted that because of these policies, African Americans might be less likely to support the Democratic Party in the future. Wilson took offense at this political threat and the conversation degenerated into a

heated argument. Although the meeting ended on a calmer note, this fiery confrontation between a black leader and the President generated intense news coverage and enormous publicity for the movement against Jim Crow in the government.

Presidential aide Joseph Tumulty was impressed with Trotter's eloquence and continued to urge Wilson to reconsider the issue of segregation. While discrimination and segregation remained in existence for some time, after 1914 there was little, if any, further growth of Jim Crow in the federal establishment.¹⁷

African Americans and World War I

With the U.S. declaration of war against Germany on April 6, 1917, black support and black labor were now crucial to both war munitions production and the military build-up. Administration officials worried, perhaps out of a guilty conscience, that German propagandists would find blacks responsive to their message promoting non-intervention by the U.S. and less willing to contribute to the war effort. Rumors abounded of German agents stirring up black field hands. Unsubstantiated incidents were blown out of proportion and widely disseminated. A black man was reported to have said, "The Germans ain't done nothin' to me, and if they have, I forgive 'em."¹⁸ To help counteract this perceived threat, Wilson and his Cabinet sought to rebuild ties with the black community that had been damaged by the onset of Jim Crow under his Administration.

As it turned out, the loyalty of African Americans and plots to undermine their support of the war effort were greatly exaggerated. After hundreds of federal investigations of alleged German subversion, there was no proof of a single *bona fide* plot to turn black people against the U.S. government during the war.¹⁹ On the

contrary, a national meeting of the NAACP and allied groups in May 1917 resolved that blacks should enthusiastically support the U.S. and work for a victory that the delegates believed could lead to freedom for the “darker races” throughout the world. Further, while pledging absolute loyalty to the military’s aims, the delegates also vowed to continue seeking equal rights for blacks. These rights included the right to serve at all levels of the military, to fully exercise the voting franchise, to be free from Jim Crow practices, and to be safe from lynch mobs, an escalating problem of the early 20th century. This resolution characterized the wartime positions of most black leaders, who advocated loyalty to the government, but who also demanded fairness.

Meanwhile, the most pressing need after the declaration of war was a rapid mobilization to expand the U.S. armed forces. Hundreds of thousands of civilian blacks freely and enthusiastically joined patriotic rallies and volunteered to serve on the home front and in the military.²⁰ Consequently, it was in the military that the first serious wartime issue involving blacks arose. The Selective Service Act of 1917 allowed the induction of black conscripts by local draft boards. Large numbers were drafted, but the U.S. Army sought to hold to long-established traditions of discrimination. In an attempt to break this mold, the NAACP campaigned to convince Secretary of War Newton D. Baker, one of the non-southern members of the Cabinet, to try to improve conditions for black soldiers. Adding pressure on the government, in August 1917, race riots broke out in Houston, Texas, stemming from police brutality toward black soldiers.²¹

In response to the military’s discrimination and the violence in Houston, Secretary Baker ordered the training of black officers and created an all-black combat division, the legendary Ninety-Second. This new division and several black regiments in existing divisions

broke the barriers to military service by blacks in combat duty and acquitted themselves well in battle on the Western Front.²² Despite these opportunities, the NAACP was critical of the lack of further progress in the Army. It objected to the fact that segregated units remained the norm, that white officers publicly belittled the combat abilities of black soldiers, and that blacks were discriminated against in matters of leave and recreation.²³

In October 1917, Secretary Baker sought to respond to the NAACP and help defuse racial tensions. He met first with President Wilson and black educator Robert Moton; later he met separately with W.E.B. DuBois, one of the founders of the NAACP. After these dialogues, Baker created the post of confidential adviser in the War Department in order to address black concerns within the military. He named Emmett Scott, an African American and long-time associate of Booker T. Washington, to fill the post. At that time there was only one other federal office dedicated to black affairs, an obscure Division of Racial Groups in the Bureau of Education. Scott's duties included inspecting training camps and investigating discrimination claims against the military and Southern draft boards. He also strove tirelessly to require the U.S. Public Health Service to hire black doctors and nurses.²⁴

Like the military, federal civilian agencies had a mixed wartime record of promoting equal opportunity and fair treatment of black workers. The National War Labor Board, established to eliminate disruptions in war production due to labor disputes, intervened in a number of cases affecting black workers and generally supported their rights. In a case involving white and black laundry workers in Little Rock, Arkansas, for example, the Board ordered equal pay for equal work, regardless of race. The U.S. Railroad Administration (USRA), which operated the railroads after the federal government nationalized

them in late 1917, also sought—with some success—to equalize opportunities. On a number of occasions, the USRA defended the rights of black workers and their unions in the historically white-dominated realm of train operations. In one notable instance, sleeping car porters were granted a pay increase after appealing to the USRA. On several occasions, the agency cancelled union contracts that discriminated against blacks. The USRA's impact was limited, however, by the fact that Treasury Secretary McAdoo, a leading proponent of Jim Crow, was its director. Like McAdoo, many USRA investigators were far from racially progressive and usually sided against the rights of black railroad workers. Likewise, the USDA generally sided with southern farmers who feared losing their cheap black labor to new jobs in defense plants. The USDA helped farmers by promoting local “work or fight” orders that forced black farm workers to remain in their jobs or else face conscription into the Army.²⁵

Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson and the War Labor Administration (WLA), which he directed, had the massive and difficult job of facilitating the mobilization of the labor force for defense production.²⁶ Though hampered by lack of preparedness planning by the White House and inefficient defense procurement procedures, the WLA and the Department of Labor placed millions of workers in defense jobs. In the process, Secretary Wilson and the agencies he headed were faced with the situation of hundreds of thousands of black workers who had migrated in search of defense work. Unlike the many government officials who favored Jim Crow, William Wilson, a former labor leader, was sympathetic to the plight of African Americans. The campaign against segregation in the government had reached the Labor Department in late 1913 when Secretary Wilson received letters from groups as diverse as the NAACP and the New York City Republican Club, calling for

equal treatment of black federal employees. These missives found a receptive ear at the Labor Department, which staunchly resisted the Jim Crow tide. Wilson's biographer, Clark Wilhelm, wrote that Wilson "was willing to use his labor administration to help Negroes, showing himself a courageous innovator." Wilson's second-in-command, Assistant Secretary Louis Post (a white), also had a strong record of supporting black causes. He worked for the Freedmen's Bureau after the Civil War, participated in the founding of the NAACP in 1909, and maintained strong relations with the black leadership.²⁷

The Department of Labor and the Great Migration

Even before the war, the Department of Labor became involved with black workers and the Great Migration through the work of an agency known as the U.S. Employment Service (USES), not to be confused with the agency of the same name created by law in 1933. The first USES was created in 1915 as part of a plan to find jobs for those left without employment during a recession.²⁸ However, the new agency built upon a preexisting Division of Information, established in 1907 within the Bureau of Immigration that operated labor distribution (i.e., placement) offices at major ports to help guide arriving immigrants to jobs.²⁹

The recession of 1915 proved to be short-lived, but the USES continued and played a surprising role in the Great Migration. A Secretary of Labor's circular in January 1915 ordered the USES to expand the labor distribution network. The scope of the system was also greatly extended through a strategy involving the Post Office Department and using Bureau of Immigration field staff to oversee operations. Every post office in the country was directed to prominently display a notice advising employers and workers

of a new employment program. Interested parties were to fill out application forms and turn them in to the postmaster to be sent to USES distribution branches where job seekers would be matched with job offers on a nationwide basis.³⁰

Although the job matching system was never fully implemented, post offices did display notices from the Labor Department announcing employment opportunities. The USES also facilitated transportation arrangements for relocating employment candidates, many of them southern blacks who could not afford the rail ticket North to a new job, by asking employers to advance one-way railroad tickets when needed. The trunks of new hires were checked straight through and consigned to the employer as security to assure reimbursement for the tickets.³¹

In this way, the Department of Labor provided an assist to the Great Migration, just when demand for labor in the industrial North was swelling. In its Annual Report for 1917, the Department acknowledged that “[s]ome of the black migration northward had been through agencies of the U.S. Employment Service.” Charles Johnson, a leading black sociologist, might have gone a little overboard, however, when he asserted in 1930: “Quite unwittingly the [Department], through its practice of assisting in the movement of labor to acute points of demand, was giving the first impetus to the Negro migration.”³²

By June 1916, southern planters were becoming intensely concerned about the impact on production of the actual and anticipated shortages of cheap black labor due to migration. Rising war-time agricultural prices provided a strong incentive for them to maintain production.³³ In response, they supported “work or fight” laws and orders to force black workers to stay in the fields. They also complained to their elected representatives in Washington that the

USES was encouraging migration. Several Southern Congressmen importuned the Department of Labor to put the brakes on. In a rare about-face on racial policies, the Labor Department, while continuing to assist individual black workers, yielded to pressure and “withdrew its facilities from group migration.”³⁴

In further response to mounting criticism, generated principally by Southerners, the Department of Labor ordered studies of the migration’s economic and social impact. In the summer of 1916, the Department sent Charles Hall and William Jennifer, black investigators on detail from the Commerce Department, on a fact-finding mission to determine the impact of the migration.³⁵ Based on numerous interviews with individuals of both races, the researchers concluded, contrary to assertions by the planters, that the migration was neither flooding the labor market in the North nor severely shrinking the labor force in the South.³⁶

Hall and Jennifer called for further study of the complex and changing nature of the migration. By 1917, they wrote, it had “excited widespread concern for its possible effect upon the prosecution of the war.” The perceived black migration problem was now a war problem. To look into these and other issues, Secretary Wilson commissioned a more thorough investigation in 1917. To supervise the study, he appointed Dr. James H. Dillard, a distinguished white academician and president of the Jeanes-Slater Funds for Negro Education. Wilson considered Dillard a credible investigator who had the confidence of blacks and whites alike.³⁷

Dillard engaged a team of investigators from both races to conduct field work in several Southern states. He compiled their findings in a detailed report submitted to Secretary Wilson at the end of 1917. The report, however, was not published until 1919, but its purpose was to uncover both the causes of the migration and also its

effects on the economy of the South. While Dillard worried about the impact of the migration on the South, he found that the effects were fundamentally positive. The study asserted that the movement of blacks to the North was a “commendable effort” that reflected the natural desire of human beings to improve their circumstances. In Dillard’s view, national progress depended upon broadly shared improvement which was not confined to one class or race.³⁸ In regard to labor shortages in the South, he concurred with Hall and Jennifer and wrote that “the danger seems not to have been so extensive or so acute as was feared.”³⁹

Despite Dillard’s findings, Secretary Wilson continued to receive complaints about alleged labor shortages. G.S. Cullinan, president of the Houston, Texas, Chamber of Commerce, charged that a Pennsylvania Railroad agent sought to hire 500 blacks away from Houston by spreading a rumor that the federal government planned to force remaining blacks into farm work. Congressman John T. Watkins (Democrat—Louisiana) charged that hundreds of black farm laborers were heading to the North from his district. But it was not only the southerners who complained. The governor of Minnesota called on Wilson to halt the entry of blacks into his state. A group of labor leaders from Illinois blamed a series of racial assaults in East St. Louis on the large number of black migrants in that area. Further, many labor unions were unhappy about the widespread use of black migrants as strike-breakers in the North and Midwest.⁴⁰

Secretary Wilson was conciliatory toward Congressman Watkins. He responded that the Department had no authority to interfere with the movement of workers and admitted it was “an embarrassing situation.” Wilson expressed the hope that in the North employers would cease using black strike-breakers and in the South they would be “as solicitous as others for the welfare of the workers of their

region.” The Labor Department’s policy, he wrote, was to balance the individual interests against the “industrial interests of the country as a whole.”⁴¹ To further address southern concerns about labor shortages, Wilson instituted a program to temporarily admit Mexican workers, including agricultural labor.⁴²

Wilson was only compromising with political realities and wartime needs, but USES Director John Densmore went beyond practical needs in responding to southern employers. When the operator of a sawmill charged that blacks were being lured away from his firm to higher paying federal munitions work in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, Densmore assured him that the government would not give black workers any information “showing what they do at Muscle Shoals to get [them] to move away from there. We will let [them] alone.”⁴³

Birth of the Division of Negro Economics

In response to the Great Migration and continuing into the war period, African American leaders increasingly called for federal action to assist black workers. Initially spearheading the drive was Giles Jackson, an ambitious Virginian who was president of the National Civic Improvement Association. Jackson advocated a self-help program for blacks that would focus on agricultural work. Beginning in 1916, he lobbied Washington for the creation of a “Bureau of Industrial Aid and Economics” which his association would operate under the umbrella of the Department of Labor with a substantial federal funding level of \$700,000. The main purpose of the Bureau was to encourage blacks to farm in the South instead of migrating, thereby helping to maintain food supplies and holding farming costs down. In a region where growers were increasingly worried about

losing low-wage black labor, this approach gained political support. The Richmond Chamber of Commerce and Senator Thomas Martin of Virginia endorsed Jackson's approach.⁴⁴

