

*"Master race" orators on stage  
at a police committee hearing*

# Race Hatred Gets a Hearing

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*January 1948*

**O**CCASIONALLY an event takes place in the South which crystallizes all the curious, conflicting elements that go to make up Southern prejudices. Such an event was the recent public hearing on Negro police conducted by the Police Committee of the Atlanta City Council.

The issue of Negro police has been a controversial one in Atlanta for a long time. It became more controversial than ever recently when an impressively large group of civic organizations, supported by the Atlanta newspapers, began a concerted move to have Negro policemen employed in the Negro sections of the city. A survey by the Southern Regional Council provided some practical arguments in favor of the proposal. The survey revealed that more than forty Southern cities were successfully using Negro policemen; all the cities commenting announced their satisfaction with the colored officers, and many reported startling reductions in Negro crime. On the basis of these and similar findings,

an increasing number of civic-minded groups and individuals added their support to the move.

The controversy reached its height in November when one member of City Council introduced a resolution providing for the appointment of eight Negro policemen on a trial basis. Another councilman immediately moved that the resolution be tabled, but he was defeated. Instead, the resolution was referred to the Police Committee with instructions that a public hearing be held to determine the state of public opinion.

So it was that, on the evening of November 26, approximately one thousand persons crowded into a large courtroom in the police station on Decatur Street. On the dais at the front of the room sat the members of the Police Committee and the Mayor. The Chief of Police had taken his stand at one end of the platform, and policemen were stationed about the room. Negroes, who made up about one-fourth of the audience, occupied the right rear section of the courtroom. On the whole, they were the quietest and most attentive of the spectators. White persons filled the other benches and the space along the walls. Some of them were there to support the resolution, but many more, easily a majority, were there to oppose it. There could be little claim that the white spectators formed a cross-section of Atlanta's white population. Most of them were residents of those sections of Atlanta where white and colored citizens have been in fierce competition for housing, and flare-ups of race tension were fresh in their minds.

As the spectators waited for the hearing to begin, they talked and laughed with their neighbors, but their eyes were constantly moving about the room—from the committee chairman to the other members of the audience to the newcomers pouring into the courtroom. The atmosphere was one of expectancy, the sort of expectancy one senses in any crowd that has come together to witness a dramatic spectacle.

The chairman rapped for order, and the hearing got under way. The first white spokesman for the resolution made his way to the front of the room. As if on signal, a wave of noisy throat-clearing spread through the crowd.

"What's his name? Make him tell his name!" came from somewhere in the crowded room.

The spokesman's name was announced, and he presented a petition signed by some fifteen civic organizations. Briefly he cited the record of Negro police in other Southern cities. It was a factual speech, delivered quietly and without emotion. When it was over, the spokesman returned to his seat amid silence. There was no applause and no throat-clearing.

Other proponents of the plan, white and colored, then appeared before the Committee. A representative of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, a labor spokesman, a white minister, a Negro minister, a Negro newspaper editor, a Negro businessman—each of them gave his reasons for believing the plan a wise one. There were boos and heckling from time to time. Occasionally there was scattered applause. But for the most part the audience was unresponsive.

A new animation stirred in the courtroom, however, when the chairman called for those who were opposed to the resolution. The air buzzed with talk, but no one stepped forward. For a long moment it seemed that no one was going

to speak in opposition. Then a gray-haired figure appeared at the platform. The spectators sat up straight and craned their necks. The air of expectancy was strong again.

"Changes are not always progress," the man began. "The morale of the Atlanta Police Department will be destroyed if we put Negro policemen to work. . . ."

In these quotations the word "Negro" is given its proper spelling. As the word was actually spoken, the letter *r*—always hard for a Southern tongue to manage—appeared feebly a few times, and presently vanished altogether.

As the gray-haired man spoke, he was interrupted now and then by applause. The crowd was beginning to come to life. But, all things considered, he was not an overwhelming success with the audience. He was too moderate. He admitted that the time might come when it would be proper to appoint Negro policemen, although it had not come yet. He confined himself to relatively temperate objections. Although much of the audience applauded and cheered when he sat down, one felt that they were hoping for stronger meat than this.

The next speaker was much more successful. He had some command of that brand of oratory which has long been cultivated by Southern demagogues.

