

THE WHITE HOUSE  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## CLASSROOM | 9-12 Lessons :

### TRUMAN, A. PHILIP RANDOLPH AND THE DESEGREGATION OF THE ARMED SERVICES



*President Truman announces the end of the Second World War, 1945. Harry S. Truman Library*



*A machine-gunner in an M-4 tank near Nancy, France, 1944. National Archives*

Though A. Philip Randolph had won a significant victory when he persuaded Franklin Roosevelt to desegregate defense industries, the armed forces serving in World War II were very much two separate armies, black and white. That goal of Randolph's 1941 March on Washington Movement was still very much unmet. Not only were blacks segregated, but they were often denied combat roles. No doubt they had performed valuable service, but often at the rear of the army—driving trucks through sleet and snow, delivering food and medical supplies, building roads. Civil rights leaders, including Randolph, had protested the War Department's policy throughout the war. All told, there were only three black combat divisions, and only the 92d, fighting in Italy, had seen significant front-line action.<sup>1</sup> Yet toward the end of the war, an unusual circumstance arose.

In the Battle of the Bulge, British and U.S. troops were being badly mauled by a ferocious,

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In the Battle of the Bulge, British and U.S. troops were being badly mauled by a ferocious, last-ditch counteroffensive by Hitler's army. The American army, desperate for replacements, sent out a call to black service divisions, asking them to volunteer as infantrymen. They would fight side by side with white troops on the front lines. It was a matter of the "necessity being the mother of integration." The response to the call was overwhelming. As Doris Kearns Goodwin states in *No Ordinary Time*, "Negro soldiers recognized that they were being presented with an opportunity to affirm their competence and courage on the battlefield and to prove that whites and blacks could work together."<sup>2</sup> By the time the German offensive had been stopped, prejudices had broken down among the racially mixed units. When white troops had first heard about the plan for integrated troops, 64 percent admitted they were skeptical; however, after fighting with black soldiers, 77 percent had said their attitude toward integration was "highly favorable." Furthermore, blacks as combat soldiers had "fared brilliantly."<sup>3</sup> When the victory was won, blacks were returned to their service units. But, as Goodwin writes, "The excellent performance of the integrated platoons demonstrated once again the waste and impracticality of segregation."<sup>4</sup>

### ***Equal Opportunity Segregation***

A. Philip Randolph was determined that this wasteful and impractical policy would come to an end. The civil rights leader had made several attempts to form a new organization dedicated to pressuring the government to desegregate the armed forces but had never quite gotten the necessary funding and support. A new impetus, though, came in April 1946 when the Gillem Board, which had been formed by the army to investigate armed forces' policies toward blacks, released its report. Though the directive recommended "eliminating any special consideration based on race," it in fact did nothing to question or change the underlying policy of separateness. Secretary of the Army Kenneth Royall described the recommendations as "equality of opportunity on the basis of segregation."<sup>5</sup>

### ***Beginnings***

Meanwhile, in December 1946 President Harry S. Truman, who was beginning to take bold steps on civil rights issues, appointed the President's Committee on Civil Rights. In October 1947 the committee issued its report, condemning segregation, particularly in the armed forces. It recommended that segregation be ended in all branches. By early 1948, Truman was formulating a civil rights policy based on the findings of this Committee. He put that policy into a message he sent to Congress on February 2, 1948. It seemed very liberal in tone. The president condemned lynching in the strongest possible terms and asked for a federal law to protect against it. He called for federal statutory protection for the right to vote, the elimination of poll taxes, and the desegregation of interstate travel by bus, train, or air. He also instructed the secretary of defense to look into alleged discrimination in the military and to see that it was stopped as soon as possible. It was, as David McCullough states in *Truman*, "a brave, revolutionary declaration, given the reality of entrenched discrimination and the prevailing attitudes of white Americans nearly everywhere in the country."<sup>6</sup> Southern members of Congress were outraged. Senator Olin Johnston of South Carolina refused to attend a Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner where Truman was to be the guest speaker, explaining to reporters that "he and his wife might be seated beside a 'Nigra.'"<sup>7</sup> A friend from Missouri, appealing to Truman as a fellow southerner, told him to "go easy on civil rights." Truman wrote back,

