CLASSROOM | *9-12 Lessons* :

FDR, A. PHILIP RANDOLPH AND THE DESEGREGATION OF THE DEFENSE INDUSTRIES

Franklin Roosevelt delivers a fireside chat over the radio. Library of Congress

Since September 1939, war had been raging in Europe. Hitler's armies had virtually seized the mainland, so that Great Britain stood alone as the last bastion of democracy on that continent. Hitler's ally in the East, Japan, under the influence of militaristic leaders, had attacked Manchuria and was making aggressive moves on the Pacific Rim. By the summer of 1940 Great Britain was under relentless attack by the German Luftwaffe, and running out of resources. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had convinced the American people, who were mainly in an isolationist mood, that the United States must help supply Great Britain, telling the nation that if it did not, even "fortress America" might fall victim to Hitler's raw aggression. The great industrial potential of the United States was cranked into action, and soon defense industries were pumping out the materiel of war. Furthermore, in the late summer of 1940, the Selective Service Act was passed, a peacetime draft intended to strengthen the military capability of the United States. The president insisted that the young men were simply to be trained: "Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars," he had said in a speech after the first draftee names were drawn. The scudding clouds of war on two continents seemed to belie the statement.

The passage of this draft legislation and the heightened program of rearmament were very much on the mind of Asa Philip Randolph. In that year, Randolph had all of the attributes of

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a charismatic leader: “handsome, tall, imposing in stature and bearing, and possessed of a magnificent speaking voice.”[1] Randolph had an excellent reputation as a smart, no-nonsense labor organizer. In a time when few trade unions offered membership to African Americans and very few black unions existed, Randolph had fought a tough battle to organize overworked Pullman porters into a union. The odds against it were great; it took Randolph’s disciplined focus and leadership ability to achieve success against the Pullman Company’s propaganda and intimidation. When in 1936 the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was accepted as a full international member of the American Federation of Labor, Randolph became one of the most important black leaders in America.[2] On September 16, 1940, when he spoke at the convention of the porters in Madison Square Garden, he was at the peak of his career as a labor organizer. Yet a confluence of historical events was about to broaden his struggle into one involving all black Americans.

First, it troubled Randolph deeply that the boom in the defense industry that had fueled jobs for white workers was not bringing the same benefit to blacks. Government-instituted training programs excluded blacks with the assumption that such training would be wasted on them; even blacks with training were not considered for skilled positions. The general manager of North American Aviation said that “Negroes will be considered only as janitors,” and in Kansas City, Standard Steel informed the Urban League, “We have not had a Negro working in 25 years and do not plan to start now.”[3] More than 250,000 new defense jobs were closed to blacks; in the aircraft industry, for example, only 240 of 107,000 workers were black. Supposedly there was a labor shortage for construction workers, but contractors ignored experienced black painters, plasterers, and bricklayers.[4] Second was the problem of discrimination against African Americans in the armed services. When the country began to rearm in 1940, blacks had poured into recruiting stations, yet they would not find it easy to secure their “right to fight” in this brewing conflict. In an army of one-half million there were only 4,700 blacks–four Negro units altogether, with only one of them being trained for combat. Not a single black served in the U.S. Marines, the Tank Corps, the Signal Corps, or the Army Air Corps.[5] Drafted under a discriminatory quota system, blacks were often trained in segregated camps and almost always assigned support duties–digging ditches, building roads, cooking and serving meals. Blacks stationed in southern towns fared badly, since they were often subjected to abuse and brutality. Even the Red Cross blood supply was segregated.[6]

A Meeting in the White House

At the September 1940 porters’ convention, Randolph spoke eloquently of the need to solve these two problems. In his audience was a distinguished guest, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who was scheduled to speak to the group the following evening. In a conversation with Randolph and other black leaders, she realized that the president’s secretaries had not answered a request for a meeting that Randolph had made. In her remarks that night, she was strong in her support, pledging to make America a place where “everyone, Negro and white, could live in equality and opportunity.” Later, when she returned to her room, she wrote her husband a letter telling him she had just found out that “no meeting was ever held on how colored people can participate” in the armed services. She advised the president that a meeting should be held and that he should be prepared to do something about these issues; otherwise, it would be “bad politically besides being intrinsically wrong.”[7]