"If people like Henry Wallace, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Drew Pearson would leave us alone, we wouldn't have any problem!" he cried. He was rewarded by thunderous applause and whoops of approval.

"If we get Negro policemen, where are we going to stop? Maybe we should have some Negro councilmen! Maybe some of them should sit on this Committee!"

Enthusiastic laughter echoed in the crowded courtroom, and it required prolonged gavel-pounding by the chairman and the chief of police to restore order. This was what many of the white spectators had come to hear, and they were not to be cheated out of their enjoyment.

The keynote had been struck, and the pitch grew higher and higher for two long hours as each successive speaker tried to out-rant his predecessors. Some of them—politicians and past and present office-holders—were accomplished in wool-hat rhetoric:

"It seems the colored brothers have convicted themselves. In one breath they admit they commit the greatest number of crimes, and in the other tell us the violations will be reduced if we authorize Negro policemen! [*Laughter and cheers*] Anyway, they want to start too high. We ought to start them in a more elementary grade. [*"Tell 'em how to do it"*] If we are to start them at all, we should start a few in the City Hall. [*Laughter*] We could put 'em in the tax office. [*"Now you're telling 'em!"*] The Mayor can appoint his executive secretary. [*Cheers*] Maybe the newspapers who are sponsoring Negro police would put some in the City Hall press room." [*Laughter and applause*].

Some of the audience reactions were so well-timed that one wondered if they had been rehearsed. It is no doubt true that the opposition had marshaled its forces and planned its attack in advance. But the most effective preparation began years ago and can be traced in the tortured political history of Georgia. Thanks in large measure to that history, nowhere have hate organizers found more ready-made recruits than in Georgia and Atlanta. On this night, as so

often in the past, the followers were rallying to their self-appointed leaders.

It early became apparent that the opposition spokesmen had no intention of confining their discussion to the resolution on Negro police. They launched violent verbal attacks on the individuals and organizations backing the proposal, accusing them of being subversive and Communist-inspired. (The conservative Chamber of Commerce, as well as several church groups, were presumably included in this all-embracing charge.)

Several speakers took the time to build up elaborate theological arguments for the belief that Negroes are an inferior race of mankind. Indeed, the pseudo-religious theme was sounded, with infinite variations, in speech after speech. The Bible was quoted and misquoted with great frequency. Indelible pictures were painted of the Negro and his false white friends marching arm in arm down the road to Hell.

Full treatment was also given to the familiar claim that the Southern white man is the Negro's best friend.

"Without the Southern white man to look after him," said one speaker, "the Negro would long since have perished from the face of the earth." He went on to maintain that by following the false lead of "meddlers" the Negro was alienating his only true friends among the white race.

Following the traditional pattern, the rabble-rousers were scattering their shots. Skilfully they built up the impression of a vast conspiracy against the white, laboring, God-fearing majority. It was startling—though perhaps to be expected—when one speaker said:

"It is a dangerous idea that every minority should be represented on official bodies. If you give the Negro this right, then all the others will demand it. The next thing, the Jews will claim the right to sit on this Council and hold high office on every political body." Such was the nature of the opposition that this remark slipped neatly into context.

Even in this maelstrom of emotion, it was impossible to miss the undercurrent of hostility toward those of position, power, and influence.

"Who are these people who favor this thing? If you check up, you'll find out they live out in North Side, where they don't have the Negro problem."

The response to this was greater than might be expected. North Side is a residential suburb where many of the city's well-to-do and influential citizens live. The opposition supporters showed great delight when slurring remarks were directed at this group, and even greater delight when the Mayor and City Council were attacked. One speaker drew lusty approval when he made a contemptuous reference to bankers.

The technique is not a new one. Eugene Talmadge made effective use of it in his stump speeches denouncing "those rich city fellows." It has become a traditional bid for the affection of the "common man." The meaning implicit is: "They have the money and the power, but *you* are the salt of the earth and I am for you." It is a strange alchemy indeed that transforms such an attitude as this into hatred of the poorest and least influential group in the South—the Negroes.

The efforts of the Police Committee to have the speakers keep to the subject of Negro policemen met with little success. The crowd roared its disapproval at this interference, and the speakers were allowed to go on with their digressions.