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The main difficulty with the South is that they are living eighty years behind the times and the sooner they come out of it the better it will be for the country and themselves. I am not asking for social equality, because no such things exist, but I am asking for equality of opportunity for all human beings, and, as long as I stay here, I am going to continue that fight.  
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### ***Coming Out of It***

A. Philip Randolph was ready for the fight as well. He was determined that southerners and others were going to “come out of it,” at least in the arena of the armed services. By late September 1947, almost four months before Truman’s message, Randolph, along with black New York Republican, Grant Reynolds, had formed the Committee Against Jimcrow in Military Service and Training.<sup>9</sup> This was in response to the realization that new legislation bearing on the armed forces was about to be considered by Congress. In late summer 1947, the president had requested passage of a program called Universal Military Training, a preparedness approach that would require every young man between the ages of eighteen and twenty to be trained for one year as part of a reserve force. These units would be called to active duty in the event the cold war turned “hot.” Though it was unlikely that Congress would enact this plan, it seemed certain that some kind of draft legislation would be forthcoming. Despite Truman’s forward steps in civil rights, Randolph had criticized the president for not backing his words with action. It concerned Randolph that despite the recommendation of the Committee on Civil Rights, by late 1947 draft legislation and a Universal Military Training bill were before Congress with “Jim Crow” still very much in place. In December 1947 Randolph asked the president for a meeting to discuss the bill. He and his committee had received a polite reply from the president’s secretary: “While I appreciate your desire to talk over this matter with the President in person, it is not going to be possible to arrange an interview in the near future.”<sup>10</sup> By January, Randolph was writing again, this time telling the president that he could not imagine what could have greater urgency on his schedule than the “just concern and long-accumulated grievances of one-tenth of the population.”<sup>11</sup> By this time, the president’s administrative assistant, David Niles, suggested that Randolph’s group be received, saying in an internal White House memo: “Phil Randolph, the signer of this letter, is an important Negro. He is the head of the Negro Pullman Porters Union, and is not a left-winger.” However, the memo also noted that the meeting was not to be scheduled until the president’s civil rights message had been “sent up to the hill.” Niles added, “In that message there will be some mention of Jimcrow [sic] in military service, and those people [Randolph’s group] will not be able to say that the message is a result of their visit.”<sup>12</sup>