Jackson's strategy, with its unorthodox mixture of private and public resources, gained enough support to have the matter taken up in the White House in May 1917. President Wilson's personal secretary, Joseph Tumulty, referred the plan to the wartime Council of National Defense, which informed Jackson that Congressional approval of funding would be needed. Jackson petitioned members of Congress to approve the necessary legislation. In order to gain more support in the Administration, Jackson joined Congressman W. Schley Howard (Democrat-Virginia) and members of the Richmond Chamber of Commerce to discuss the plan with Secretary Wilson. Jackson also met with Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), around the same time. Gompers, concerned about the use of black migrants as strike-breakers in the North, endorsed Jackson's plan and urged Secretary Wilson to join him. Additional support came from John A. Ross, president of the Associated Colored Employees of America, headquartered in New York City.⁴⁵

Jackson's proposal was never adopted, but it did establish the idea of a permanent federal office dealing with black labor issues. At the end of January 1918, the National Urban League (NUL)—long involved in the issue of the black migration and concerned that the exodus was about to intensify—held a conference in New York City, with representatives of business, social service agencies, other black organizations, and organized labor in attendance. The NUL's primary focus was on winning the support of the AFL for greater union membership for black workers, who were now entering the industrial workforce in droves and were, at the same time, subjected to significant discrimination by organized labor. To supplement this

effort, the conference included in its resolutions a call for “one or two competent blacks” to be appointed in the Department of Labor to assist in the distribution of black labor.⁴⁶

On Lincoln’s Birthday, February 12, 1918, a group of black leaders from the NUL, the NAACP, and other bodies acted on this resolution. A preliminary meeting with Louis Post paved the way, and the group presented Secretary Wilson with a more detailed version of their January conference recommendation. The memo cited the war emergency as creating “the most critical labor problem in its history.” It noted that the Department of Labor had already set up mechanisms to provide an adequate labor supply, deal with war production labor disputes, and assure decent working and living conditions for war industry workers. The petitioners made it clear that they believed it was now time for attention to be paid to the black labor force, whose migration posed a social challenge to the nation. Unlike Giles Jackson, who sought to keep blacks in the rural South, this group accepted migration as a continuing reality that required understanding and action to prevent further social problems in the North. Specifically, they asked for the appointment of “a black expert on labor problems” to advise the Secretary of Labor. They cited the service of Emmett Scott in the War Department as a precedent. To supplement the proposed “black expert,” they called for the appointment of black assistants in the various offices of the war labor program as recommended in the January resolution. They also offered to suggest names for black appointees.⁴⁷

Post forwarded their request to Secretary Wilson, along with his personal endorsement. Although Post felt that simply adding a black to the Department of Labor’s Advisory Council would be “mere race recognition,” or tokenism, he and Wilson agreed that the Department should pursue the matter. Post noted that “there is an absolute

necessity that the Department of Labor come into comprehensive and comprehending relations with ... the black race.” He recommended to Wilson that the Department hold an “authoritative conference” to decide how best to act on the petition. With his scribbled “Approved Feb. 16-18, WBW” on Post’s decision memo, Wilson endorsed the first step toward applying to black workers the broad federal mandate stated in the Department of Labor’s 1913 Organic Act: to “foster, promote and develop the welfare of the wage earners of the United States, improve their working conditions, and advance their opportunities for profitable employment.” With this action, the federal government also began laying the groundwork for outreach efforts that evolved over the next half-century into affirmative action.⁴⁸

The recommended “authoritative conference” took place later in February 1918 at a meeting between several signers of the Lincoln’s Birthday proposal and the Department of Labor’s Advisory Council. L.C. Marshall of the Council reported to Wilson that what the black group really wanted was to have a black adviser serving within the Department. The Advisory Council agreed with this idea. However, it rejected the call to have the black adviser serve on the Advisory Council itself, because of the temporary nature of the Advisory Council’s existence. They recommended that Wilson appoint a black expert who could provide advice and also help administer any programs that were developed. They left open the question of where the adviser would be located and what kind of organization, if any, would be needed.⁴⁹

Wilson followed the Advisory Council’s recommendation and created the position of Director of the Division of Negro Economics (DNE), the purpose of which was to advise him “in all matters affecting Negroes.” The Director would report to Wilson. To fill this historic post, he appointed George Haynes, professor of sociology

and economics at Fisk University. James Dillard, the Urban League, the NAACP, and others supported Haynes for the position. The appointment was effective May 1, 1918.⁵⁰

Haynes, by then, was already a ground-breaking black pioneer. Born in 1880 to a domestic servant in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, he graduated from Fisk University in 1903. After several years divided between pursuing graduate studies in sociology and working to support his mother and sister, he enrolled at Columbia University and, in 1912, became the first black to receive a doctorate there.

During the course of his graduate studies, Haynes focused on the causes and effects of the Great Migration. He became convinced that it was not, contrary to the hopes of many both within and outside of the South, about to be reversed. He believed that blacks and whites should apply social work techniques to ease racial friction and promote black adjustment to urban life. To that end, he helped found the NUL in New York City while teaching at Fisk. While working with the fledgling organization, he endeavored to develop cooperation between white and black groups. After his service at the Department of Labor, he returned to the field of social work, spending the balance of his career with the Federal Council of Churches as head of the department of race relations.⁵¹

As DNE Director, Haynes had beaten out a powerful rival: Giles Jackson. Although Jackson's original proposal for a black workers program had been rejected, he received endorsements for Director of the DNE from the AFL, both Senators from Virginia, and the White House. Louis Post, however, derailed the nomination because of his doubts about Jackson, both personally and professionally. These doubts were reinforced by the NAACP and other black organizations that considered Jackson *persona non grata*. W.E.B. DuBois termed

Jackson “disreputable,” while *The Washington Bee*, a black newspaper, charged that he was “not fit to be a dog catcher.”⁵²

Though he failed to land the big prize, Jackson was able to secure an appointment within the USES as Chief of its new Negro Division. He took office on May 1, 1918, the same day Haynes became Director of the DNE. Jackson’s Negro Division was mandated to develop a program “for the mobilization, employment, and housing of black labor,” a mission very similar to that of the DNE.⁵³

Such a duplication of functions had the potential for generating a disruptive rivalry in leadership between Haynes and Jackson. The rivalry never materialized. The Negro Division and Giles Jackson were briefly cited in the 1918 Annual Report of the USES, but were not mentioned in any subsequent annual reports. The fact was that, while Secretary Wilson had appointed Jackson to please Jackson’s politically powerful supporters, he never intended to allow him to play a significant role. Starved of staff and budget, Jackson was virtually ignored. Haynes and the DNE held sole responsibility for the Department’s efforts to mobilize black labor.⁵⁴

Wilson met with George Haynes on May 1, 1918, Haynes’s first day in office, and laid out some initial goals for the DNE. As the Advisory Council had suggested, Haynes was to advise the Secretary and other top Department of Labor officials “on matters relating to black wage-earners” and to direct programs promoting cooperation between blacks and whites in both agricultural and industrial workplaces. Wilson asked Haynes to develop specific plans for such programs, based on this broad mandate. Wilson also stressed his own belief that such public programs were important because blacks were such a significant portion of the populace, constituting one-tenth of the U.S. population and one-seventh of the workforce.⁵⁵

In April 1918, just before Haynes (and Jackson) took office, the USES prepared a memo of suggested policies for the DNE. The main recommendation was to create within the DNE a “Farm Service Reserve,” a cohort of black workers for “the farms in sections of the country where farmers are dependent on colored laborers.” The Farm Service Reserve (FSR) bore the fingerprints of Giles Jackson and was never adopted. Nevertheless the USES memo played an important part in the development of the DNE. Clearly aimed at the South, the FSR also reflected the thinking of USES Director John Densmore, who was sympathetic to southern growers. The leadership of the proposed FSR would be chosen from the black community, with special consideration given to leaders of secret societies who, it was believed, would be better able to gain the cooperation of black workers. These leaders would also counter-act racially inflammatory wartime propaganda supposedly spread by German agents through Gypsy fortune tellers and others. There was to be a campaign to enlist white cooperation with the FSR, with strong reliance on publicity in the press and on support from state government and local leadership.⁵⁶

The USES memo and FSR proposal soon circulated to Wilson, who referred it to Haynes. Haynes prepared a detailed response, in which he expanded on its ideas and broadened its scope. Haynes’s memo became the basis for the DNE program.⁵⁷ While not fully endorsing the FSR, Haynes did approve of many of its features. He favored utilizing black staff tapping into black organizations, presenting workers with a certificate and badge, and obtaining publicity from black leaders and newspapers. Haynes pointed out, however, that with the planting season nearly over, there was less need for emergency farm-workers. Yet, in his view, there remained a need for long-range planning for both agricultural and industrial labor. Haynes also stressed that the needs of the whole country and

not just the South should be considered. Furthermore, the black labor program would have to be coordinated with the broader mandate of the Department of Labor to improve conditions for all workers. Finally, Haynes pointed out that, given efforts in the South to forcibly prevent blacks from leaving, workers would probably be suspicious of any program that sought to send them back to the farm.⁵⁸

Based on these considerations and building on the USES proposal, Haynes formulated a four-point approach to helping blacks find jobs while maintaining peace between the races. First, he proposed that a farm reserve-type program should be part of a wider effort to deal with black employment in all sectors and regions. Second, he suggested that the plan provide a mechanism for bringing black and white representatives of various local bodies together to promote mutual understanding and to establish permanent committees comprised of both blacks and whites.⁵⁹ Third, Haynes wanted to mount a careful campaign to publicize the effort among both whites and blacks, again using local leaders and organizations. Fourth, he wished to appoint black staff members (e.g., Assistant Directors and Examiners) to work in the field to help administer the program. Though his plan was comprehensive, Haynes stressed that:

The most delicate and difficult problem will be

1. To have the colored people understand the large purpose and liberal spirit of the Department,
2. The finding and securing of the right type of black workers,
3. The approach to the local white people, especially in the South.

The first two are the keys to the third.⁶⁰

Post forwarded Haynes's proposal to Wilson. To implement Haynes's four-point approach, Wilson, Post, and Haynes formulated the guiding strategy of the DNE as follows: 1) organization of local inter-racial committees; 2) publicity campaigns to promote racial harmony and cooperation with the Department's war effort; and 3) development of a staff of blacks in the DNE to assist in those efforts and to work with other war agencies of the Labor Department. In addition, Haynes and the USES were to work jointly to keep Wilson informed about "industrial" (i.e., race) relations between blacks and whites.⁶¹

A Federal-State Partnership

The Division of Negro Economics implemented its dual mission of mobilizing black labor for the war effort and promoting fairness and racial harmony through a federal-state partnership, with an emphasis on the states. This effort concentrated on the regions most affected by the migration: the South, the root homeland of most of the nation's blacks and the base for their exodus; and the Northeast and Middle West, the primary destinations of that migration. Assisted by a corps of newly appointed state Supervisors of Negro Economics, Haynes set the stage for grass-roots action within the states. Grass-roots action was implemented primarily by means of multi-racial Negro Workers' Advisory Committees (NWACs). Together the DNE and the state Supervisors of Negro Economics complemented the mobilization and anti-discrimination efforts of the Negro Workers' Advisory Committees. These corresponding efforts were then, in turn, supplemented by other federal agencies.

