

FORUM

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*How a government
agency effected equality*

The Negro and The O.P.A.

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THE achievement of racial equality in the administration of the home front war controls—price, rationing and rent—did not just happen. The progress made in relation to America's minorities and particularly the Negro came about as a result of the efforts of many people within the Office of Price Administration from the highest policy-determining official to the individual employee. For an agency to declare a non-discriminatory policy is to be taken for granted, but the real test comes in the way that policy is carried out.

The story of Negro participation in the defense and war program may be dated from May, 1940, when the National Defense Advisory Commission was revived by Roosevelt, and the late Miss Harriet Elliott was appointed one of the seven advisers. Miss Elliott's domain, consumer protection, was broadly social in character. Her division came to consider itself responsible for the entire "home front line" or all aspects of

the civilian in national defense except manpower, food production and pre-retail and pre-wholesale prices.

She recognized from the start that minorities should have a hand in the formulation of policy. To assist her in defining some of her functions, she called to Washington a small group of consultants. Louis Adamic represented the foreign population, and Miss Frances Williams, the interracial education secretary of the Y.W.C.A., spoke for the Negro.

Again, when the Consumer Protection Division, as it came to be known, undertook its first major activity in August, 1940, Negro leaders were invited to a conference in Washington of the heads of some 100 organizations. Among others, there were representatives of the National Urban League, the National Association for the Advancement of the Colored People, the National Business League and the Harlem Medical Center. The conference issued a pledge against racial discrimination in all aspects of the

defense program. It also accepted the recommendation that whenever local consumer interest committees were established, representatives of all the people should be named to them.

Thus the policy of non-discrimination took root early. As the work of the division grew, Miss Elliott established a Civic Groups Section, which had the job of getting all cultural groups to participate continuously in the defense program. Each person was to have a role in the defense effort commensurate with his interest and capacity.

The staff developed special projects to enable the Negro population to understand the nation's defense activities. Problems of the Negro community were studied, and steps were taken to ensure non-discrimination in the federal defense structure. For Negro consumer interest groups throughout the country, the division prepared special publicity materials; for meetings of Negro organizations from coast to coast, it supplied staff speakers and interpreted the responsibilities of the Consumer Adviser. In turn, Negro groups, including organized labor, funneled to the division information on unusual price stipulations, housing shortages and other welfare questions.

When the President revised the defense organization and welded the Consumer and Price Stabilization Divisions into the Office of Price Administration and Civilian Supply in April, 1941, he brought together Leon Henderson's staff which had been working on pre-retail prices and Miss Elliott's which had been watching retail prices and rents.

Within O.P.A.C.S., the program with cultural groups continued at about the same tempo. Information went out to minorities on such subjects as price control, the allocation of goods to consumers, housing, nutrition, recreation and consumer standards.

In the days following, until January 30, 1942, when Congress gave O.P.A. statutory authority, "jaw-bone" methods of price control, successive reorganizations, the fight for legislation, and the outbreak of war and plans for rationing occupied a major share of attention of the agency. And in the spring of 1942, the staff worked day and night to inaugurate the much needed rationing programs, to issue the General Maximum Price Regulation, and to determine the rent control areas. Non-discrimination in administration of the programs was assumed. But as the programs were executed, it became apparent that the over-all consideration given to problems of administration was inadequate when applied to minorities. Fair administration of O.P.A. programs—and they affected everyone in the country—required a special effort on the part of officials in order to compensate for the Negro consumer's economic disadvantage and for his comparative inarticulateness.

Three or four problems grew out of the speed with which O.P.A. had to be staffed and the programs begun. One concerned employment. Before the war, Negro personnel in the federal government was principally in the unskilled grades. Although Miss Elliott had brought to O.P.A.C.S., one Negro in a profes-

sional grade and three or four in the clerical, and Henderson had early employed a Negro attorney in the Legal Division, the number of Negroes on the O.P.A. payroll remained small for some time. By the spring of 1942, there were 167 in the Washington office, and of these only nine were in the \$2,000 to \$4,600 salary brackets. The Personnel Branch showed no discrimination and tapped sources of qualified Negroes including colleges, professional societies and trade groups. Still, in January, 1943, the number of Negro employees in the national office was only 1½ per cent of the total. Figures available for March, 1943, on field personnel showed that Negroes in the regional and district offices comprised but 1.14 per cent of the total.

The inflation control program had the early backing of the Negro press and organizations. The rationing of sugar, gasoline, tires, and other commodities received the commendation of minorities. But the same could not be said of the enforcement of price regulations. Complaints began to arise that differentials existed in Negro neighborhoods under the price freezing order. The N.A. A.C.P. conducted a survey in Harlem in July, 1942, discovering that systematic overcharges raised the Negro's food bill 7 to 12 per cent beyond economically comparable areas in New York City. Walter White pressed the issue to Henderson and the President and urged that inequalities be corrected. Otherwise, he argued, the already economically handicapped Negro would

have an added burden of more than \$100,000 a year.

