

# Segregation In

[Adapted from Morris J. MacGregor, Jr.,

## ***A War Policy: Reaffirming Segregation***

The White House tried to adjust the conflicting demands of the civil rights leaders and the Army traditionalists. Eager to placate and willing to compromise, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sought an accommodation by directing the War Department to provide jobs for Negroes in all parts of the Army. The controversy over integration soon became more public, the opponents less reconcilable; in the weeks following the President's meeting with black representatives on 27 September 1940 the Army countered black demands for integration with a statement released by the White House on 9 October. To provide "a fair and equitable basis" for the use of Negroes in its expansion program, the Army planned to accept Negroes in numbers approximate to their proportion in the national population, about 10 percent. Black officers and enlisted men were to serve, as was then customary, only in black units that were to be formed in each major branch, both combatant and noncombatant, including air units to be created as soon as pilots, mechanics, and technical specialists were trained. There would be no racial intermingling in regimental organizations because the practice of separating white and black troops had, the Army staff said, proved satisfactory over a long period of time. To change would destroy morale and impair preparations for national defense.

General Marshall was a powerful advocate of the views of the Army staff. He lived up to the letter of the Army's regulations, consistently supporting measures to eliminate overt discrimination in the wartime Army. At the same time, he rejected the idea that the Army should take the lead in altering the racial mores of the nation.

The effect of segregation on manpower efficiency became apparent only as the Army tried to translate policy into practice. In the face of rising black protest and with direct orders from the White House, the Army had announced that Negroes would be assigned to all arms and branches in the same ratio as whites. Several forces, however, worked against this equitable distribution. During the early months of mobilization the chiefs of those arms and services that had traditionally been all white accepted less than their share of black recruits and thus obliged some organizations, the Quartermaster Corps and the Engineer Corps in particular, to absorb a large percentage of black inductees. The imbalance worsened in 1941.

The Army Air Forces found it easier to absorb the thousands of black enlisted men than to handle the black flying squadrons. The Air Corps, like the Armor and the Artillery branches, was able to form separate squadrons or battalions for black troops, but the Infantry and Cavalry found it difficult to organize the growing number of separate black battalions and regiments. The creation of black divisions was the obvious solution, although this arrangement would run counter to current practice, which was based in part on the Army's experience with the 92d Division in World War I. Convinced of the poor performance of that unit in 1918, the War Department had decided in the 1920's not to form any more black divisions.

Faced with manpower shortages, the Army began to reassess its plan to distribute Negroes proportionately throughout the arms and services. The demand for new service units had soared as the size of the overseas armies grew while black combat units, unwanted by overseas commanders, had



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remained stationed in the United States. The War Department hoped to ease the strain on manpower resources by converting black combat troops into service troops. A notable example was the inactivation of the 2d Cavalry Division upon its arrival in North Africa in March 1944. By trying to justify the conversion, Secretary Stimson only aggravated the controversy. Stimson declared that the decision stemmed from a study of the relative abilities and status of training of the troops in the units available for conversion. If black units were particularly affected, it was because "many of the Negro units have been unable to master efficiently the techniques of modern weapons." Thus, by the end of 1944, the Army had abandoned its attempt to maintain a balance between black combat and service units, and during the rest of the war most Negroes were assigned to service units.

Officer candidate training was the Army's first formal experiment with integration. It proved that even in the face of considerable opposition the Army was willing to abandon its segregation policy when the issues of economy and efficiency were made sufficiently clear and compelling. The Army's second experiment with integration came in part from the need for infantry replacements during the Allied advance across Western Europe in the summer and fall of 1944. General Eisenhower issued a call to the black troops for volunteers to share "the privilege of joining our veteran units at the front to deliver the knockout blow."

All the services developed new racial policies in the immediate postwar period. One pressure felt by all the services was the recently acquired knowledge that the nation's military manpower was not only variable but also limited in quantity. Military efficiency demanded, therefore, that the services not only make the most effective use of available manpower, but also improve its quality. Since Negroes, who made up approximately 10 percent of the population, formed a substantial part of the nation's manpower, they could no longer be considered primarily a source of unskilled labor. They too must be employed appropriately, and to this end a higher proportion of Negroes in the services must be qualified for specialized jobs.

The Navy was the acknowledged pioneer in integration. The Navy's postwar revision of racial policy, like the Army's, was the inevitable result of its World War II experience. Inundated with unskilled and undereducated Negroes in the middle of the war, the Navy had assigned most of these men to segregated labor battalions and was surprised by the racial clashes that followed. The Navy also came to question the waste of the talented Negro in a system that denied him the job for which he was qualified. Unlike the Army, the Navy seriously modified its racial policy in the last year of the war, breaking up some of the large segregated units and integrating Negroes in the specialist and officer training schools, in the WAVES, and finally in the auxiliary fleet and the recruit training centers.

In retrospect, several causes for the elimination of segregation can be identified: the civil rights movement, the quest for military efficiency, and certain individuals within the military establishment who personified America's awakening social conscience.

Segregation officially ended in the active armed forces with the announcement of the Secretary of Defense in 1954 that the last all-black unit had been disbanded. Equal treatment and opportunity would remain an elusive goal for the Department of Defense for years to come. Still, the services, at that point, were the only segment of American society to have integrated, however imperfectly, the races on so large a scale.