Haynes's first step in the national black labor program was to organize and set the course for the DNE. Given the triple mandate

approved by Secretary Wilson, Haynes had to take into account several factors when planning new programs and establishing his national organization. Primary among these was the impact of the black migration upon the balance of labor in both the North and South. In the North, migration put the races into close contact and resulted in deplorable living conditions for blacks. Haynes recognized that confrontations between the races in shops and factories gave rise to “misunderstandings, prejudices, antagonisms, fears and suspicions.” He considered these problems to be local issues that should be understood and remedied in their local context. He also recognized the need to forestall both black and white suspicions about the goals and intentions of his agency. “From the start,” he later wrote, “we have wanted both races to understand and firmly believe that the Department wishes to promote cooperation and to help solve local labor problems.”⁶²

With these factors in mind, Haynes began developing a multi-faceted program to utilize existing governmental and non-governmental bodies. The strategy was for the DNE to work with the USES, which was the prime placement agency for war-related jobs, and with other war-related agencies throughout the federal government to deal specifically with African American issues. The DNE would also coordinate with private welfare organizations around the country. Finally, to improve black morale, enthusiasm for the war effort, and race relations, Haynes planned a nationwide publicity program.⁶³

While he planned these massive coordinations, Haynes also had to deal with bureaucratic issues, such as planning the organization and finding qualified candidates to serve as staff. Wilson, mindful of suspicions about the program around the country and particularly in the South, made it clear that the DNE was largely advisory and had no enforcement powers. He also stressed that it was not a separate “Negro

Bureau” but rather an integral part of the Office of the Secretary that reported directly to him. The staff in the national office was kept small to reduce the visibility of the program, but this concession was not as crippling a limitation as it might seem. The key component of the organization was not the national but the state segment.⁶⁴ Appointing African Americans as DNE staff, state supervisors, and racial specialists in the USES was a priority for Haynes. Mindful that there was “serious doubt about the expert efficiency of blacks in official positions,” he ensured that staff members were well-trained and fully experienced in their specialties. The job of mediating between whites and blacks in the workplace and promoting black morale required staff with exceptional human relations skills and sensitivities. Haynes was convinced that his personnel measured up to these standards. Two experts from the Bureau of the Census were appointed supervisors in key states: Charles E. Hall and William Jennifer, the co-authors of the Department’s 1916 study on migration, served in Ohio and Michigan, respectively. Haynes also hired black clerks for his office and reviewed black appointees in the USES, with whom he worked out a joint supervisory arrangement. DNE Assistant Director Karl Phillips supervised the Washington office and worked closely with the Director. Haynes later praised the entire staff for their performance under difficult circumstances. Looking at the broader context of black people functioning in a largely white world, he wrote: “Their services as a part of this experiment in the Federal Government’s relation to black-wage earners has been a contribution to the experience with blacks in important administrative positions.”⁶⁵

While still developing the DNE staff and program, Haynes began to establish contact with local leaders and groups in the states. He embarked on a ten-day tour in early June 1918 to meet with white and black representatives in the eight Southern states where the

problems of black workers were particularly urgent. Setting the stage for the tour was a Department of Labor press release dated May 31, 1918. Citing problems in both the South and the North resulting from black migration, the Department called on patriotic whites and blacks to form local alliances. In the case of the South, it asked the alliances “to make those [blacks] who have not yet left the South satisfied.” On his tour, Haynes developed what he called “sympathetic contacts” and laid groundwork for local efforts. He won promises of assistance from white and black educators, chambers of commerce, state Councils of Defense, and local offices of the USES. In many areas, his visits sparked the spontaneous formation of local cooperative groups that proved useful in the national effort.⁶⁶

Haynes chose North Carolina as the place to initiate the federal-state phase of the DNE program. Two weeks after Haynes paid a visit to Raleigh, Governor T.W. Bickett called a conference of white and black leaders. Haynes met with the group to explain the federal program and offer his assistance. After the conference, Bickett appointed a working group to set up a North Carolina NWAC, with provision for county and city NWACs as well. Haynes was particularly pleased to see the governor accept the post of Honorary Chairman of the State Committee. The Committee organized a wide-ranging coalition of educators, government officials, and representatives of the major towns and cities. While the participants were predominantly black, many white citizens were also involved. A number of cities and counties developed local NWACs to work with the state body. Haynes appointed Dr. A.M. Moore as North Carolina’s Supervisor of Negro Economics. Moore reported jointly to Haynes and the USES and worked closely with the North Carolina NWAC system. Haynes also helped get the USES involved in the program. The state Council of Defense and the governor also played major roles.⁶⁷ Thanks to their

efforts, North Carolina was able to report that several progressive employers asked the NWAC for advice as they voluntarily set up programs for the welfare of their black employees.

The North Carolina system became a model for other southern states, with numerous variations in types of participant, organizational structure, and mission, differences which were to be expected in such a decentralized program. Mississippi, Florida, and Virginia soon held conferences and organized their own NWACs, followed by other southern states. The Council of National Defense played a key role in the development of such programs in the South, both through endorsements and through efforts by the state Councils to bring white members to the NWACs.

Attention then turned to the North. Haynes selected Ohio, a major employer of black migrants, to lead the way in that region. Jointly with the USES and Governor James M. Cox (later the unsuccessful Democratic nominee for President in 1920), Haynes convened a state conference. Cox, who had visited Tuskegee Institute that year, assured an enthusiastic audience that “We ... need [black] people and need them badly in the war ... [and] in the industrial life of this country.”⁶⁸ Ohio soon set up a program similar to that in North Carolina and served as a regional leader and example.

To deal with large new concentrations of blacks in Ohio’s cities, Charles Hall worked with the USES and also directly with the black workforce. He sought to assure that blacks would be able to find available work, the pay and hours of these jobs, and details on the attitudes of surrounding white communities.⁶⁹ A local Ohio committee reported to the state conference that blacks were being denied skilled jobs in defense work. It called on the federal government to prohibit discrimination in contract work (see Chapter 3 on the Fair Employment Practice Committee). An Ohio committee on black

women in industry also called for greater attention to the needs of this group of workers.⁷⁰

The Florida NWAC defused a tense situation caused by rumors that black women receiving military allotments from family members in the armed forces were refusing to work. The Committee investigated and announced the finding that many of these women were actually employed.

In Illinois a special committee reported to the state conference on the general conditions of black war workers. It found that union organizing in the Chicago stockyards had actually improved race relations, but that in other parts of the state blacks were well accepted. Although race riots erupted in Chicago, through the efforts of local NWACs and other groups in Illinois “much friction ... was removed by this cordial effort.” In several Illinois cities, these groups defused tense racial situations and calm prevailed.⁷¹

The work of the states was varied and wide-ranging, including investigating conditions of black workers, educating blacks and whites on race-relation improvement, helping with job placements, alleviating discrimination and race friction, and developing recommendations for federal action. The DNE report, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, published in 1921, provides many illuminating examples of this work. Before the end of the war, most large states east of the Mississippi River had developed a black labor program. A total of 11 states had formal NWACs, buttressed with 225 local committees with a membership of over 1,000. This aggregation of local white and black leadership generally worked well together, and both races gave freely of their time for little or no pay. Haynes noted that there was only one known case of friction among committee members serious enough to cause a resignation.⁷²

In addition to these efforts in their own backyards, the states also kept the Department of Labor and the DNE informed of conditions and morale in their workforces and assisted the Department and the Supervisors of Negro Economics in their work.⁷³ The state Supervisors worked closely with the local USES offices. When the USES was given the responsibility for recruiting labor for defense work, many members of NWACs and state Supervisors of Negro Economics volunteered to assist. While not technically supervised by Haynes, they kept him informed of their activities and of conditions in their states. The Supervisors assisted the NWACs and associated groups and also worked directly with employers and others to reduce discrimination, place blacks in defense jobs, and improve black morale and productivity. Since the NWAC system handled the bulk of this work in the southern states, the Supervisors were most active in the northern states.⁷⁴

Like the NWACs, the Supervisors engaged in a wide range of activities, but they had to be very selective since they were operating with little or no staff. One of the most notable Supervisors was Charles Hall in Ohio. He took particular interest in housing and promoted the organization of black building and loan associations. Based on Ohio law, he developed a model constitution for such associations and distributed this model constitution within the black community. The so-called "Ohio Plan" resulted in the establishment of several associations in Ohio and spawned interest and imitation in other states as well. In addition to his work on housing and loan practices, Hall acted to reduce racial discrimination "at the gate" of employers and won agreement from the Ohio Federation of Labor to allow blacks to enter freely into labor unions.⁷⁵

In Michigan, Forrester Washington was a very active administrator, as was William Jennifer, who followed him. Like

Ohio, Michigan was a major migration magnet. The Detroit area saw explosive growth in its black population and in the resulting problems of racial tensions and over-crowded housing conditions. The Michigan labor department and the Detroit Urban League (DUL) were struggling to place blacks in war industry jobs and deal with social problems. These bodies welcomed the attention the Department of Labor now focused on the state. The fact that Supervisor Washington was former director of the DUL assured good cooperation with existing local efforts. In his brief stint in Michigan, Washington investigated more than a hundred munitions factories, auto plants, and other shops in the Detroit area employing large numbers of blacks. He worked out a program to help these organizations increase the productivity of their black workers by providing better working conditions, setting up advisory committees of black workers, and appointing more black foremen.⁷⁶

William Jennifer took over as Supervisor of Negro Economics in Michigan in October 1918. He immediately embarked on a statewide tour to view local conditions and build coalitions with business groups, churches, and other organizations. In addition to investigating discrimination, helping blacks find suitable jobs, dealing with housing problems, and other typical activities of a Supervisor, Jennifer organized a state conference in December, one month after the World War I Armistice in November. The conference quickly shifted its emphasis to post-war labor issues. It placed importance on dealing with the problems of black women workers. A special committee developed a program to improve working conditions for this group, investigate reasons why some industries hired only white women, and fight discrimination in wages and workplace facilities.⁷⁷

The Supervisors of Negro Economics in other northern industrial states had similar agendas, with local variations. Their impact varied

depending on when the Supervisor took office and the effectiveness of existing programs sponsored by local NWACs, governments, and private organizations. Forrest Washington left Michigan to become Supervisor in Illinois. One of his main projects in his new position was to promote, with the assistance of local NWACs, cooperative retail enterprises among blacks. Several self-help ventures set up black-run businesses as a means of retaining within the community the money black residents had available to spend. Economic self-help was one of Haynes's and the civil rights community's major national priorities.⁷⁸

New Jersey Supervisor William M. Ashby also worked hard to place black workers in well-paying war industry jobs, persuade employers to hire black foremen, and eliminate discrimination. However, when deciding where to concentrate the limited resources of his DNE, Haynes gave less emphasis to states where problems were less acute, such as New York and Pennsylvania. Consequently, the Supervisors in those states did not take their posts until the war was almost over and, when they did begin operations, they focused mainly on post-war adjustment, such as placing skilled black workers displaced from shut-down munitions plants and finding jobs for returning black veterans.⁷⁹

The Division of Negro Economics from Wartime to Peacetime

After all the state programs were set in motion and Supervisors were deployed, the DNE concentrated on serving as a watchdog for local efforts; proselytizing, both directly and indirectly, for full black participation in war labor production; and promoting racial harmony. The proselytizing was accomplished through speeches and talks

that Haynes and his staff gave and through press releases that were circulated widely to both the white and black presses. The public relations blitz also included distribution of prepared speeches and articles to be used by speakers and magazines around the country. On July 4, 1918, an estimated 2,000 orators delivered a speech provided by the DNE on “Labor and Victory,” a speech promoting the role of black people in the “world struggle for democracy.” Haynes estimated that these messages reached at least one million people a month.⁸⁰

During its existence, the DNE had significant interaction with and impact on other sections of the Labor Department that housed it. In August 1918, Post, Haynes, and others developed cooperative arrangements between the DNE and other Department of Labor offices at the local level. Post circulated the DNE’s annual budget around the Department for comments.⁸¹ The USES adopted a plan developed by Haynes for hiring black war-workers. The Woman in Industry Service (WIS), forerunner of the Department of Labor’s Women’s Bureau, consulted with the DNE in developing a survey on the treatment of female black workers in war industries. The DNE helped locate qualified researchers to lead the WIS effort. When the Department’s Inspection and Investigation Service started planning a study of black workmen in northern industries, the Division assisted in similar fashion.⁸²

After the war ended with an Armistice on November 11, 1918, the DNE re-invented itself for peacetime work, and Haynes saw a chance for African Americans to build on progress made during the war. In a speech titled “Grasping the Hands of Economic Opportunity,” Haynes pointed out that “for the first time the Negro has the chance to firmly entrench himself in the better occupations,” and he urged his black listeners to take advantage of “Mr. Opportunity,” as he put it. But holding on to wartime gains was only one of his priorities.⁸³

Shortly after the Armistice, Haynes alerted Labor Department policy-makers to the problem of the large numbers of unemployed blacks who were about to be demobilized from war industries and mustered out of the military.⁸⁴ He also emphasized that, in the North, the potential for racial friction was increasing in those cities with new black populations and, in the South, employers needed to improve the often harsh working conditions blacks faced. However, the most critical post-war problem, in Haynes's view, was the challenge to improve relations between black workers and their white colleagues and employers. He saw the work of the racially mixed local NWACs as the best way to deal with these issues, and he threw the support of the DNE behind their efforts.⁸⁵

The Department of Labor and the DNE supported local efforts to improve post-war race relations in a number of ways. In February 1919, Secretary Wilson called a national conference of the NAACP, the Phelps-Stokes Fund, and other social welfare organizations with the goal of promoting better race relations and addressing black issues involving women in the workplace, farm workers, and training and education. Participants worked on facilitating cooperation among their organizations and on coordination between them, the Department of Labor, and other government agencies. Conferees called for the Department of Labor to renew efforts to improve the lot of black workers by taking such steps as continuing to survey their working conditions and training black youths for entry into industry. After the conference, Haynes authorized Supervisors in states with camps for black soldiers to work jointly with the USES toward placing discharged veterans in civilian jobs. This task was made more difficult by a virtual shut down of the munitions industry and a nationwide economic recession.⁸⁶