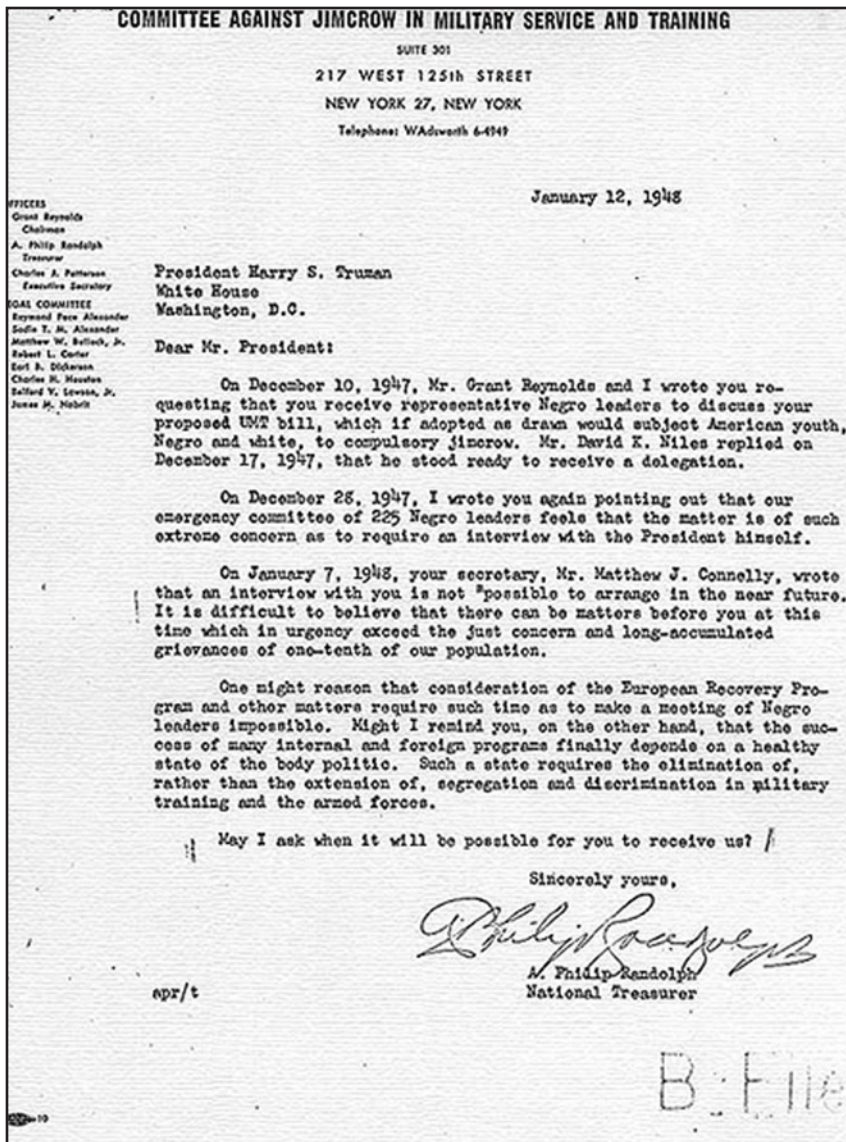
### ***Applying Pressure***

On March 17, 1948, over a month after Truman’s civil rights message had been sent to Congress, A. Philip Randolph received a telegram from the White House: the president would see him and other black leaders on March 22. The gathering could not have been friendlier until Randolph began to speak bluntly about the armed services issue. He reminded Truman of the recommendations of the Committee on Civil Rights that the proposed draft law banish segregation, then told him how disturbed he was to see that the desegregation clause had been deleted from the bill at the request of the army. Further, Randolph told Truman, “Negroes are in no mood to shoulder a gun for democracy aboard so long as they are denied

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democracy here at home.”<sup>13</sup> Then Randolph homed in on the main point: those gathered for the meeting were calling for an executive order abolishing segregation in the armed services. Truman gave no direct answer, but thanked his guests for coming and rather abruptly ended the session.<sup>14</sup> Randolph left behind a three-page memorandum to the president making specific requests: 1) send a supplemental message to Congress asking for an anti-segregation amendment and civil rights safeguards in any Universal Military Training bill or Selective Service bill and 2) end segregation by executive order immediately. Finally, the memo stated: “Use your administrative diligence to prevent a repetition of the wartime abuses, indignities and humiliations suffered by Negro soldiers.”<sup>15</sup>



A. Philip Randolph's letter to President Truman



### ***They Won't Take It Lying Down***

Though they felt they had made their positions clear in the memorandum, Randolph and Grant Reynolds were not convinced that Truman would push desegregation. Only nine days later the two were testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee. Randolph, though always composed and dignified, had strong words for the committee. "This time Negroes will not take the Jim Crow laws lying down. The conscience of the world will be shaken as by nothing else when thousands and thousands of us second-class Americans choose imprisonment in preference to permanent military slavery."<sup>16</sup> Then he dropped the bombshell. Unless all forms of discrimination were prohibited in the proposed Universal Military Training bill, he would advise young men to resist induction. He painted a picture for the senators of a mass civil disobedience movement along the lines of the one against British imperialism.<sup>17</sup> Then he added, "I personally pledge myself to openly counsel, aid and abet youth, both white and Negro, to quarantine any jimcrow conscription system."<sup>18</sup> Senator Wayne Morse interrupted to ask a question: "But you will expect . . . that there would not be any other course of action of our Government to follow but indictments for treason?"<sup>19</sup> Randolph was undeterred by the implications: "We would be willing to absorb the violence, absorb the terrorism, to face the music and to take whatever comes, and we, as a matter of fact, consider that we are more loyal to our country than the people who perpetrate segregation and discrimination upon Negroes because of color or race."<sup>20</sup> A line had been drawn in the sand.