On September 27, 1940 that meeting took place with A. Philip Randolph, Walter White, the head of the NAACP, and T. Arnold Hill, an administrator for the Urban League, present. Speaking of the many injustices in the hiring practices of the burgeoning defense industry, these leaders specifically mentioned blacks being excluded from almost all skilled trade unions, again limiting their access to high-paying jobs. They talked with President Roosevelt about the discriminatory practices in the fighting forces. The president answered this complaint by telling the black leaders that progress was being made, since blacks were going to be put into combat services proportionately, and he added, "Which is something."8 Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, present at the meeting, was asked about integrating the navy, and he responded that it would be almost impossible. "We have a factor in the Navy that is not so in the Army, and that is that these men live aboard ship. And in our history we don't take Negroes into a ship's company." Without realizing the stereotyping inherent in the statement, Roosevelt suggested putting Negro bands on white ships so the white sailors could get accustomed to blacks on ships.9 Throughout the conference, Roosevelt listened intently, asked questions, and was cordial. At the end of the meeting, he thanked the leaders for coming and promised to talk with cabinet offices and other government officials about these problems; after that, he would call the civil rights leaders with a follow-up. Unfortunately for blacks, the cabinet and military leadership was opposed to such changes, especially when so many other pressing defense issues were taking center stage. Army Chief of Staff George Marshall had argued, for example, "There is no time for critical experiments which could have a highly destructive effect on morale."10 Not knowing the extent of debates taking place behind office doors, Randolph and the other leaders were greatly encouraged and waited anxiously to hear from the president.

A former waitress working at the Kaiser Shipyards at Richmond, California, 1942. National Archives

A Change in Tactics

They did not hear from the president at all. When word came, it was from FDR's press secretary, Stephen Early, who shared a statement drafted by the War Department with reporters at a press briefing. Essentially it stated that the War Department would not intermingle "colored and white" enlisted personnel in the same regiments. Further, the language of the statement suggested that this report represented a plan upon which "all had agreed." It infuriated Randolph that this statement of the "status quo" was linked to his approval, and he was mobilized to action. Randolph joined with NAACP head Walter White and other black leaders to publicize their true feelings on these issues, and they immediately asked for another conference with the president. That meeting was not forthcoming, and Early refused

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to clarify the statement he had made to the press.[11] Randolph brooded about the president's indifferent response to his sincere efforts to explain the plight of black Americans to those in power. The fundamental unfairness of it made him realize he needed to change his tactics. Before he had always tried to bring about change through letter writing, meetings, and conferences with government leaders, always thinking significant changes could be made. That fall, Randolph and another Pullman porter, Milton Webster, were on a train taking them to Pullman conferences in several major American cities. They talked at length about the recent events, then fell into silence. After a while, Randolph turned to Webster and said, "I think we ought to get 10,000 Negroes and march down Pennsylvania Avenue asking for jobs in defense plants and integration of the armed forces. It would shake up Washington."[12] That was the birth of the March on Washington Movement. Before the trip was over, Randolph was making his proposal in speeches to the Pullman porters. Soon he had formulated a slogan: "We loyal Negro Americans demand the right to work and fight for our country."[13]

Nothing Counts But Pressure

By late 1940, Randolph had a National March on Washington Committee with branches in eighteen cities. Black newspapers started spreading the word; the NAACP, the Urban League, and especially the porters began to publicize and secure financing for the project. In January, Randolph issued his call for a march. The date was set for July 1, 1941. He told blacks, "You possess power, great power," and he laid out the specifics in a bold statement:

> In this period of power politics, nothing counts but pressure, and still more pressure, through the tactic and strategy of broad, organized, aggressive mass action behind the vital and important issues of the Negro. To this end, we propose that ten thousand Negroes MARCH ON WASHINGTON FOR JOBS IN NATIONAL DEFENSE AND EQUAL INTEGRATION IN THE FIGHTING FORCES OF THE UNITED STATES.[14]

By January the president had been alerted that Randolph planned to march on the capital. Despite all of the obvious planning activity in black communities, Roosevelt did not express any outward concern and refused to have another meeting with Randolph in the spring. The message from the president's staff had read: "The pressures of matters of great importance is such that it does not seem probable he will be able to comply with your request for a personal conference."[15] Randolph sent letters to the president and other government officials asking them to make speeches at the Lincoln Memorial, where the marchers intended to gather. The fact was that, even though sympathetic to the issues raised by Randolph, the president thoroughly opposed the idea of 10,000 blacks marching through the streets of Washington.[16] Randolph had made it clear that the march would be blacks only, and that seemed even more threatening and ominous to the president. Roosevelt worried that people could be hurt or killed and that it set a bad precedent for other groups.[17] As historian Paula Pfeffer points out, the Roosevelts feared the march could "prove an embarrassment to the country that held itself up as a model of democracy."[18]

Momentum

The president understood that there was gathering momentum for the march. Whereas Randolph had once talked of 10,000 blacks coming to Washington, he had now revised his estimates upward to 100,000! Roosevelt was in a quandary: while he feared the effects of a march, he also worried about not antagonizing southerners in Congress who already opposed him on many other issues. Either choice would result in some serious political fallout. It was not lost on the president that Congressman Arthur Miller of Nebraska had called Randolph “the most dangerous Negro in America.”[19]