In an era of revolutions abroad and “Red Scares” and racial unrest at home, Haynes and the DNE responded in various ways to the unstable social landscape of post-war America. The wartime (spurious) rumors of German efforts to propagandize blacks morphed into a peacetime hysteria about Bolshevik propaganda. The DNE escaped attack by extremists in most areas. However, in Florida it ran into rough waters when whites charged that radicalism was being engendered in the program by leftist journals. This accusation tainted the efforts of both the Florida NWACs and the DNE in the minds of those who equated advocacy of improved conditions for blacks with Bolshevism. Florida Governor Sidney Catts, an erstwhile supporter of the DNE during the war, succumbed to the changing winds of post-war politics. He charged that the Division and local USES offices were filled with “carpetbag, negro federal officers” who advocated mixing of the races. Catts demanded that Wilson abolish the DNE and replace the head of the USES office in Florida. Wilson refused these demands but, under pressure to compromise, he temporarily suspended the Labor Department’s race relations work in Florida.⁸⁷

In the Midwest, badly housed black migrants were isolated into urban ghettos and made unwelcome by resident whites. Haynes felt these conditions made this population “a very ripe field for critical developments of unrest, friction and disturbances” and a possible victim of efforts “to arouse the black group to radical action.” He reported to Wilson that the DNE had partially countered these influences by guiding newly arrived blacks to employment offices and social service organizations. However, he insisted, “I do not see ... how we can help the situation” unless the Division could hire more black field assistants. Unlike the Florida critics, Haynes saw this program as a solution, not a problem.⁸⁸

After bloody race riots in Chicago in July 1919, Louis Post, administering the Labor Department in place of the ailing Wilson, sent Haynes on a fact-finding mission to several Midwestern cities. Haynes found whites pitted against blacks due to the familiar syndrome of social, economic, and political disruption associated with the migration, but he failed to find any evidence of incitement by radical provocateurs. One special factor he noted was bitterness among black war veterans over harsh treatment by the Army. In several of the cities he visited, especially Chicago, a city with excessive black unemployment, he found that “the racial tension is so widespread as to be in fact a matter of national concern.”⁸⁹

Haynes argued that this situation required government action. Blacks echoed that sentiment as many were now looking to government to solve problems of racial violence and poor living conditions. Indeed, the work of the DNE, along with the state and local activities it spawned during and after World War I, seems to have generated hope and enthusiasm among blacks and racial progressives throughout the nation. Ohio Supervisor Charles Hall reported that blacks in his state “watched with increasing interest” the DNE’s activities on their behalf. They were developing an appreciation of government at all levels. As a result, blacks in Ohio, Hall said, felt that “the Government has recognized them industrially, that they now have a medium through which to voice their complaints, and that ... they will be less subject to exploitation.” An investment banker from Memphis wrote to Wilson praising Haynes and expressing the hope that the DNE would continue its post-war work of “preserving the proper attitudes of the races toward each other.”⁹⁰

Unfortunately, racial relations in the U.S. reached a nadir during what became known as the “bloody summer” of 1919. From Washington, D.C., to Chicago and points South and West, a wave of

violence raged against black people, fueled by the potent post-war mixture of unemployment, inflation, job shortages, fears of revolution, and, above all, fear of black political power and social advancement. In Washington, D.C., lurid newspaper accounts of alleged black assaults on white women fomented mob attacks on blacks, who retaliated in kind. Two thousand army troops had to be called in to restore order. Similar violence broke out in Chicago, Indianapolis, Knoxville, Omaha, and other cities. In rural Arkansas, an estimated 250 blacks were murdered by whites, who deeply resented and felt threatened by a perceived rise in the victims' standard of living.⁹¹

Just as the "bloody summer" started, the Department sought to fund the DNE for the new fiscal year beginning July 1, 1919. Haynes remained hopeful for the Division's future. He noted that "everyone who has looked into it commends the work as valuable and necessary." However, the program's timing was not good. Congress was unsympathetic to the continuation of the DNE. During proceedings on the Department of Labor appropriations bill, the DNE and two other wartime agencies were excluded from the legislation. In the enacted appropriations bill, funds were restored to the other two bodies, but not, unfortunately, to the DNE. The Division was able to survive through fiscal year 1919 (ending July 1, 1919) only by borrowing resources from the U.S. Conciliation Service and other Department of Labor offices. It was unable, however, to fund the system of state NWACs, which quickly withered away.⁹²

Despite the budgetary woes, Haynes remained optimistic and continued to plan for the future. He proposed a federal-state effort led by the Department of Labor to collect data and work cooperatively on black labor issues. He envisioned a joint effort "for the investigation of black affairs and race relations in as many localities as possible ... as a means of having information and advice to improve conditions

and race relations.” Unfortunately the DNE had no better luck in Congress in 1920, and it went out of existence after the Administration of Republican President Warren G. Harding took office in March 1921.⁹³

The 1920s: An Age of Federal Minimalism

While the DNE disappeared during the 1920s, the social problems that it addressed—the urbanization of black workers and their assimilation into industry—only became more pressing. Spurred on by the booming economy of the 1920s, the black migration from the rural South to the cities of the North and Midwest continued at an accelerated pace. Part of the reason for increased migration was the growing mechanization in farming. These innovations reduced the demand for agricultural labor in the South, as elsewhere, and forced thousands of blacks to leave the region every year to seek work. In the 1910s, the net average increase of the black population outside the South was 34,000 per year.⁹⁴ In the early 1920s, that figure swelled to over 100,000 per year.

Partly as a result of the growing concentration of African Americans in New York City’s Harlem in the 1920s, there was a flowering of creativity in black music, literature, and art known as the Harlem Renaissance, which celebrated black identity and sought to displace negative stereotypes. This and similar flowerings of black culture elsewhere acted as magnets attracting additional migrants from the South. Adding to the incentive to move, Ford Motor Company, partly motivated by the desire to break up unions, adopted a policy of paying black workers equal pay for equal work and placing a number of African Americans in high wage jobs.

After the war, many black workers were able to retain their foothold within industry. Expanded black urban populations also increased the demand for black professionals and small businessmen. Consequently, many blacks were able to enter the ranks of the middle class, although the bulk of them still remained in low skill, low wage jobs.⁹⁵

Several factors combined to restrain significant federal efforts to promote equal opportunity for African Americans in the 1920s. The predominant policy of Presidents Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover was to minimize government involvement in the economy. The prosperity of the 1920s only reinforced this approach. There was also widespread growth of xenophobia and an explosion of membership within the Ku Klux Klan in many areas. This expansion of formalized racism overwhelmed whatever social pressures may have existed on the federal government to adopt progressive racial policies.

Federal labor policy became focused on developing and enforcing more restrictive immigration laws. The primary successes for black groups came in winning inclusion of pro-civil rights planks in both the Republican and Democratic Party platforms in presidential election years.⁹⁶ In the area of federal employment, obstacles to the hiring of blacks that had been raised during the Wilson Administration remained largely in place. These obstacles included the Civil Service Commission's requirement that photographs accompany federal job applications.⁹⁷ Throughout the 1920s, the majority of government agencies continued to hire only white applicants for work above the unskilled level. The Department of Labor reported in 1928 that most blacks who managed to get federal jobs had been relegated to the lowest paying positions. In addition, many black workers were still routinely segregated to minimize their contact with white workers. One exception during the Harding and Coolidge Administrations

was the Department of Commerce. Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce from 1921 until he was elected president in 1928, eliminated segregation in his department. Black employees in most of the other departments that had implemented Jim Crow under President Wilson continued to suffer discrimination.⁹⁸

For the most part, during the 1920s, the federal government ignored the public policy legacy of the Division of Negro Economics. Nevertheless, a precedent for federal intervention on behalf of black workers was in place. Federal intervention during World War I, limited as it was, had encouraged a propensity within the black community to look toward government, particularly at the federal level, for fair treatment and better opportunities.

Chapter 2: Depression and New Deal

Lurking under the surface of the prosperous 1920s was an economically lethal combination of factors that would soon combine to produce the Great Depression. Millions of Americans were forced into unemployment and poverty that endured almost unrelieved until World War II. The complex causes included persistent low wages, excessive speculation in real estate and securities, weakened international financial structures, and, perhaps foremost, a depressed agricultural sector. Partly due to a cost-price squeeze on agricultural commodities in the 1920s, agriculture slipped into a rapid decline that, due to the fact that it had become an integral factor in the national economy, soon dragged down the other sectors. By the time of the stock market crash of 1929, the country was already in deep economic trouble.¹

African Americans felt the effects of the Depression disproportionately. The agricultural decline of the 1920s forced many of those working on farms to migrate to seek scarce industrial work, and many wound up in unemployment lines. In many cases, those lucky enough to be employed at the time of the Depression had only recently obtained good industrial jobs and fell victim to the traditional rule of “last-hired, first fired.” As the economic tide ebbed, those already below the surface sank further. Black unemployment rates eventually exceeded 50 percent in many areas, double the maximum general rate of 25 percent. By the early 1930s, 17 percent of whites were unable to support themselves, but 38 percent of blacks were in a similar predicament.²

During the Administration of President Herbert Hoover, the federal government attempted to alleviate unemployment through limited public works programs. However, there was no effort to compensate for the disparate impact of the Depression upon black workers. When Hoover ran for re-election in 1932, his opponent was Franklin D. Roosevelt, Democratic governor of New York. Roosevelt had instituted extensive anti-Depression programs in his state, and he promised to do the same for the nation as president.

However, FDR had never shown much interest in racial matters, and his campaign was not strongly supported by blacks. Like Woodrow Wilson—in whose Administration he served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy—FDR deferred, during the campaign, to the Southerners who still dominated the Democratic Party. While the Republican Party platform contained a mild civil rights plank, the Democratic nominating convention failed to adopt one. Many blacks worried that a victory by FDR would put southern segregationists back in power. As a result, black voters maintained their traditional loyalty to the Republican Party and voted overwhelmingly for Hoover.

The Roosevelt Administration and the “First New Deal”

While Roosevelt carried only 4 of the 15 largest black wards in the northern states and won black majorities only in New York City and Kansas City, he won the election in a landslide. The country turned to a new president to lead it out of the Depression.³ Roosevelt took the Presidential Oath of Office on March 4, 1933, vowing to inaugurate a “New Deal” for America. He immediately commenced a historic national mobilization designed to relieve the economic and psychological suffering from the Depression and bring about the return of prosperity. In the 1930s, Roosevelt and the now heavily

Democratic Congress greatly expanded the size and scope of the federal government and developed a number of programs that, while not aimed specifically at African Americans, aided them greatly. In practice, these programs were not always racially fair in their distribution of relief and employment benefits, but racial equality was always the goal. The participation of unprecedented numbers of blacks in policy-making positions in Washington increased the chances that African Americans would be treated fairly during the greatest economic crisis in the nation's history.⁴

Roosevelt's entire Cabinet was confirmed by the Senate and sworn in on Inauguration Day. Despite FDR's weak stance on civil rights, the make-up of his Administration's leadership boded well for blacks. One of the leading racially progressive appointees was Harold Ickes, the Secretary of the Interior. Ickes, a white, had served as head of the Chicago branch of the NAACP and became a champion of Native American rights in the 1920s.⁵ Frances Perkins, FDR's New York labor commissioner, was his choice for Secretary of Labor.⁶ As a young social worker in Philadelphia, she helped black girls arriving from the South avoid the clutches of prostitution rings.⁷ Another Albany, New York, alumnus was Harry Hopkins, who served initially as a presidential adviser before moving on to head major New Deal programs. Like Perkins, Hopkins had been a social worker with private welfare organizations. Then he joined FDR's successful 1928 gubernatorial campaign, won Roosevelt's trust, and was appointed director of the state's Temporary Emergency Relief Organization.⁸ This trio of social progressives brought in a small army of like-minded aides, many of them black. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who had become personally involved in a number of social issues in the 1920s, became a major ally of the racial progressives and an influential supporter of black causes. In terms of racial attitudes,

Roosevelt's White House differed sharply from Wilson's, and, despite FDR's personal lack of involvement in racial matters, the new Administration was poised to build on the legacy of the Division of Negro Economics.⁹

A privately sponsored Washington "Conference on the Economic Status of the Negro" in early 1933 sought to direct national attention to the impact of the Depression on black incomes and the black family.¹⁰ FDR, however, was totally focused on the broader goal of overcoming the Depression through aggressive federal action. Like Wilson, FDR badly needed the support of Southern Democrats in Congress, and he was willing to accommodate, to some degree, their racial views to win their backing for his economic recovery program.¹¹

With the help of this key bloc, Roosevelt was able to quickly initiate his New Deal. In its first 100 days, he sought to stimulate recovery through such measures as stabilization and control of banking and the currency, extensive federal loans to private industry and property owners, unprecedented regulation of private enterprise, and massive relief efforts for farmers and the unemployed. Frances Perkins and Harry Hopkins met with FDR early on and persuaded him also to support a strong relief effort to help working people and their families.¹² Thus was set in motion a cluster of laws and programs that became known as the "First New Deal" (1933-1935).