### ***Noncooperation***

Meanwhile, in April, Secretary of Defense James V. Forrestal, realizing that the issue of blacks in the military was heating up, called black leaders to Washington to participate in a National Defense Conference on Negro Affairs. Their task was to offer advice to the Defense Department on how Americans could "utilize Negroes in the Armed Forces." Neither Randolph nor Reynolds was included, perhaps due to other commitments. From Forrestal's point of view the conference was a failure. The black leaders did not feel it was useful to talk about how to best use the services of blacks in the armed forces as long as the military was still segregated. Furthermore, though many black leaders did not agree with the militancy of Randolph, they would not denounce the statements he and Grant Reynolds had made before Congress. While falling short of actively supporting his proposed movement, they were glad he had taken his civil disobedience stand.<sup>21</sup> The wall of segregationist thinking that still met black leaders when they spoke to government officials, whether it was Forrestal or others, pushed them closer to political activism. Moreover, as these leaders became more politically visible, the military began to realize this force of black Americans must be taken into account; even Forrestal's calling of the conference indicated that. By May 7, 1948, A. Philip Randolph was quite visible, as he and eight others marched in front of the White House. This dignified regal man carried a sign with his slogan: "If we must die for our country let us die as free men—not as Jim Crow slaves." The demonstrators distributed buttons inscribed, "Don't Join a Jim Crow Army."<sup>22</sup>

### ***Discouragement***

The debate over the draft bill continued. When Senator William Langer of North Dakota tried to introduce amendments into the bill that were lifted directly from the Civil Rights



tried to introduce amendments into the bill that were lifted directly from the Civil Rights Commission report, not a single liberal senator supported him during the four days of debate. Senator Wayne Morse, considered a liberal, had risen to state “neither Congress nor the country is ready for a complete anti-segregation body.”<sup>23</sup> It was very discouraging to Randolph. As he continued to develop strategies for organizing the continuing protest, he wasn’t even sure young blacks would actually support a massive civil disobedience action. After all, for many of them born in the rural South or in northern big city ghettos, the military still offered a better way of life than they had at home. Nevertheless, when the Youth Division of the NAACP took a poll of draft-age college men, it found that 50 percent said they would serve their country in an emergency only if segregation was abolished!<sup>24</sup> Randolph would press on. When the draft act became law in June 1948, without protection for civil rights, Randolph promptly organized the League for Non-Violent Civil Disobedience and planned protest marches in Chicago, Harlem, and other cities.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Another Letter***

Once more a letter, dated June 29, arrived at the White House from the Committee Against Jimcrow. Randolph once again requested a conference with President Truman to discuss the fact that he had signed a Selective Service bill “devoid of any safeguards for Negro youth.”<sup>26</sup> He told the president that he was “morally obligated” to issue an order. Ending with a veiled threat, Randolph promised that “unless this is done, Negro youth will have no alternative but to resist a law, the inevitable consequences of which would be to expose them to the un-American brutality so familiar during the last war.”<sup>27</sup>

