How Washington’s Color Line Looks to Me

By WALTER WHITE

The author, a distinguished Negro spokesman, senses a changing—and heartening—attitude toward racial discrimination in our capital. But, he says, indignities are still forced on dark-skinned foreigners and Americans there—and that’s the story Moscow loves to exploit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In our issue of July 18, 1953, we published an article by Walter White on the race problem in Detroit. Now this same eminent Negro writer takes a look at segregation in the national capital.

During the past few years the Post has published a number of articles, expressing various viewpoints, on Negro problems. As a variant, we believe it is illuminating to take a look at the question occasionally through the eyes of a well-known leader of that race.

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ONE will deny that Washington, D.C., “showcase of democracy,” ranks in stately beauty among the four most magnificent world capitals. Its wide avenues and spacious circles, its glistening marble buildings, its Embassy Row and luxury hotels, its cherry blossoms and its incessant round of diplomatic receptions make Washington today the most exciting capital of them all. Its concentration of power makes it the most important.

But another side of the city—emphasized ironically by the fact that Benjamin Banneker, a Negro, played an important role in planning Washington after Major L’Enfant in pique returned to France—is almost as well known. That side is its color line and its noisome slums. Colored foreigners, as well as American Negroes, have been embittered by refusal of Washington’s hotels, restaurants, theaters and concert halls to admit them.

Twenty years ago, a president of Haiti, graduate of the Sorbonne, was refused to discuss mutual defense of the Caribbean, by the playing of Bye Bye, Blackbird at Washington’s Union Station by the United States Marine Band. Ras Imru, Ambassador of Ethiopia, angrily departed from Constitution Hall in 1945 when an usher barred him from the official box which had been assigned him for a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Five years ago, Dr. Ralph J. Bunche, destined shortly afterward to become winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, declined the post of Assistant Secretary of State because he would not force his family to undergo the daily humiliation of Washington’s Jim Crow rules.

Two years ago Thava Rajah, Malayan labor leader, guest of the State Department in its program of bringing visitors to America to enable them to learn at first hand what democracy means, was
bluntly refused service in a Washington drugstore and in a restaurant. He was told, "We don't serve black people here!" The episodes were gleefully reported by Izvestia and the Moscow radio.

Another view of Washington is one an American Negro Fulbright scholar obtained recently in Egypt. He was attempting to interpret American democracy to a group of Egyptian friends. One of them who had served in the diplomatic corps of his government answered the Negro's defense of America by telling him that when the Egyptian lived in Washington he had had to use his passport continuously to keep from being considered and treated as an American Negro. "Isn't it ridiculous," he asked the embarrassed American, "that just because I had a passport I could be treated better than you, a citizen of the United States, even though I am brown too?"

But such incidents, as basis for hurtful dispatches, have dropped materially during the past year and, if the present trend continues, are destined to be even more scarce in the years to come. The complete abolition of racial discrimination and segregation has not yet been achieved, but the democratic process has manifested its ability to correct its shortcomings here in a fashion which is genuinely encouraging. Washington has taken the revolutionary changes in its stride, with but little of the friction which opponents of change or the faint-hearted predicted. And the perturbation of the State Department and other Government agencies over what might happen to important visitors from countries whose friendship and essential materials the United States must have to ride out the cold war with Russia, has materially lessened.

The extent of Washington's reformation is illustrated by a recent luncheon attended by 700 Negro and white guests, held in one of the city's top hotels to celebrate the ninetieth birthday of an Oberlin graduate, the widow of Washington's first Negro judge, who played a major role in the famous Thompson restaurant case. The decision of the United States Supreme Court in that test case had opened the doors of the District of Columbia's restaurants to Negroes for the first time since the Woodrow Wilson Administration.

Mrs. Mary Church Terrell, guest of honor at the luncheon, with two white friends and a distinguished Negro clergyman, had been refused service in a Thompson restaurant in 1951. A suit for damages was promptly instituted under laws which had been enacted in 1873, but mysteriously "forgotten" at the turn of the century. These laws required restaurants to serve "any well-behaved and respectable person." The late Charles H. Houston, chairman of the National Legal Committee of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, had found the lost laws, and legal action was commenced by the corporation counsel of the District of Columbia on behalf of Mrs. Terrell as she neared the tenth decade of her life.

A municipal judge reached the odd conclusion that the lost laws had repealed themselves through nonuse. But the United States Supreme Court handed down a unanimous decision that "well-behaved persons" could not be denied service because of race or color. An excellent friend-of-the-court brief in support of the Negro's defense of America was filed by the Department of Justice as the first government action by the Eisenhower Administration implementing President Eisenhower's campaign pledge to continue the drive against segregation in American Negro communities.