To relieve hunger and homelessness, in May 1933 Congress created the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) to fund state relief efforts. The FERA provided hundreds of millions of dollars in grants to state relief agencies. Roosevelt appointed Harry Hopkins to direct the massive program. Hopkins believed that work was superior to the "dole" and always sought to convince the states to provide public service jobs rather than handing out checks or goods. A few areas, such as New York City, followed the jobs approach

under the FERA, but most of the country opted for welfare because it provided quicker relief at lower cost. Hopkins went to great lengths to assure that blacks across the country would receive their fair share of benefits. This goal proved difficult to achieve in the South, however, because welfare benefits were lower there, and blacks were often denied a fair proportion of the meager relief that was available. Partly because of this lack of access to welfare, migration out of the South jumped during the 1930s and the black population in the North grew by 25 percent. Another problem was that migrant farm workers, a disproportionate number of whom were black, were totally excluded from relief under the FERA on the phony basis that aiding them amounted to a federal subsidy of their employers.¹³

To help restore prosperity, on June 16, 1933, Congress passed the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), which created the National Recovery Administration (NRA). This program operated on the theory that ruinous competition had brought about low prices and over-production, factors which helped cause the Depression. The NRA sought to limit production and raise prices by imposing mandatory controls or codes in each industry. To gain the support of organized labor, the NRA affirmed the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively under Section 7a of the NIRA. The NRA also required that all codes include a minimum wage of up to 40 cents per hour and overtime pay after 35 to 40 hours per week, depending on the industry. Participating businesses displayed the distinctive NRA blue eagle emblem, and consumers were urged to sign pledges to patronize only NRA businesses.¹⁴

Committees representing business, organized labor, and consumers drafted NRA codes for most industries by September 1933. Absent from the deliberations, unfortunately, were any representatives of black workers. Not surprisingly, the codes that

emerged tended to work to their disadvantage. The Joint Committee on National Recovery, a black watchdog group, reported a system of discrimination in the codes that resulted in lower incomes for blacks. Traditional “Negro occupations,” such as janitorial and household help, were often excluded from minimum wage and maximum hour requirements. Industries concentrated in the South, which still housed the bulk of the black workforce, were allowed to pay lower wages than other industries. For many other industries and occupations, pre-existing wage differences, often based on race, were frozen in place by a wage differential. When blacks received higher wages under the codes, southern employers often replaced them with white workers. Echoing similar concerns expressed during World War I, employers complained that high wages dictated by what some of them dubbed the “Negro Relief Association” deprived them of cheap labor for picking and chopping cotton. Weak and biased enforcement allowed many employers to get away with paying sub-code wages to black workers. Reflecting widespread dissatisfaction, black newspapers came to refer to the NRA as “Negroes Ruined Again” or “Negro Run Around.” Few blacks mourned when the Supreme Court ruled in 1935 that the NIRA was unconstitutional and closed down the NRA.¹⁵

Born of the NIRA and long surviving its nullification was the Public Works Administration (PWA), established in June 1933. Congress appropriated the unusually large sum of \$3.3 billion to fund the PWA to build public structures of all kinds to provide jobs, stimulate the economy, and provide badly needed new facilities and infra-structure. The PWA was intended to address the anomalous combination of hundreds of thousands of idle laborers and skilled workers, business inventories overflowing with construction materials, and schools, housing, roads, and sewer systems crumbling due to lack

of public revenues. Roosevelt chose Harold Ickes to head the PWA while Ickes also continued to serve as Secretary of the Interior.¹⁶

To assure fairness to workers, Ickes arranged whenever possible to use the new version of the U.S. Employment Service, which had been reincarnated and strengthened by the Wagner-Peyser Act of June 1933. The new USES was to refer workers to job sites and to do so regardless of race. Ickes believed that hiring through the USES would help counter the tendency of employers to give preference in hiring to former employees, who were often disproportionately white, rather than considering new applicants. The USES also helped open PWA jobs to blacks in unionized firms, which normally hired through union business agents (except in the case of the industrial unions). This move resulted in favoritism to whites because of past union discrimination. Consequently, many unions resisted the PWA's use of the USES. A compromise was worked out whereby business agents were given 48 hours to place a union member in a new position. If the union hall could not fill the position, the local USES office took over. The USES also handled all non-union placements. To get the USES system operational as quickly as possible, the PWA agreed to finance the agency's operating costs. By the end of 1934, the USES and other bodies had placed 2 million workers in PWA jobs.¹⁷

Like the NRA, the PWA set minimum wage levels. The PWA system was more elaborate than the NRA, however, and took local variations into account with a separate structure for each region. Nationwide, wages ranged from \$1.00 to \$1.20 per hour for skilled workers and \$0.40 to \$0.50 for those classified as unskilled, with workers in the Southern region at the bottom of the scales. Unions opposed minimum wages in principle at that time, but they were mollified by a proviso allowing PWA to accept local prevailing union

rates under certain conditions. Classification of workers as skilled or unskilled labor, a classification which had a major impact on a worker's income, was a touchy issue for both union and non-union workers alike. Ickes established a Board of Labor Review to assure fairness and to settle any disputes in this area.¹⁸

Even before organizing the PWA, Ickes had established himself as a major champion of black workers' rights in the Roosevelt Administration. In an order dated September 1, 1933, he specifically banned discrimination based on either race or religion in hiring for PWA contract work. To clarify and enforce the rule, Ickes adopted a recommendation from his staff to set racial hiring levels, in effect quotas, and make them proportional to population. He ruled that the number of blacks hired in a given trade had to be proportional to the total number of blacks in the workforce in a given area who plied that trade, based on 1930 census data. Failure to meet this standard was interpreted as *prima facie* proof of discrimination.

Conversely, meeting the quota was considered *prima facie* proof of compliance. The PWA was largely successful in implementing its quotas and did not encounter any legal challenges. While the proportional hiring requirement was sometimes disregarded by individual contractors, overall, blacks held their fair portion of PWA construction jobs and received 31 percent of total wages by 1936. With this policy, Ickes became the first federal official ever to set racial quotas for federal programs. Thereby, he set a precedent for proportional representation that was widely adopted throughout the New Deal agencies that followed and helped lay the basis for affirmative action in the 1960s (see Chapter 9).¹⁹

Backing up Ickes's equal treatment orders was the PWA's Division of Investigations. Ickes selected Louis Glavis, an attorney who actively supported minority rights, to head the Division. A staff

of 150 agents looked into issues of fraud and corruption, as well as unfair treatment of employees. The most common violations involved wages. To protect against unfair wage practices, the PWA required that employers publicly post wage rates in workplaces and pay workers by cash or check.²⁰ This enforcement eliminated the practice of payment in company-issued “scrip” which could only be spent at company-owned stores.²¹

Despite its efforts for racial fairness, the PWA drew some criticism from the African American community. In the summer of 1933, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP complained that, out of 4,000 workers at the Boulder Dam site, only 11 were black, and they were not fairly treated. Ickes could do little about hiring in this case because the contracts pre-dated the PWA. However, he was able to improve the living arrangements of the black workers. When Glavis turned up instances of discrimination in Illinois’s PWA projects, Ickes ordered the state engineer to “see to it that the existing discrimination against blacks is remedied at once.”²²

In the long run, the PWA significantly benefited both blacks and the economy. However, it started up very slowly because of the painstaking project approval process Ickes had established. By the end of 1933, the PWA had spent only a fraction of its initial funding. As unemployment soared, PWA jobs were not being generated rapidly enough to satisfy the Roosevelt Administration. By November 1933, there were only 250,000 workers on PWA-funded payrolls.²³

At that point, the Administration decided to look into a new approach to job creation. Harry Hopkins persuaded FDR to allocate \$400 million from PWA funds for a short-term jobs program to help the unemployed survive the winter of 1933-1934. On November 8, 1933, the White House announced the initiation of this new program, which was to be administered by the Civil Works Administration (CWA)

with Harry Hopkins as head. Hopkins appointed Aubrey Williams, a racially progressive, white Southerner, to assist in administration.²⁴

With the goal of establishing useful jobs that provided both dignity to the unemployed and income for their survival, Hopkins used the FERA administrative machinery to establish and oversee work projects. Labor policies were closely modeled on the PWA, with an identical wage scale and the same dual reliance on unions and the USES for hiring. Over its brief course, the CWA spent \$934 million, with 80 percent of the money spent in wages for 4 million recipients. Its 177,000 projects included construction or repair of hundreds of libraries, schools, and other public buildings, paving of hundreds of miles of streets, and cultural projects to employ the growing army of unemployed white collar and creative workers. New York City used CWA funds to help black artists such as sculptress Augusta Savage, who established the Harlem Community Arts Center to train budding artists.²⁵

While data on the participation of African Americans in the CWA is scanty, they appear to have been included at least in proportion to population. There is some evidence of discrimination in hiring, but most failures to employ individual blacks were due to inefficiency and the rushed pace of hiring. The CWA established a grievance system and complaint process, but few complaints of discrimination were reported.²⁶

A quick termination of the CWA was a foregone conclusion, given the resistance of FDR to funding long-term government work relief jobs. By March 31, 1934, the CWA had shut down most of its projects and released most employees. In its short life, the CWA pumped substantial income into the economy, enhanced the public infrastructure, and reduced the stigma of relief by providing employment at decent pay. It also provided a precedent for later federal

programs that served blacks and other victims of the Depression on a longer term basis. As if to underscore the arguments of Hopkins and others who wanted to continue the CWA, immediately after its shutdown the relief rolls swelled by 1.3 million. By late 1934 the economy had exhausted the pump-priming benefit of the CWA and fell to its lowest level of the year.²⁷

A much longer-lived work-relief program was initiated even before the CWA was fully functional. Alarmed by the exceptionally high rate of unemployment among young people, FDR proposed the idea of putting them to work in the nation's public forests to preserve natural resources. A Cabinet group consisting of Harold Ickes, Frances Perkins, Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace, and Secretary of War George Dern was asked to develop a bill based on FDR's idea. As a result, on March 31, 1933, Congress enacted the Emergency Conservation Work Act. It created a program for young men (women were not included) aged 17 to 23 to do forestry work, flood control, fire fighting, and trail construction in national forests and parks. Dubbed the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), it was jointly administered by the Interior, Labor, Agriculture, and War Departments. The corpsmen, who served up to 18 months, were housed in special camps and provided room and board and a \$30 per month allotment, \$25 of which went directly to their families. The AFL had opposed the bill because it considered the pay inadequate. To mollify organized labor, FDR appointed Robert Fechner, a vice president of the International Association of Machinists, as Director. This appointment would prove to be unfortunate, at least in regard to racial policy in the CCC.²⁸

Fechner, who was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and served as Director until his death in 1939, oversaw the quartet of agencies that operated the CCC and set the overall policies. To those who expressed

concern over the four-fold division of authority, Roosevelt responded: “the Army and the Forest Service will really run the show and Fechner will ‘go along’ and give everybody satisfaction and confidence.” The U.S. Army served the vital role of administering and maintaining the camps. The USES enrolled men for the camps, Interior supervised projects in national parks, and Agriculture oversaw work in the national forests. Eventually over 2 million young men—200,000 of them blacks—served in the CCC. It was one of FDR’s most popular programs. However, it was a mixed blessing for African Americans, representing, for them, both the best and the worst of the New Deal.²⁹

After the Army enrolled the initial contingent of Corpsmen in April 1933, the USES took over that job and established recruiting quotas for each state based on population. While black participation was low at first, eventually the number reached the national benchmark proportionality level of 10 percent. Nominal parity was misleading, however, as black youths were disproportionately represented in the ranks of the economically disadvantaged.³⁰

The low black participation rates in the early stages of the program were largely a result of discrimination. Georgia, with a 36 percent black population, sent no blacks at all to the Corps in the early weeks. Mississippi included less than 2 percent blacks in its June 1933 contingent, despite a statewide black proportion of 50 percent. In Dallas County, Alabama, white enrollees outnumbered blacks 2 to 1 despite the fact that the population was 75 percent black. In California, black participation was initially low due to a failure to publicize the CCC. Most blacks there learned about it through word of mouth.³¹

The existence of discrimination in recruitment generated counter-measures, some more effective than others. The CCC’s establishing law decreed that “no person shall be excluded on account of race,

color or creed.” To enforce this requirement, Fechner instituted mandatory quotas based on proportional enrollment of blacks in each state. However, local administrators could get around these measures and deny blacks admission, claiming falsely that the state had already met the quota. To counter these deceptions, Frances Perkins instructed state employment agencies to avoid discrimination in recruitment. She telegraphed one governor to observe the anti-discrimination clause of the law and to look into allegations that it was not being observed.³²

On another occasion, however, Perkins consented to discrimination at the CCC. In July 1935, Fechner asked USES Director Frank Persons to cut off the number of black recruits in Texas at 3,200 for the year. He argued that a limited number of projects existed in Texas to which black CCC corpsmen could be assigned without provoking strong objections from local white populations. Persons drafted a letter to Fechner objecting to this request as a violation of the CCC law. Secretary Perkins, for reasons unknown, supported Fechner and informed Persons, “I prefer that this letter not be sent.” The limitation on Texas enrollments stood.³³