### ***A Special Session***

In a picket line in front of the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia that July, Randolph carried a sign that read, “Prison Is Better Than Jim Crow Service.”<sup>28</sup> Inside, in the early morning hours of July 15, 1948, Truman gave his nomination acceptance speech to sweaty, tired convention delegates. Though he had recommended only a mild civil rights plank in the Democratic Party platform, he had something to say on that subject: “Everybody knows that I recommended to the Congress the civil rights program. I believed it to be my duty under the Constitution.” He noted that some of his own Democratic Party members had disagreed with him, but at least they had done so openly. Taking on the opposition party, he said that even though the Republicans had professed to be for these measures, their Congress had failed to act.” Then, as McCullough says in Truman, came the bombshell: I am, therefore, calling this Congress back into session July 26. On the 26th of July, which out in Missouri we call “Turnip Day,” I am going to call Congress back and ask them to pass laws to halt rising prices, to meet the housing crisis, which they [Republicans] say they are for in their platform . . . I shall ask them to act upon . . . aid to education which they say they are for . . . civil rights legislation, which they say they are for. <sup>29</sup>

### ***Unrelenting***

That very day, July 15, Randolph sent another letter to the president. “We are indeed happy,” he said, “that you decided to call Congress back into special session in order to act on civil rights legislation.” Yet he was relentless for what must be accomplished, adding to the

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praise, “We trust that in your message to Congress on July 26 you will specifically ask for legislative approval of anti-lynching and other safeguards for Negro draftees.”<sup>30</sup> The executive order was still on Randolph’s mind: “May we take this opportunity to renew our request for a conference with you in the immediate future to discuss such an Executive Order.” Then came the final plea. He beseeched the president to take this step so that Negro youth would not face “imprisonment for following the dictates of self-respect.”<sup>31</sup>

### ***Victory—Almost***

In fact, immediately following his speech before the Democratic Convention, Truman had instructed his staff to draft an executive order that would end segregation in the armed forces. Finally, on July 26, 1948, the president signed Executive Order 9981. According to the language of the order, “It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin. This policy shall be put into effect as rapidly as possible, having due regard to the time required to effectuate any necessary changes without impairing efficiency or morale.”<sup>32</sup> It also established the President’s Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services, which was to determine that the rules, procedures, and practices of the armed services matched the new policy.

Though many in the black community were happy with the order and hopeful that the issue of civil disobedience would not be forced, Randolph still was not satisfied. He found the language of the order ambiguous. Soon he penned another letter to the White House asking for a meeting to clarify the exact meaning of the executive order, and seeking assurances that the integration of the armed forces would take place in a timely fashion. Finally, Truman sent his spokesman, Senator J. Howard McGrath, to talk through these points with Randolph and Reynolds, allaying their fears. Then Randolph saw the list of members who would head up the President’s Committee on Equality and felt it was a “strong body.” Finally, on August 18, 1948, A. Philip Randolph and Grant Reynolds called off their campaign of civil disobedience.<sup>33</sup>

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**COMMITTEE AGAINST JIMCROW IN MILITARY SERVICE AND TRAINING**  
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 NEW YORK 27, NEW YORK  
 Telephone: WADsworth 4-4747

July 15, 1948

**OFFICERS**  
 Grant Reynolds  
 Chairman  
 A. Philip Randolph  
 Treasurer  
 Charles J. Patterson  
 Executive Secretary

**LEGAL COMMITTEE**  
 Raymond Pace Alexander  
 Beffe T. M. Alexander  
 Matthew W. Bellack, Jr.  
 Robert L. Carter  
 Earl S. Dickerson  
 Charles H. Houston  
 Bedford V. Lewis, Jr.  
 James M. Nabrit

President Harry S. Truman  
 White House  
 Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. President:

We were indeed happy that you decided to call Congress back into special session in order to act on civil rights legislation, among other matters. We trust that in your message to Congress on July 26 you will specifically ask for legislative approval of anti-lynching and other safeguards for Negro draftees. You are undoubtedly aware of the intense bitterness on the part of Negro citizens because of the bi-partisan "gentlemen's agreement" to scuttle the Langer amendments to the draft bill early in June.