Almost simultaneously, the question of rents in Negro neighborhoods came to the fore. In the fall of 1942, Negro tenants waged fights for adjustments of rent scales in several cities including Columbus and Cleveland. There was also a drive in Harlem to have that area placed under rent control.

As important as any of the others was the problem which arose out of the method of setting up the local War, Price, and Rationing Boards. Time was of the essence, and quite naturally the emphasis of O.P.A. officials had been on getting local boards established. That boards would be representative of the community was assumed. But the first boards were white boards. When Negroes insisted on having a share in the administration, the next step was the creation of all-Negro boards in Negro areas. To an aspiring minority seeking the removal of discriminatory restrictions and desiring the same recognition accorded to other citizens, this was not the answer.

Meanwhile reverberations of the Jim Crow prices and boards reached Congress, and there were unsuccessful attempts in the Senate in the fall of 1942 to change O.P.A. legislation to provide specifically for non-discrimination. The agency itself was sensitive to such criticism. The national office did not have evidence in support of the price differentials in Negro communities but promised to level off ceiling prices of particular commodities for retail

stores within a given class of outlets. The national office also gave more attention to policy statements on Negro relationships.

Henderson referred the whole question to a group of business advisers in O.P.A. which named a committee to make special studies of food prices and rent differentials and employment. The Administrator also appointed a special assistant, T. Arnold Hill, to channel the opinion of Negro groups to O.P.A. officials and to interpret O.P.A. policies to these organizations.

Apart from such special measures, the Henderson period was marked by the fact that in many quarters throughout the agency, officials high and low were working on the problem of equality. Subsequent progress grew out of their early efforts. Take the questions of employment and local boards. When Prentiss Brown succeeded Henderson early in 1943, the Negro press urged a more precise definition of racial policy. An official pronouncement via an Administrative Order was made in February, 1943: There should be no discrimination against the employment of anyone because of race, creed or national origin. Teeth for enforcement were not lacking; the Director of Personnel had the responsibility of making investigations and correcting violations. In effect, the agency was announcing its adherence to civil service rules and presidential directives.

Shortly thereafter, O.P.A. also spelled out in more detail the composition of local boards. An order was issued that boards were to represent the entire community. "When

appropriate," the order declared, "membership should include a housewife and members from labor, agriculture, business, the professions and consumers, and various minority and racial groups."

To execute these orders required still more time, and it was not until Chester Bowles' administration that Negro employment reached a peak. The agency increasingly appointed personnel on the basis of merit. In the Negro press in 1944, O.P.A. along with F.E.P.C. gained the reputation of being the fairest of the federal agencies. During the war years, there was a shift in the nature of the jobs held by Negro personnel in the federal government. The majority were no longer in custodial work but were in the clerical grades. This was true in O.P.A. But significantly enough, O.P.A. selected Negroes for its professional jobs, ranging from section heads to attorneys, economists and information officers. Negroes were also named to the Labor and the Consumer Advisory Committees. An incident probably unique in federal personnel annals occurred in connection with O.P.A.'s promotion policy. A branch chief was removed because he had discriminated against Negro employees in making promotions. The union preferred charges, and his dismissal came after hearings before an agency committee.

In March, 1945, 13 per cent of the national office staff were Negroes and more than two per cent of the field personnel, excluding local board employees. Those regions with central offices in New York, Chicago and Cleveland had the largest num-

ber respectively. Of the Negroes in the Washington office, five per cent were receiving \$3,200 or better.

Before V-E Day, Bowles instituted plans to obtain more Negro volunteers on price and rationing panels in the local boards. By April, 1945, there were 687 Negroes serving in various sections of the country. And all regions could point to some participation of Negroes on boards before the European war ended. Washington, D. C., had the largest number with 12 per cent Negroes; Richmond, Virginia, was next with 6.2 per cent; Detroit followed with 3.9 per cent; and New York was fourth with 2.3 per cent. Who served? Housewives, members of labor unions, and clerical and professional persons.

As his special assistant on racial relations, Bowles, in the autumn of 1944, named Miss Frances Williams who had been on the information staff of O.P.A. Her office was watchful of the lag in making O.P.A. programs work in respect to the Negro and other minorities. Her job was not that of special pleader but was to make sure that the regular process of government applied to Negroes as to other people. The Administrator placed the responsibility of ensuring non-discrimination on the price, rationing, rent and information program heads. Miss Williams emphasized compliance in Negro areas and sought the assistance of Negroes in support of O.P.A. programs.

Progress in securing equality in administration was marked during the 10 or 11 months before the war's end. For instance, the idea

of a survey of rents in Negro areas had been contemplated as early as the fall of 1943. Finally in November, 1944, representatives of the Rent, Information, and Enforcement Departments were able to agree upon a plan. Door-to-door rental surveys of all low income neighborhoods in Bridgeport, Newark, Louisville, Norfolk, Houston and Minneapolis were made. Not only were the surveys popular, but they revealed numerous violations and stimulated increased registration of rental units.