The treatment of black recruits in the CCC camps was often unsatisfactory. In the South, black corpsmen were assigned to separate camps. Elsewhere, the races were initially assigned to mixed camps. However, the existence of camps with black corpsmen bothered nearby communities, particularly in areas of the West where few African Americans lived. Because of such community concerns and also in response to allegations of racial strife within the camps, Fechner toured the Western CCC region in the summer of 1935. He presumably saw what he wanted to see, since he concluded that race relations were a problem and immediately asked the Army to segregate the races into separate camps. The Army complied and ordered complete segregation, except when there were not enough

African American corpsmen to complete a full CCC company. To deal with community complaints about black corpsmen from out-of-state, the order required that blacks be assigned only to camps in their states of residence. Thereafter, Jim Crow conditions prevailed throughout the CCC. To further assuage the sensitivities of white communities, Fechner relocated black camps from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, Springfield, Illinois, and the vicinities of various cities in New York and New Jersey to more remote sites. In its zeal to limit contact with local whites, the Army established isolated black camps deep in federal lands.³⁴

Discrimination was also rife in the staffing of the camps. The need in the black camps for a complement of camp officers, Army doctors, teachers, clerical staff, and service workers seemed like an opportunity for blacks, both military and civilian. However, the Army held a long-standing policy of never putting black officers into positions where they might be able to issue orders to or minister to whites. Fechner supported the Army, and black officers were initially ruled out in the camps. Walter White of the NAACP and Emmett Scott, the black World War I era War Department official (see Chapter 1) now at Howard University, led a movement to force the CCC to allow black officers and military doctors to serve. FDR ordered the Army to permit this suggestion, but only a handful of black officers were eventually called to duty at only two all-black camps.³⁵

The CCC provided an extensive education and training program, with general educational and vocational classes for corpsmen in a wide range of subjects. However, the Interior Department's Office of Education, which administered the educational programs, did not oppose the Army's discriminatory racial policies. As a result, blacks were initially excluded from staff positions in the training program. After Harold Ickes protested vehemently to Army Secretary Dern,

the Army relented and allowed the appointment of black educational advisers in most of the all-black camps.³⁶

Despite the existence of a significant degree of discrimination, a substantial number of young black men were allowed to receive the benefits of the CCC. The program eliminated a significant amount of illiteracy and probably reduced the level of juvenile delinquency in the black community. Except for training provided only to blacks in so-called “Negro occupations,” such as cooking and serving, both races received the same training, which focused on high-skill occupations. Training did not always translate into appropriate employment for blacks, however. Most black alumni in the California CCC found jobs as laborers. Blacks were appointed to positions of responsibility as officers and educators, although they were limited to service in the black camps. At the intangible level, the program buoyed the spirits of the young black enrollees and provided them with a measure of social and economic security.³⁷

In the Federal Departments

While the “alphabet soup” of agencies born of the First New Deal was wrestling with issues of racial fairness, the Cabinet Departments began to deal with long-standing fairness issues of their own and to involve blacks in policy-making. As he had in the PWA, Harold Ickes strove to make the Interior Department a model of non-discrimination. Aside from Ickes’s personal interest in racial justice, it made historical sense for his Department to take the lead on this issue. Besides being responsible for Indians on their reservations and for other minorities on island territories, Interior had long managed several institutions that specifically served blacks. These included Howard University, the Freedmen’s Hospital, and St.

Elizabeth's Hospital for the Indigent, all in Washington, D.C., Ickes appointed several white racial progressives to top staff positions in the Department. Notable among them was Louis Glavis, who headed the Inspection Division. Glavis was already performing a similar duty at the PWA. Nathan Margold, a former U.S. Attorney who had done a study for the NAACP on the denial of citizenship rights to blacks, was appointed Departmental Solicitor.³⁸

In March 1933 Ickes ordered removal of "Whites Only" and "Colored Only" signs at cafeterias, restrooms, and drinking fountains in the Interior Department. He also banned discrimination in hiring practices. When the park system in Washington, D.C., came under his jurisdiction in June 1933, he desegregated all public parks. Ickes was, however, forced to bow to public sentiment and did not integrate swimming pools or golf courses.³⁹

The Department of Interior rose quickly from role model to policy leader on racial affairs with the appointment in the summer of 1933 of a "special assistant on the economic status of Negroes." This appointment came about after the NAACP pressured FDR to take action on behalf of the African American population. Simultaneously, Julius Rosenwald, who headed a fund he established in 1919 to aid minority groups, recommended to Roosevelt that he appoint an adviser to the Administration to represent blacks in the planning and administration of the program for economic recovery. Roosevelt, however, feared that appointing such an adviser would alienate congressional Southern Democrats.

Ickes and Rosenwald worked out a way to set up the new position.⁴⁰ Prompted by Rosenwald, as well as by his own racial sympathies, Ickes offered to house the function in his Department. FDR did not object, but there was a problem with funding this new position. Roosevelt had drastically pared back the regular budget to

find money for the economic recovery program. Ickes had to cut his own Department's budget in half while he administered the massive PWA. It would have been difficult to obtain funding from Congress for the position. Rosenwald solved the dilemma by agreeing to pay for the position out of his own pocket.

Rosenwald recommended Clark Foreman, the Rosenwald Fund's research director, for the post. Ickes welcomed the idea and appointed Foreman as his "Adviser on Negro Affairs." Foreman was a young white Southerner who had worked with the Georgia Commission for Interracial Cooperation. Roy Wilkins of the NAACP responded negatively when Ickes did not appoint a black to the most important position in the government dealing with race. Ickes defused the NAACP's opposition by creating two additional positions (also paid for by Rosenwald) under Foreman specifically to be filled by blacks. One was for an assistant and the other, a secretary. Ickes appointed Robert Weaver, a young Harvard economist (who went on to a distinguished public and academic career), to the assistant position.⁴¹

The first concrete accomplishment of Foreman's group was to convince other agencies to appoint black affairs advisers. Among those who were then brought into the government were Robert L. Vann, editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, in the Justice Department; Eugene Kinckle Jones, Executive Secretary of the National Urban League, at the Department of Commerce; and Lawrence A. Oxley, an experienced social worker and labor mediator, at the Department of Labor. Working with the Interior Department group, these advisers pressed for fair consideration of the needs of blacks in the recovery program.

With the advisers providing leadership, treatment of black career federal employees in many agencies besides Interior began to improve. More "Colored Only" signs came down, and entire agencies

were integrated, some of them demolishing racial dividing walls put in place during the Wilson Administration. The Civil Service Commission ruled that applicants for federal employment no longer had to submit a photograph with their application. However, the CSC retained the “rule of three” whereby employers interviewed three qualified job candidates at a time. An employer was free to hire any one of them or reject all three, without explanation or recourse. Despite this regressive rule, black employment in FDR’s first two terms grew from 50,000 to 150,000. The black percentage of the rapidly expanding federal workforce doubled, from 5 to 10 percent, thereby attaining rough proportionality in relation to whites. The bulk of these jobs were in what were often called “Negro occupations”—janitors, chauffeurs, and elevator operators, for example—but many blacks also worked as clerks and secretaries. A number were hired at the professional level as architects, engineers, lawyers, and librarians. In addition, FDR appointed over one hundred blacks to administrative and patronage posts, a number far exceeding that of any previous Administration.⁴²

Reflecting the unprecedented role of African Americans in making national policy, in January 1934, Ickes established the “Interdepartmental Group Concerned with the Special Problems of Negroes,” composed of the growing body of special advisers in the various departments. It was led by Clark Foreman and Robert Weaver. Previously the two had suggested the establishment of a “National Advisory Board on Negro Welfare.” Ickes had vetoed that proposal because he feared that the name would make it a red flag to segregationists. He believed an “Interdepartmental Group” would sound much less threatening. The purpose of the Group was to organize and rationalize federal policies affecting blacks and to promote programs on their behalf. Members began meeting with white

representatives from numerous departments and New Deal agencies, but the innocuous name of the Group did not shield it from significant resistance to its ideas. Most agencies soon dropped out, and it held its fourth and last meeting on June 1, 1934. However, a precedent had been set for the eventual emergence of a more influential body: the “Black Cabinet” (see below).⁴³

One agency that gave full cooperation to the Interdepartmental Group and fully shared its goals was the Labor Department. Secretary Perkins desegregated the Department’s cafeterias, where white and black employees had been kept apart by having one area for manual laborers—who were mostly black—and another for white collar workers—who were mostly white. Perkins canceled a plan by the Department to fire black elevator operators and replace them with whites. She noted that in the 1920s, whites had scorned jobs of this nature. She added a total of 129 black employees to the Department of Labor’s rolls, many of them not in “Negro occupations.”

Perkins also attempted to see that the USES treated black job applicants fairly. Early on, she ordered that, in states with large black populations, there should be blacks on the USES staff in local offices. Southern Members of Congress closely monitored the operations of the USES, particularly its offices in their region. From its inception, these Congresspersons constantly pressured the USES to accept Jim Crow practices in the South. As a result, and despite Perkins’s call for equal treatment, the USES bowed to pressure and began accepting employer requests that it refer only white candidates for a given position. Blacks objected strenuously to this practice, which became a bone of contention between civil rights groups and the USES until the 1960s.

In an effort to shed light on the situation of black workers in America, Perkins had the Department undertake and publish a

number of special studies. One of the first products was an article by Robert Weaver, published in the *Monthly Labor Review* (MLR), the journal of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). In his article, Weaver contradicted the common notion that relief rolls were over-loaded with blacks because these workers lacked ability and initiative. Throughout the 1930s the MLR published a series of articles and reports on black labor, covering such topics as migration, restrictions on black employment, problems of black youth, and blacks in federal relief programs.

While the PWA was primarily Harold Ickes's responsibility, the Labor Department had an interest in assuring fair hiring practices in that program. Regarding a PWA-sponsored construction project for housing in the largely African American south side of Chicago, Perkins was made aware that black workers were not obtaining a fair share of employment. To see that the situation was rectified, she sent BLS Commissioner Isador Lubin to meet with the Chicago building trades unions and contractors association. Lubin presented them with a fair hiring plan that Ickes had seen and approved. It was based largely on Ickes's fair hiring policy of 1933 and represented a relaxation of straight proportional hiring in that it specified black employment in the project in relation to black participation in specific trades. These rates were usually lower than the black percentage of the general population in toto. This formula resulted in fewer construction jobs for blacks. Lubin summarized the Labor Department's plan in a March 27, 1935, letter to Ickes:

[The formula] provided for the allocation of jobs for Negroes according to the ratio that prevailed between white and Negro artisans in the Building Trades in Chicago as shown by the census of 1930. That ratio

showed that 13 percent of the unskilled jobs and 3.5 percent of the skilled jobs should go to Negroes. The Building Trades representative undertook to arrange that in the event the contract was awarded to a contractor who had an agreement with organized labor, the above mentioned percentages of the payroll should be paid to Negroes. They further agreed that the proportion of the jobs to be given to the various crafts should be related to the ratio of Negroes to whites in the various skilled crafts. This ratio varied from 1.3 percent for electricians to 11 percent for plasterers and cement finishers. In those instances where there are no Negro employees in a given craft union, an arrangement would be made for the granting of working permits to a number of Negro workers sufficient to make possible the employment of the necessary percentage of persons.

Lubin won agreement from both labor and management to carry out a fair hiring plan along these lines, and he also won the support of key black leaders who had been involved in the discussions.⁴⁴

At the request of the black community, Perkins appointed an African American to advise the Labor Department on black issues. Previously she had sent a white representative to several black labor conferences and had appointed a Departmental committee to study the health and welfare of blacks. In early 1934, she appointed Lawrence A. Oxley to serve as a black issues adviser and gave him the official title of Director of the new Division of Negro Labor (DNL). Oxley was a former social worker employed at that time as a labor mediator with the Department's Conciliation Service. As DNL Director, he reported to Isador Lubin.