All manner of dire predictions were voiced, even by Washingtonians who were ashamed of and opposed to denial of restaurant service to dark-skinned patrons. Very few unpleasant episodes occurred in one small restaurant two intoxicated white men beat a colored woman and tore her dress. In another low-priced neighborhood lunchroom the proprietor told a colored man that he had been served "only because the court says so, and we don't want your trade." There was no great nor immediate rush of Negro customers into the more expensive restaurants and hotels, and when they did enter them, they were served like anyone else.

How awant the changes taking place here are illustrated by the description of Washington written a short six years ago by the President's Committee on Civil Rights in its epochal report, To Secure These Rights:

For Negro Americans, Washington is not just the nation's capital. It is the point at which all public transportation into the South becomes "Jim Crow." If he steps in Washington, a Negro may dine like other men in the Union Station, but as soon as he steps out into the capital, he leaves such democratic practices behind. With very few exceptions, he is refused service at downtown restaurants. He may not attend a downtown movie or play, and he has to go into the poorer section of the city to find a night's lodging. The Negro who decides to settle in the district must often find a home in an overcrowded, substandard area. He must often take a job below the level of his ability. He must send his children to inferior public schools set aside for Negroes and entrust his family's health to medical agencies which give inferior service. In addition, he must endure the countless daily humiliations that the system of segregation imposes upon the one third of Washington that is Negro.

The relative ease with which the restaurant ban in Washington was erased embodied other places of public accommodation to initiate new policies. Long and continuous efforts against theater, swimming pool, tennis-court, Government-restaurant and Constitution Hall discrimination had created a climate of opinion for compliance with the Supreme Court's decision in the Thompson restaurant case. Not long after that decision was handed down, downtown Washington moving-picture theaters abandoned their policy of refusing to admit Negroes. All but a few hotels accepted Negro guests and there was
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exceedingly little protest even from white Southerners. It would be a mistake, however, to believe that Washington has become overnight a city free of race prejudice or that a single court decision, admirable though it be, has totally reversed the pattern of relations between white and Negro residents here. There remain many ludicrous contradictions, although the trend is definitely toward integrated living. I believe that Negroes, whatever their capacity to buy or build, and in one respect is getting worse. Public schools remain tightly segregated, although Congress will hand down a decision soon which may materially alter the rigid pattern of public education. Jobs are still limited, as Negroes higher-paid positions are concerned.

A recent order by the President's Committee on Government Contract Compliance to include antidiscrimination provisions in all contracts entered into by the District of Columbia should materially improve the number and number of jobs for Negroes.

Facilities at the Robert E. Lee House, home of the famed Confederate general, whose statue, still stands adamant against giving Negroes the right to live in any house in the city. Mr. Ickes, named by President Truman in 1950 as Secretary of the Interior, was already familiar with the stand of Negro leaders, and in the summer of the very hot summer of 1952.
substandard units for Washington's low-income areas. The movement of a family moving out of a project be­longing to public housing as a whole if integra­tion was practiced under the very noses of Congress.

Colonel Johnson, however, would not be discouraged. After a year and a half, his resolution was passed unanimously. A campaign to educate and prepare tenants in each project and in the neighborhoods in which the housing projects were located was undertaken. Today, according to Colonel Johnson, 97 per cent of all public housing in the District of Columbia—distinquished from suburban housing—operates under an integrated policy, and it is expected to apply shortly to all such projects.

"Not a single racial incident has occurred as the integration program has gone forward in public housing," Colonel Johnson reports. This is remarkable in view of the fact that Washington is more Southern in its racial patterns than Chicago, Cleveland, St. Louis, or Kansas City, Missouri—in all of which cities friction occurred when Negroes moved into white neighborhoods. "Dine happenings had been predicted," Colonel Johnson asserts, "but, so far, nothing has happened. White families have gone into projects previously restricted to Negro occupancy and Negro families into units formerly restricted to white. Indeed a single case has developed of a family moving out of a project because members of another racial group moved in."

But this admirable development applies only to the 3800 public-housing units for Washington's low-income families. Sixty per cent of the city's substandard housing, privately owned, is occupied by Negroes, who constitute only one third of Washington's population.

Possibly the least changed of all in­stitutions in Washington is the Protes­tant church. While restaurants, hotels, the courts, the armed services, Govern­ment employment, theaters and mov­ing-picture houses, housing and recre­ational facilities have voluntarily or as result of the pressures of changing public opinion abandoned or modified their racial policies, the church has ad­hered to segregation. In a previous article in the Post, I related how Protes­tant churches in Detroit have taken a liberal attitude on this matter.)

An example is furnished by the ex­perience of a sincere Protestant minister whose conscience is sorely troubled by church segregation in Washington. He arranged with a Negro college class­mate to hold an annual meeting of the young people of his own and his classmate's churches. Members of the white church heard about the meetings. One of them happened to be held on Com­munion Sunday. The sacrament was jointly served by the two ministers—one white, the other Negro. So unusual was the experience that some of the white children excitedly reported the experience to their parents. Notice was served on the minister that the joint meetings must cease or he must find a pulpit elsewhere.

