

The President and Civil Rights

THREE months ago, when the President's committee of fifteen issued their comprehensive 175-page survey on the state of civil rights throughout the country, we wondered whether anything would be done about it. We are still wondering. Mr. Truman did, on February 2, brave the wrath of a number of his southern political supporters by asking Congress to enact a ten-point civil rights program based on the recommendations of his committee. He has moderated those recommendations considerably, particularly in the matter of restrictive covenants, but has outlined to Congress something genuinely substantial. So specific a presidential recommendation to the Congress will constitute a milestone in the direction of establishing basic rights to gainful employment and equality before the law to men of every race throughout the United States only if there is unrelenting public pressure to bring this legislation, and these equalities of opportunity, to pass. Thus far the general reaction has been lethargic. Only a brief flurry of protest from southern Democrats elected to Congress by a tiny minority of their constituents has ruffled the calm of Pennsylvania Avenue.

Even a friendly critic might point out that Mr. Truman's concern for the right to vote—the fourth of his ten points—might sound more convincing if he had insisted that things be thoroughly cleaned up in his own home district, where the ballot boxes for a fraudulent primary election in 1946 have with impunity been clean spirited away. With Mr. Truman, as with other national leaders who advocate social justice quite eloquently, such proposals might also carry more conviction if in the city of Washington itself conditions did not constitute so flagrant a violation of American ideals.

It is a mistake, of course, to believe that practices in the South are all that stand in the way of achieving nationwide civil rights for all. There is that little matter of the Japanese-Americans on our West Coast. And there are preeminently the racial antipathies, the job discrimination and restrictive covenants that obtain in all sections of the country. To set up adequate guarantees of civil rights for men of every race and station is clearly a nationwide responsibility.