Another illustration might be drawn from the field of rationing and price compliance generally. In the spring of 1945, the important program heads met with Bowles to consider where compliance had broken down in relation to minorities and especially the Negro population. They concluded that better enforcement at the retail level was needed. They also felt that an information campaign should be inaugurated to let people know what remedies were available when overcharges occurred.

To reach the Negro public, the Information Department had specialists working with Negro organizations, educators, and the press. More than 200 Negro newspapers were serviced with stories of O.P.A. regulations. For areas where Negroes had little or no access to newspapers or the radio and where schools were the chief medium for information, the staff supplied special materials to state supervisors of Negro education. Over 100 presidents of Negro colleges, deans, department heads and leaders of edu-

cational associations also cooperated in disseminating information.

As the non-discriminatory principles of the agency became known, Negro organizations and the press began to speak in terms of identifying their own interests with the purposes of the agency. When question of renewal of the Price Control Act came before congressional committees, their spokesmen appeared on behalf of extension.

The assistant's office did not overlook the needs of other minorities. There were the problems of the Mexican and the Indian in the Southwest, the Chinese in California, the Nisei who returned to the coast. Wherever the assistant could aid in the disposition of language or other questions of administration, she did so.

Finally O.P.A. took the leadership in fostering the application of non-discriminatory principles among the permanent federal departments. This championship of employment resulted from O.P.A.'s policy of in-

forming its personnel of other possible jobs as reductions in force took place and the agency began to be liquidated. The Administrator called the attention of the Civil Service Commission and the President's assistant to the practices. The President reminded all agencies of their obligation to administer fairly.

What conclusions are suggested by O.P.A.'s experience? The vast decentralization to the field offices meant that progress toward equality in administration was greater in some sections of the country than in others. The Negro personnel made a substantial contribution to the agency in many positions of responsibility. Too, it became apparent that to accomplish the same for a minority as for the majority, special attention was sometimes required in administration. O.P.A. discovered as did Alice that "it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

All things are simple when you analyze them. What is a rattlesnake but an eel with a crap game going on the rear?

—*Alliance Times-Herald*

* * *

A manufacturer had carefully put up placards in his plant warning his women employees to "Be Careful!" Nevertheless, many were injured in the 5:00 P. M. rush for the stairs. He lowered his accident rate by installing full length mirrors on the stair landings.

* * *

On her honeymoon the bride had gone shopping, and after coming back to the hotel, she had gotten off the elevator at the wrong floor. She went down the corridor until she reached what she supposed was the door of her room. Having no key, she knocked and called out softly: "Honey, oh, Honey." Getting no response, she called again more loudly. After several more calls, a male voice roared out from within: "Madam, this is not a beehive, it's a bathroom!"

—*Cappers Weekly*

*What has happened
to the evacuees on the coast*

The Japanese Came Back

By Ed Ritter

Teacher, Journalist

“GIVE us one more year,” says pretty 16-year-old Rose Shibata, of Los Angeles, “and things will be just about as good as they were before the evacuation. The Caucasian girls at school wave and say ‘Hi’ like they used to and a few of the Nisei kids are being elected to school offices again. There aren’t any more of those ugly scenes like that morning on the streetcar when the man tried to make the conductor put us girls off and called us ‘dirty Japs’.”

Of the many shades of optimism held by the 67,500 Japanese-Americans¹ who have returned to the West Coast since their war-time exile, Rose’s outlook for next year appears to be average. The degree to which the future will bear it out depends on the West Coast’s answers to such questions as:

Can Japanese-Americans’ determination to break down the “Little Tokyo” and “Jap Town” pattern withstand the impact of restrictive covenants and similar forces making for such revivals?

The West’s answer and the validity of Rose Shibata’s hope for next year have a striking relevance to America’s right to self respect. For

Rose is one of the 112,353 persons who were evacuated from their West Coast homes in 1942 because they or their parents or grandparents are Japanese.

Over 70,000 of the evacuees were American citizens. Victims of what was probably the most appalling violation of civil liberties in American history, these citizens—along with the Japanese aliens whom the United States had excluded from citizenship—were thrown into concentration camps without a specific charge of disloyalty or subversive activity being established against them.

Organized rivals of Japanese-American farmers and shippers capitalized on war hysteria in launching a successful campaign for evacuation immediately after Pearl Harbor. The sensationalist press screamed palpable lies about Japanese-American sabotage in Hawaii. Typical of Hearst and McClatchy newsmen, Henry McLemore wrote in the *San Francisco Examiner* on January 29, 1942:

“Herd ’em up, pack ’em off and give ’em the inside room in the badlands. Let ’em be pinched, hurt, hungry, and dead up against it . . .”

Westbrook Pegler cried, “To hell with habeas corpus . . .”

Even the United State Army’s

¹The term *Japanese-Americans*, as used throughout this article, denotes first, second and third generation Japanese in America.