Roosevelt was beginning to recognize the labor leader’s power. Knowing that Eleanor had established a good relationship with Randolph and other black leaders, he asked her to write Randolph, urging him not to follow through with the march. Eleanor did so, telling Randolph that she thought his plan was a “grave mistake”, and offering a strong opinion that such a march might well do more harm than good, especially if people were hurt as a result. Understanding that this was a sincere letter, Randolph released it to the Pittsburgh Courier, a black newspaper, telling the readership that it was the opinion of a “genuine friend of the race.”[20] But it did not change Randolph’s mind about the march. When Eleanor later asked Randolph how he proposed to feed all of these marchers, he replied that they would stay in Washington hotels and eat in the city’s restaurants. Randolph biographer Paul Pfeffer writes that the image of a “black invasion of lily-white Washington restaurants and hotels” added to the worries government officials already attached to the proposed march. Understanding the power of that image to gain the attention of white officials, Randolph never revised this statement. Yet within his organization he asked the March on Washington committee to request the support of black churches and schools in the capital to help feed and house the marchers.[21]

A White House Meeting, Again

After a meeting with Randolph in New York, Eleanor told her husband that the only hope for halting this march was for him to meet with Randolph at the White House. The president agreed. On June 18, 1941, Randolph, along with the NAACP head, Walter White, once again faced the chief executive. Roosevelt was firm about the status of the armed forces: they would remain segregated. He did promise that he would set up a committee to investigate cases of discrimination. In No Ordinary Time, Doris Kearns Goodwin notes that Roosevelt tried to keep the meeting light with political anecdotes. Randolph, in no mood for banter, told the president, “time is running out.”[22] “We want something concrete, something tangible, positive and affirmative,” Randolph insisted, and proceeded to make his goal clear: an executive order desegregating the defense industry.[23] Roosevelt still insisted that nothing could be done until the march was called off. That Randolph would not do. Goodwin describes the decisive exchange:

“How many people do you plan to bring?”

“One hundred thousand, Mr. President.”

The astronomical figure staggered belief. Perhaps Randolph was bluffing. Turning to White, Roosevelt asked, “Walter, how many people will really march?” White’s eyes did not blink. “One hundred thousand, Mr. President.”[24]

A Rising Wind

President Roosevelt finally agreed that a committee would draft an executive order. Randolph told the president that when a satisfactory order had been signed by the president, the march would be called off. Randolph helped draft the document, starting with government officials in the Cabinet Room of the White House shortly after his exchange with the president. Subsequent drafts were edited by Randolph until he was satisfied that its wording was strong enough. Goodwin relates that Joe Rauh, a young attorney sent over to work on the language of the order asked, “Who is this guy Randolph? What the hell has he got over the president of the U.S.?”[25] Finally, Randolph agreed on the final draft. On June 25, 1941, Executive Order 8802 was signed. It stated, “There shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin.” Further, under the order, a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) was set up to investigate reports of discrimination so legitimate complaints could be heard.[26]

Though A. Philip Randolph was thrilled with the executive order, he knew that many blacks across the land who had saved money to come to Washington for the march felt let down. They had developed an attitude of militancy that was difficult to quell. To harness all of that energy into an event, Randolph orchestrated a huge rally at Madison Square Garden that June. Twenty thousand blacks attended. Randolph came into the auditorium to speak, escorted by one hundred Pullman porters in their uniforms and fifty Pullman maids marching behind. The audience was on its feet, cheering wildly until Randolph finally beseeched them to stop.[27] Other crowds weren’t so happy with Randolph. The militant youth element of the March on Washington Movement said that he had sold out to Roosevelt. They claimed he should have just postponed the march for ninety days. Others believed that the Fair Employment Practices Committee might prove “toothless;” after all, its strength was untested. Randolph answered his critics, saying he had not called off the march permanently, he had merely postponed it. Calling the threat of the march “our ace in the hole,” he reaffirmed its power to serve as a “watchdog,” keeping the government from backsliding on its commitment.[28]

The Fair Employment Practices Committee proved inadequate to the task. Though war industries did hire blacks, discrimination in wages and seniority remained the rule in spite of the FEPC’s efforts, and the armed services remained segregated. The movement of black workers to industrial cities brought them face to face with prejudiced whites. Race riots broke out in 1943, with the worst occurring in Detroit when black families began moving into a new housing project near a Polish neighborhood. More than thirty people, twenty-five of them black, died in two days of guerilla fighting. Evidence of racism discouraged the new militancy put into place by Randolph but did not destroy it. The achievements of the FEPC raised hopes for the future. Nevertheless, it seemed clear that only continued protest, “a rising wind” as Walter White put it, would move the public to the cause of civil rights.[29]

What a Bluff It Was

Looking back on the social environment of the early 1940s, some have questioned whether Randolph could have convinced “a hundred thousand” to march on Washington. The Chicago Defender, a black newspaper, had declared in the early stages of the march, “To get 10,000 Negroes assembled in one spot, under one banner with justice, democracy and work

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as their slogan would be the miracle of the century.”[30] Doris Kearns Goodwin writes that years after the first planned March on Washington, “NAACP leader Roy Wilkins suggested the whole thing may well have been a bluff on Randolph’s part, but what an extraordinary bluff it was. ‘A tall courtly black man with Shakespearean diction and the stare of an eagle had looked the patrician FDR in the eye–and made him back down.’”[31] It was the beginning of “a rising wind.”