The action most necessary today to strengthen the fabric of democracy is of the type that would enhance the dignity of second-class citizens. Because the 1948 Republican platform expressed its disapproval of army segregation and because the recently adopted platform of your own party in essence called for the abolition of racial distinctions within the military establishment, we feel that you now have a bi-partisan mandate to end military segregation forthwith by the issuance of an Executive Order.

May we take this opportunity to renew our request for a conference with you in the immediate future to discuss such an Executive Order. The date for registration under the draft is only a month away and it is the hope of all Negro youth that there will be an alternative beyond submission to a discriminatory law and imprisonment for following the dictates of self-respect.

Sincerely,

*Grant Reynolds*  
 Grant Reynolds, National Chairman

*A. Philip Randolph*  
 A. Philip Randolph, National Treasurer

GR/k

Grant Reynolds and A. Philip Randolphs' letter to President Truman





JULY 26, 1948

## EXECUTIVE ORDER

ESTABLISHING THE PRESIDENT'S COMMITTEE ON  
EQUALITY OF TREATMENT AND OPPORTUNITY IN  
THE ARMED SERVICES

WHEREAS it is essential that there be maintained in the armed services of the United States the highest standards of democracy, with equality of treatment and opportunity for all those who serve in our country's defense:

NOW, THEREFORE, by virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States, by the Constitution and the statutes of the United States, and as Commander in Chief of the armed services, it is hereby ordered as follows:

1. It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin. This policy shall be put into effect as rapidly as possible, having due regard to the time required to effectuate any necessary changes without impairing efficiency or morale.
2. There shall be created in the National Military Establishment an advisory committee to be known as the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services, which shall be composed of seven members to be designated by the President.
3. The Committee is authorized on behalf of the President to examine into the rules, procedures and practices of the armed services in order to determine in what respect such rules, procedures and practices may be altered or improved with a view to carrying out the policy of this order. The Committee shall confer and advise with the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of the Army, the Secretary of the Navy, and the Secretary of the Air Force, and shall make such recommendations to the President and to said Secretaries as in the judgment of the Committee will effectuate the policy hereof.
4. All executive departments and agencies of the Federal Government are authorized and directed to cooperate with the Committee in its work, and to furnish the Committee such information or the services of such persons as the Committee may require in the performance of its duties.
5. When requested by the Committee to do so, persons in the armed services or in any of the executive departments and agencies of the Federal Government shall testify before the Committee and shall make available for the use of the Committee such documents and other information as the Committee may require.
6. The Committee shall continue to exist until such time as the President shall terminate its existence by Executive order.

HARRY S. TRUMAN

THE WHITE HOUSE

July 26, 1948

*Truman's executive order desegregating the armed services*



### ***Not Such Strange Bedfellows***

The historian William Berman said of Truman's issuance of Executive Order 9981 that it "was not simply an exercise in good will, but rather the product of political pressure applied by A. Philip Randolph, Walter White, and others at a time when a presidential incumbent needed all the support he could muster in states with the greatest votes in the electoral college."<sup>34</sup> Yet there was also good will. Though Truman did not support Randolph's tactic of civil disobedience, he had a strong sense of fairness, a firm belief that it was the fundamental right of American citizens to live and work where they pleased and to improve their condition by their own efforts. As the chief executive who ordered the desegregation of the armed services and the civil service, Truman had done more than any president since Abraham Lincoln to awaken America's conscience to civil rights.<sup>35</sup>

At the end of his term in office, Truman told the nation from the Oval Office, "A short time after the new President takes office, I will be on the train going back home to Independence, Missouri. I will once again be a plain, private citizen of this great Republic. That is as it should be."<sup>36</sup> But Randolph still had work to do for the republic. As Grant Reynolds said, blacks "would cast their eyes around" to find other areas of segregation where a program of noncompliance might be feasible.<sup>37</sup> They would not look far for the next battle, and when they found it, A. Philip Randolph would be with them.