Twelve years ago the pastor of one of Washington's largest churches was ordered to "lay off" permitting inter­racial luncheons and meetings to be held in his church. He did lay off, and no such gatherings have taken place since.

On the other hand, All Souls' Un­i­tarian Church, under the pastorate of the Rev. A. Powell Davies, is fully in­tegrated racially and is one of the few Protestant institutions where inter-racial religious services and public meetings can be held. Since the Right Rev. Angus Dun became bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Washington Ca­thedral, the color bar there has been lowered and a Negro, chaplain of Howard University, appointed to the cathedral's official staff. "But no more than a single case has developed of a Negro "laying off," the Right Rev. Stephen G. Sportwood, of the African Metho­dist Episcopal Zion Church, told me, "are genuinely on our minds by opposing racial segregation."

Yet, strangely enough, the Washington Federation of Churches is integrated. One third of its officers—exactly the proportion of Negroes in Washington's population—are colored.

In marked contrast with Protestant, Catholic Have achieved a degree of in­tegration which was described to me enviously and penitently by a dis­guised Protestant as "nothing short of terrific." Catholic University, for example, admitted Negroes on the basis of their qualifications, beginning in 1936. Georgetown University fol­lowed suit. All parochial schools in Washington admit students regardless of race or color. American University, a Methodist school, however, has also begun to admit Negroes.

As for public schools in Washington, the inimicacy of a Supreme Court ruling on segregation caused the school board to initiate public hearings early in 1953 on proposals as to how integra­tion could be accomplished with mini­mum friction. But on June 5, 1953, the Supreme Court ordered re­arguments, the school board trans­formed its position to one of suspended animation as it awaited eventual deci­sion by the court.

On the basic problem of obtaining work at the job which one's education and experience fit one to do, the Wash­ington story for Negroes has vastly im­proved during the past two decades. For many years Washington was one of the few places where educated Ne­groes could find some white-collar jobs, although many college and uni­versity graduates served as messengers or clerks to other Americans with less scholastic training. Negroes were forced to accept these positions because their color barred them from other employ­ment.

Beginning with the Roosevelt Ad­ministration the number of Negroes in Government employment expanded greatly, and the trend has continued. In the decade from 1940 to 1950 colored attorneys and tele­graphers increased from 1 per cent of the total to more than ten times that ratio. Printing craftsmen almost quadrupled, from 3.4 to 12.3 per cent. Librarians more than doubled, from 3.1 to 7.4 per cent. Telephone linemen employed by the Government also doubled employ­ment, from 3.7 to 7.6 per cent. Still a number of large private employers refuse to hire qualified Negro men and women even as they comb the nation for competent men and women craftsmen. President Eisenhower's re­cently appointed Government Contract Committee, charged with the duty of enforcing the nondiscrimination clauses which are included in all Government contracts, will face the necessity of implementing these provisions for equality of job opportunity which the President pledged during the 1952 election campaign.

What does this melange of facts and figures, progress and frustration add up to? Washington policemen serve in in­tegrated units; Washington firemen re­fuse to respond to official and public pressures to abandon expensive and antidemocratic practices of racial seg­regation. Congress, through archaic laws and practices, continues to follow concepts which national and world events have made obsolete, as treatment of physical ills by witch doctors. A deadly coalition of Southern Demo­crats and conservative Republicans has blocked every attempt of the past thirty years to enact laws against dis­crimination and segregation. Negro doctors recently won their fight to join the District of Columbia Medical Society, but they are still barred from practicing in most of Washington's hospitals other than the segregated Freedmen's Hospital.

Much of the change of the climate of public opinion in Washington can be attributed to the persistent civil-rights campaign since the beginning of World War II. Washington has been the natural focusing point of those efforts. The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, consisting of fifty-four national churches, labor, minority and other or­ganizations, has spotlighted the issue of human rights by appearances before congressional committees, mobiliza­tions, White House conferences and other activities. These efforts, along with the report of the President's Com­mittee on Civil Rights, published in 1947, and Segregation in the Nation's Capital, published in 1944, have given Washington as well as the nation increasingly aware of the need to correct long-standing injustices.

The increasing pressures of a swiftly changing society have forced alter­ations in the Washington story which even the most idealistic dreamer would not have dared dream fifteen years ago. Yet the task of making Washington worthy of its position as capital of the world's greatest democracy is by no means completed. But faith in the democratic process is strengthened measureably when one compares today's Washington, despite all its manifest shortcomings, with that of even a year ago. A form of government which makes possible the changes which have taken place through persistent litigation, legislation, education and agita­tion justifies its existence.