Modeled partly on the World War I Division of Negro Economics but less extensive in scope, the DNL had several tasks. One was to serve as liaison with black groups and unions and maintain communications with the large body of unorganized black workers. Oxley advised the BLS, USES, Women's Bureau, and other Departmental agencies. His "Weekly Progress Reports" to Lubin indicated frequent meetings and contacts throughout the government on civil rights issues, as well as numerous speaking engagements at black schools and conferences. He also continued to work on special assignments for the Conciliation Service, conducting an extensive investigation into black participation in organized labor focused on the construction trades.⁴⁵

Like the DNE, the Division of Negro Labor organized numerous state conferences on black labor problems. The goal was to encourage the states both to develop plans for assuring that blacks would receive their fair share of jobs and to devote special attention to the racial attitudes and misunderstandings that might interfere with this goal. In a letter inviting the governor of Alabama to participate in a conference, Oxley noted: "These facts [of racial friction] must be recognized locally as well as nationally, and they must be dealt with in a statesmanlike manner." An indication of the impact of the conferences can be seen in a newspaper report on a 1939 conference of black and white leaders and officials in North Carolina organized by Oxley and the governor. Reporter William Howland wrote that, although it was too early to know specifically what the conference accomplished, "it is certain that it focussed ... the thought of leaders of both races on an ever-growing problem."⁴⁶

The “Second New Deal”

During the off-year Congressional elections in the fall of 1934, instead of losing seats, as was normal for the incumbent party after winning the White House, the Democrats gained 10 seats in each house. Part of the reason for this gain was a shift in the black vote away from the Republican Party. FDR’s dramatic actions and engaging manner as president attracted blacks’ interest and support. His Inaugural Address, which asserted that “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” resonated with African Americans suffering from an ongoing wave of lynching and other terrorism. They were also encouraged by the fact that they were included in New Deal programs. For the first time, Democratic candidates made a major effort to win black votes, and Democratic political machines courted black leaders. As a result, Democrats gained a majority of the black vote for the first time in history. They even elected the first black Democrat to the House of Representatives when Arthur Mitchell defeated the incumbent black Republican Oscar DePriest in Chicago. The election gave blacks much greater influence in Washington.⁴⁷ It also weakened the hold of the Southern Democrats on the Congress, enhancing both the prospects for stronger relief and recovery efforts and the chances of blacks for fairer treatment and greater benefit from federal programs.

Strengthened by the 1934 election, the Roosevelt Administration pursued the “Second New Deal” which, in many ways, turned out to be more beneficial for African Americans. This was fortunate because the numbers of blacks in need had been augmented by thousands of displaced tenant farmers. They were victims of the well-intended efforts of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), a New Deal program that sought to protect American farms by preventing

over-production and by shielding them from ruinously low commodity prices. The subsidies paid by the AAA were intended for farm-owners and tenant-farmers alike, but the unintended consequence was that a large number of owners replaced their tenants with hired hands so they could retain all the benefits for themselves. Many of the former tenants were then forced onto the relief rolls.⁴⁸

By 1935, New Dealers had decided to take more forceful steps to stimulate the economy and provide jobs. Beginning that year, the government engaged in a massive and historically unprecedented intervention, eventually spending \$14 billion to help the needy unemployed. Roosevelt's goal became to "weed ... out the over-privileged" and "lift ... up the underprivileged."⁴⁹

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt began paying even closer attention to black issues. Through friendships with Mary McLeod Bethune, president of the National Council of Negro Women, and Walter White of the NAACP, she learned more about their concerns and became an advocate for their causes. Bethune and White became frequent guests of hers at the White House. She developed a particularly close friendship with Bethune and reportedly "would run down the drive to meet her."⁵⁰

Eleanor Roosevelt fully utilized her unique status in Washington and became an influential friend of black Americans. Through her, black leaders made their views known to the President. She allied herself with Ickes, Hopkins, and Perkins and pressured other officials to promote equal rights in their programs. She also won a number of federal appointments for prominent blacks, including Bethune, who served in the National Youth Administration (see below).⁵¹

The Works Progress Administration

Armed with the mandate of the 1934 elections, FDR proposed to institutionalize work-relief spending and fund it on an unprecedented scale to overcome the stubborn Depression. In Roosevelt's January 1935 State of the Union Address, he proposed a \$4.88 billion program to help the needy unemployed.⁵² In April 1935, the overwhelmingly Democratic Congress gave him the requested amount in the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act (ERAA). It was then the largest single federal spending bill in history. While most of the money went to existing programs, such as the PWA, CCC, and various rural-aid agencies, \$1.4 billion was allocated to a new agency, the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Conceived and headed by Harry Hopkins and established by Executive Order (E.O.) 7034 in May 1935, the WPA was originally intended to oversee and assist in the "progress" of the other programs funded by the ERAA and also to develop "small useful projects" of its own.⁵³

Almost an afterthought, the "small useful projects" quickly came to dominate the WPA. Under Harry Hopkins, in its first five years, the agency spent almost \$8 billion on a wide variety of labor-intensive public works, as well as on educational and cultural projects. It employed an average of 2.2 million men and women at any one time, with peaks as high as 4 million. Ninety percent of those hired had to be from relief rolls, to assure that benefits went to the neediest and also to bring about a shift that the Administration was seeking—from relief to employment programs. Discrimination was banned in the WPA, and blacks benefited significantly from its programs, especially in places like Harlem, where it was one of the main providers of income. Black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote about a song he heard in the streets of Harlem in those years: "You buy my groceries / and pay my rent. / Mr. Roosevelt, you're my man!"

The cumulative result of thousands of local WPA projects was a massive upgrade of the nation's public facilities. By June 1940, WPA workers had constructed over half a million miles of roads and streets, built over 4,000 school buildings, expanded 30,000 more, created 132 new hospitals, improved 1,670 others, laid 18,000 miles of sewer lines, and built 39 electric power plants.⁵⁴

A WPA program known as Federal Project Number 1 contributed to an ongoing cultural and intellectual renaissance in the African American community by putting thousands of unemployed musicians, artists, actors, writers, and historians to work. Through research, writings, performances, and works of art relating to American history and culture, they documented and preserved diverse ethnic folkways that were rapidly fading in many regions. The WPA also provided a training-ground for young artists, performers, and writers.⁵⁵

The thousands of white-collar and millions of blue-collar workers recruited to the WPA were generally hired without regard to race. Each state's allotment of WPA jobs was proportionate to its number of able-bodied workers on relief, and 90 percent of new hires had to show financial need. On May 20, 1935, FDR issued E.O. 7046 setting rules and standards for the WPA. This Executive Order guaranteed that qualified applicants "shall not be discriminated against on any grounds whatsoever." Hopkins elaborated on the Order in 1936 when he barred discrimination against qualified and eligible WPA job candidates "on any grounds whatsoever, such as race, religion, or political affiliation."⁵⁶ Congress codified the WPA anti-discrimination policy into law in 1939, making violation a felony punishable by a \$1,000 fine or one year in prison.⁵⁷ In a number of projects, the WPA went beyond racial proportionalism and hired blacks and whites in equal numbers. The WPA was so adamant about equal treatment that it omitted information on workers' race, religion, and politics from

reports and personnel records. While well-meaning in its intent, these omissions made it difficult for researchers to accurately gauge the effectiveness of the WPA's non-discrimination policies.⁵⁸

Like other New Deal job programs, the WPA prescribed a wage schedule and set restrictions on the hours of work and duration of employment. In line with the WPA's dual goal of reducing relief rolls without competing with private industry for workers, it developed what it called a "security wage" structure. The average monthly wage was set at \$50, double the average relief payment but well below the wages offered in industry. E.O. 7046 set the maximum hours of work at 8 hours per day and 40 hours per week. In addition, Hopkins set a monthly maximum of 140 hours and a maximum term of service of 18 months.

E.O. 7046 also established schedules of earnings for four skill classes, ranging from unskilled to professional, in each of four national regions. There were demographic sub-schedules for each region to allow for local rural-urban variations in the cost of living. As was the case with the CWA and PWA, the Deep South (Region IV) had the lowest wage scales in the program. The greatest pay disparities between the South and other regions existed in the category of unskilled jobs in rural areas. This distribution had a disproportionately negative effect on African Americans. To reduce the wage gap, Region IV was abolished in 1936 and merged into the higher-paying Upper South (Region III), adopting the latter's higher wage scale.⁵⁹

The WPA helped African American workers and the black community both financially and psychologically. Hundreds of thousands were taken off welfare rolls every year and given useful, if short-term, employment at decent wages. The range of projects and services that helped blacks was broad and varied. Most of the jobs for

blacks and whites alike were as laborers in infrastructure improvement. But there were numerous skilled and creative positions as well. For example, in addition to upgrading the physical plant in school systems, the WPA developed a national adult education system that trained tens of thousands of blacks, many of them acquiring literacy in the process. Thousands of blacks were employed as teachers. In Harlem alone, there were 34 WPA education centers. WPA-run housekeeping services employed single female heads-of-household to help the elderly and the incapacitated with their domestic chores and provide basic nursing services.⁶⁰

The Federal Arts Projects of the WPA assisted many African Americans involved in cultural activities. In New York City, the Federal Music Program, under famed impresario Nikolai Sokoloff, hired talented black musicians and sponsored performances of works by William Grant Still, Clarence Cameron White, and other black composers. Black writer Ralph Ellison, later the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Invisible Man*, worked in the Federal Writers' Project researching black history and culture. While the New York Writers' Project never published a book specifically on black life, it did include material on this subject in its series of local area guides. In addition, the Federal Writers' Project enabled Ellison and other black writers both to survive and to develop material they used later in their own works. The Federal Arts Project hired thousands nationwide and, under pressure from the Harlem Artists' Guild, set proportional quotas for blacks.

Participating black artists like Jacob Lawrence, creator of an epic series of 60 paintings depicting the Great Migration, produced many more works illustrating and celebrating black history and identity. Art schools in Harlem and Chicago's south side trained a generation of black artists and sculptors. The Federal Theater Project produced 81

new plays, 14 dealing with racial issues. The Negro Theater Project in New York produced works by black playwrights and an all-black version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Federal Theater Project pageants depicted figures important in black history, such as John Brown, Nat Turner, and Harriet Tubman. However, vociferous congressional opposition and allegations of Communist influence led to cancellation of several productions and ultimately to the demise of the Federal Theater Project in 1939.⁶¹

To help assure fair treatment for African Americans in the WPA, Harry Hopkins saw to it that significant numbers of black professionals were involved in the oversight and administration of the effort. He appointed blacks to key WPA positions across the country to counteract the tendency of local government officials toward bias in the distribution of WPA jobs. Ninety-one blacks were employed in the national WPA office, including an administrative assistant and several other top staff. To oversee its own national equal treatment effort, the WPA placed black advisers in the field and established a network of national, state, and local advisory boards.⁶²

By 1939, approximately one million black workers and dependents had received significant income through the WPA.⁶³ Approximately 14 percent of all workers certified for continued WPA employment were black. The WPA was truly seen by many black people as a godsend. It not only provided economic benefits but empowered blacks to feel more included in the mainstream of national life.⁶⁴

However, masked by the favorable nationwide data on WPA recruitment of blacks were significant regional differences. New York City was among the leaders in meeting or exceeding WPA hiring goals for blacks, a logical finding since northern states generally had the highest black participation rates. In 1943, sociologist Richard

Sterner's book *The Negro's Share* provided detailed findings on black and white employment in the WPA. Sterner found that in northern states with large black populations, the percentage of blacks in WPA employment was far higher than their percentages either of general population or of all unemployed workers. However, in the southern states, black WPA and unemployment percentages were fairly close, and the percentage of blacks in WPA jobs was usually far below their proportion of total unemployed. Rural blacks were the hardest hit group.⁶⁵

Black female heads-of-household in the rural South were less able to obtain WPA jobs than their male counterparts. This discrimination was partly the result of local Jim Crow laws that allowed black and white men to work together but did not allow racial integration among women. Also, local whites often opposed offering WPA jobs because they might lure black women away from employment as domestics.⁶⁶

Nationally, average wages for blacks in the WPA were lower than those of whites, a disparity partly the result of demographics. Blacks were concentrated in the South, the area with the lowest wage scale. In addition, blacks were disproportionately classified as unskilled workers, a group which was always at the bottom of the pay scale.⁶⁷

Some relief agencies applied different standards of eligibility to the races when referring candidates for WPA jobs. They sometimes denied jobs to qualified blacks on the spurious grounds that black workers were accustomed to a lower standard of living than qualified whites. Similarly, blacks who refused low paid private sector jobs were more likely to be denied a WPA job than whites in the same circumstances. Under WPA eligibility rules, workers who refused private employment at local prevailing wages for a given type of work were not supposed to be hired by the WPA for the same work. Whites

were often excused from this requirement and, when they turned down private jobs, were placed in WPA jobs that might otherwise have gone to blacks.⁶⁸

Local governmental bodies were frequently able to ignore Washington's anti-discrimination policy because the WPA had a limited ability to enforce its rules. The WPA was largely focused on getting considerable numbers of people into jobs: oversight of relief agencies and project sponsors was not a major concern. When the WPA did pry into these bodies, the attention was often received with hostility. As a result, it tended not to interfere in the business of these local governments.⁶⁹

Throughout its existence, the WPA had to deal with public hostility, congressional criticism, and constricted budgets. Dubious about long-term relief employment and under pressure to balance the federal budget, FDR authorized a huge cut in the WPA budget in 1936.⁷⁰ Fiorello LaGuardia fruitlessly implored FDR to roll back the cuts as criticism mounted and thousands of enrollees organized protests. A 19-year-old black woman named Catherine Brunson shocked the nation when she jumped five floors to her death after she learned that her husband had lost his WPA job. Some saw the WPA and its network of local government agencies as a huge Democratic political machine. Civil rights groups criticized discrimination in the WPA in the South. Conservatives lampooned non-productive "leaf-raking" jobs and charged that arts projects dwelled excessively on social unrest and promoted radical causes. In 1939, Congress reoriented the WPA toward large-scale public works projects and cut its budget sharply. As was the case with most other New Deal programs, the WPA and its mission of recovery and relief became irrelevant during the World War II emergency, and it soon went out of existence.⁷¹

Mary McLeod Bethune, the NYA, and the “Black Cabinet”

A companion agency to the WPA that also incorporated aspects of the CCC was the National Youth Administration (NYA). Created on June 26, 1935, under E.O. 7086, its purpose was to serve in-school and unemployed youths. The NYA owed its existence, in large part, to Eleanor Roosevelt. She wanted to establish a broad program that would help all young people, not just males (e.g., the CCC), as they sought to complete their education while struggling to survive the Depression. Five million youths were out of work in 1935, representing 25 percent of the out-of-school group. Around 3 million were on relief. Harry Hopkins, Aubrey Williams, Frances Perkins, and others were thinking along similar lines as Mrs. Roosevelt and presented their ideas to FDR in the spring of 1935. While the exact nature of Mrs. Roosevelt’s role is not clear, she certainly was deeply involved in the planning for the NYA and played a key role in convincing FDR to approve its establishment.⁷²

FDR appointed Aubrey Williams to head the new agency. The NYA took over the FERA program to aid college students, initiated assistance to high school students, and provided public works jobs for youths who were not in school. The NYA also supported apprenticeships, vocational guidance programs, and recreational opportunities for youths. Buttressed by a national advisory committee and a national network of 1,500 state and local committees, the NYA ultimately provided over 4 million youths with jobs and educational assistance.⁷³

Not only did the NYA serve more young people than the CCC, which helped just 2 million, it was preeminent among all New Deal agencies in its effectiveness in serving African American youths. Much of its success was attributable to Aubrey Williams and Eleanor

Roosevelt. Williams worked to assure that black youths would be equally compensated and fully included in training that would enable them to move into skilled and non-traditional jobs. He directed local administrators in all regions to be scrupulously fair to all applicants and installed black administrators in heavily black districts.⁷⁴ Eleanor Roosevelt worked closely with Williams, who maintained dual involvement with the WPA until 1938. She made a point of knowing as much as possible about the agency and regularly passed information and suggestions along to Williams. In addition, she worked to defend the NYA from charges of radicalism and helped maintain smooth relations between the operating staff and the sometimes difficult Williams.⁷⁵

The primary credit for the NYA's success on behalf of blacks, however, goes to Mary McLeod Bethune.⁷⁶ She was initially appointed to the NYA's advisory committee and then, with the support of Eleanor Roosevelt, as director of the Division of Negro Affairs (DNA). Born in 1875 in South Carolina and one of seventeen children of two former slaves, Bethune was the only child in her family to attend college, earning her way to graduation from the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. Starting out as a teacher in bible schools, she became a leading educator and founded Bethune-Cookman College, a black teachers and industrial education school in Daytona, Florida. Active in the NUL and the NAACP and the founder of the National Council of Negro Women, by the time of FDR's election, she was the most famous and highly regarded black woman in the country.

Under Williams's and Bethune's leadership, the NYA performed its mission by means of two operational divisions. The larger of the two was the Student Work Program. It provided part-time jobs for students 16 to 24 years of age who needed assistance in order to stay enrolled in high school or college. The jobs for college students

were related as closely as possible to their interests and course-work. Almost all of the 120 existing black colleges participated in the program. Out of 440,000 youths employed, 42,900 (9.7 percent) were black. While not applying a quota, the program still achieved rough racial proportionality.⁷⁷

The smaller division of the NYA was the Out-of-School Work Program. It provided income and work experience for unemployed youths through part-time jobs in a wide range of occupations, from construction and production work to clerical, professional, and technical assistance. Of 312,000 employed in January 1940, 40,200 (12.9 percent) were black. In addition to providing regular part-time jobs, the NYA developed a program of resident work centers, largely in the South. A total of 29,000 youths, 13 percent of them blacks, lived in these centers where they also worked and received vocational training. In a reflection of Jim Crow practices in the South, black participants in the work centers were segregated into separate Negro Resident Training Centers. This was one of the few racial blemishes in the history of the NYA.⁷⁸

Over 80,000 black students and unemployed youths benefited from the NYA. Blacks participated at rates equal to or exceeding their proportion of the local youth population in most locations. Unlike the PWA, the NYA's wage scales were absolutely identical in all parts of the country, and blacks were paid exactly the same as whites. Bethune's goal for the DNA was "the adaptation of the program to the needs of Negro people and the interpreting of the program to them." Her staff of seven implemented and reported on the program and served as liaisons with local NYA programs. Blacks were well represented throughout the DNA. Augmenting the Division's work in Washington, Supervisors of Negro Affairs operated in 27 states, blacks served on advisory committees in 23 states and on numerous

local planning boards, and there were more than 500 black project managers.⁷⁹

The combination of Bethune's position in the NYA—which made her the highest ranking African American in the Roosevelt Administration—and her access to the White house enabled her to be a highly effective advocate for the African American population in the New Deal. Bethune saw to it that black workers were both beneficiaries and also administrators and policy-makers in New Deal programs. According to her associate, Dorothy Height, a black civil rights activist who later headed the National Council of Negro Women, Bethune was bold about seeking meetings with President Roosevelt. When she wanted to see him, she would simply tell Eleanor Roosevelt, “The President really needs to see me,” and Bethune would usually get her meeting, if not her way.⁸⁰

With Bethune's help, the number of black advisers in the Roosevelt Administration eventually swelled to over 100. Bethune began to gather this young professional group at her home on Friday evenings to discuss black issues. The press called them the “Black Cabinet,” after similar bodies that had advised presidents beginning in the late Nineteenth Century. The main difference from the past was that now there were far more blacks in high appointive positions than ever before. It was also known as the “Black Brain Trust,” echoing FDR's “Brain Trust” of New Deal planners.⁸¹

The Black Cabinet brought about greater awareness of black problems on the part of both the government and the public. Although the Black Cabinet initially lacked official status and kept no minutes, it provided a valuable forum and breeding grounds for policy ideas. Based on its deliberations, members developed ideas for further discussion, presented ideas in their departments, and worked with the press to get information out to the public. The black “Cabineteers,” as

they were dubbed, vetoed a proposal in the Administration to create a federal “Negro Bureau” to centralize all initiatives regarding race. They may have seen it as a potential rival to their own influence in Washington. In 1936, they were officially recognized as the Federal Council on Negro Affairs, but “Black Cabinet” remained the unofficial name.⁸²

The Council (i.e., the Black Cabinet) served as a liaison between the Administration, civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and NUL, and labor leaders like A. Philip Randolph, founder of the all-black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Besides helping the White House keep in touch with the black community, the Council also transmitted a detailed picture of operations in the White House to the black leadership. The Cabinetees worked closely with colleagues outside of government and joined with them when needed to protest particular policies and bring pressure against the appropriate officials.⁸³

With support from the Black Cabinet and the NYA, Mary McLeod Bethune organized two government conferences on black welfare and black youth. A precursor to these efforts came in 1935 when the Joint Committee on National Recovery organized a conference at Harvard University on the economic status of black people that presented dramatic testimony from black and white workers to 500 scholars and students. This conference publicized the plight of African Americans during the New Deal and helped set the stage for the later federal conferences. Held in 1937 and 1939, the Conferences on the Problems of the Negro and Negro Youth covered employment and training problems and issues, relations with labor unions, black education, and federal employment opportunities. The conferences made numerous recommendations to benefit black workers. For example, the 1937 conference called for establishing a 30-hour workweek to increase

employment of blacks; eliminating discrimination in labor unions; barring federal contracts which involved discrimination; eliminating abuses interfering with fair employment of blacks by the federal government; hiring black supervisors and managers in every federal department and every region; and appointing blacks to federal and state committees on apprentice training.⁸⁴

Second New Deal Legislation, the Courts, and Blacks

Among the more significant accomplishments of the Second New Deal in relation to working blacks were several important laws which, while not aimed at them, nonetheless provided direct or indirect benefits. The 1935 National Labor Relations Act, also known as the Wagner Act, guaranteed all workers the right to form unions and bargain with their employers. At the time, it was doubtful that the law would be of any help to blacks. It specifically excluded agricultural and household workers, representing 65 percent of black workers, and a provision to prohibit unions from discriminating against or excluding blacks had been defeated. However, the Wagner Act empowered the new Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), established in 1935 as the Committee on Industrial Organization, to aggressively organize whole industries into single unions, rather than following the model of the AFL and organizing each craft into its own union. The CIO concentrated on the automotive, steel, meat-packing, and other relatively non-unionized industries. In most of these industries, blacks had become a significant part of the workforce. Generally speaking, they were welcomed into and treated fairly by the new CIO unions.

To compete with the CIO, the AFL urged its affiliates to also organize blacks and accept them as equals. Even before the Wagner

Act, in early 1935 the AFL had admitted the all-black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, founded in 1925 by the powerful black labor leader A. Philip Randolph, as an affiliate. The result of the competition between the AFL and the CIO to organize workers was that, especially in cases where union representation was determined by elections, thousands of new black union members benefited from good union wage scales, improved benefits, and better working conditions.⁸⁵

A landmark law for all Americans, but especially important for those with limited means, was the Social Security Act of 1935. By providing old age pensions, unemployment insurance, and other benefits, it established a safety net that served the large mass of blacks who had limited resources to carry them through economic hardship and old age. The law was crafted and administered in a generally fair manner, but Social Security had its limitations. Before enactment, Senator Harry Byrd and other Southern Democrats had objected to Title I, which provided for federal oversight of the states as they determined who would receive Social Security payments and how much they would be paid. Byrd and his colleagues saw this language as a threat to state control and feared that it would lead to federal interference with discriminatory southern racial policies. They feared that Washington would be able to deny Social Security funds to any state program that it believed was discriminating against blacks. As a result, the clause in Title I that governed federal control over states was watered down.⁸⁶ In addition, the law excluded most farm-workers, a disproportionately large number of whom were black. Mary McLeod Bethune and others succeeded in broadening the coverage of the law in other areas. Bethune also objected to the small percentage of blacks employed within the Social Security Administration and worked to improve black hiring.⁸⁷

Like the Social Security Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA) was a broad law that benefited many blacks. The FLSA set an initial minimum wage of 25 cents per hour, required payment of time-and-a-half for time worked beyond 8 hours in a day and 40 hours in a week, and eliminated abusive child labor. Restricted to workers engaged in interstate commerce, the law initially excluded farm workers, domestic help, certain transportation workers, and many others. Some white employers protested having to pay blacks a minimum wage and indicated they preferred to hire only white workers for minimum-wage jobs. Initially the law covered about a million blacks, with several million others among the excluded groups. Over the years, Congress steadily broadened the FLSA to cover most of the lowest paid wage groups and it became a wage floor for black workers.⁸⁸

A major shift in the Supreme Court in favor of a greater role for the federal government and in support of the rights of individuals particularly benefited black Americans. Federal courts had blocked earlier attempts to establish labor standards, and the subject was a campaign issue in the 1936 election. When FDR won reelection, he tried to “pack” the anti-New Deal Supreme Court by appointing extra Justices. FDR failed, but the Court subsequently provided several important victories for the New Deal and working blacks. The New Negro Alliance (NNA)—a black activist group formed in 1933 by a group of young college graduates aided by the distinguished lawyer William C. Hastie—had initiated a campaign to picket Washington, D.C., employers who refused to hire blacks. When a federal court issued an injunction against the NNA in a dispute with the Sanitary Grocery Company over black employment, they appealed the case to the Supreme Court. Among the range of arguments the NNA made

was that the proportion of minorities working for a given employer should be close to the proportion of minorities in the local work force. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of their actions on the grounds that such picketing against employers was protected under the Norris-LaGuardia Act, which banned the use of federal court restraining orders in labor disputes. In 1936, Thurgood Marshall—a lawyer with the NAACP and later the first African American appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court—devised a strategy of attacking segregated public schools. He sued to force school districts to provide equivalent salaries to both black and white teachers. The NAACP won several cases in lower federal courts, including a favorable decision eliminating serious underpayment of black teachers in Norfolk, Virginia. The Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal, and these decisions became settled law.⁸⁹

Paralleling the court's racial progressivism, in 1939 Attorney General Frank Murphy established a Civil Rights Section in the Department of Justice. Murphy vowed to initiate "a program of vigilant action in the prosecution of the infringement of [legal] rights." The Civil Rights Section focused initially on protecting black voting rights in the South, for the first time directing the power of the federal government toward eliminating legal sanctions of discrimination.⁹⁰

When Nazi Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, Washington's attention turned to Europe and war. The New Deal effectively came to an end, concluding a period in which the federal government provided significant economic aid to blacks. The agencies charged to provide jobs and relief from Depression-era poverty made an unprecedented effort to do so in a way that was fair to all. Because most of these agencies were discontinued due to the war, the jobs and benefits they provided ended when they did. The coming war, however, created conditions that spawned a historic shift

to a permanent government effort to promote equal opportunities for blacks and all minority workers.

