


BLACK BRAIN TRUST

America's 13,000,000 colored people today are led by a little known group of highly educated Negroes. "If this is a war for freedom - -" they say, "we want ours now." Are they justified in their demands? This challenging article presents one of the gravest decisions facing us today

by William A. H. Birnie

 REPORTERS in the House gallery in Washington whispered to one another one day recently that Representative John Elliott Rankin of Mississippi sure was viewin' with alarm.

"This," he thundered, "is just the beginning of a scheme to abolish state government. Representative government is trembling in the balance. The next step will be to abolish Congress."

What was arousing the ire and oratory of the gentleman from Mississippi was a parcel of legislation, already approved by the Senate, to allow service men to vote in primary and general elections without paying poll taxes. It didn't take much guesswork to figure out why Mr. Rankin's fur was up. The poll tax is about the slickest mechanism ever devised to keep a black man from sticking his two cents' worth into a white man's election.

Up in the gallery, listening, sat a slender, wiry little man who knew he had done his work well. He had been buttonholing legislators for weeks. He had a pocketful of pledges and promises.

But he didn't permit himself the luxury of a smile until the vote was in, and Rankin & Co. had their ears pinned back to the tune of 247 to 53. Then, humming a tune, Walter White, master lobbyist, walked back to his hotel in the Negro district of Washington.

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It had been a red-letter day for a powerful organization, hereto unpublicized, known as the Black Brain Trust.

This Black Brain Trust consists of about 25 Negro leaders who have assumed command of America's 13,000,000 Negroes in their fight for equality. They hold informal meetings to plan their strategy, whether it is to defeat a discriminatory bill in Congress, or to overcome prejudice against a black private. Few white men know it, but they have already opened a second front in America—a front dedicated to the liberation of the dark races.

Some white leaders accuse them of "taking advantage of the war." They boldly admit it, insisting that if this is a war for liberty they want theirs. They argue that their fight serves the American cause on two fronts: It will put an end to the apathy of many Negroes toward a war in which they say they have no real stake; and it will secure America's position abroad among the black, brown, and yellow peoples of Central and South America, India, Malaya, Burma, and China.



Walter White

A FEW of these Black Brain Trusters spring from poverty in black shacks and slums. They're the kind, as some Southerners put it, "who ought to know their places," but they have risen to leadership through years of toil and determination. Others, born in comfortable circumstances, are self-assured Negroes who hold Ph.D.'s from leading universities. Some have coal-black skins and flaring nostrils; others have such light skins and delicate features that even a deep-South hotel wouldn't refuse them admittance. Some are quiet-spoken, diplomatic, cautious; others are blunt, angry at the years of repression and "second class citizenship," willing to rally the Negroes for an all-out struggle. But those differences don't affect their unity in the campaign for political and economic equality.

Talking with these new Negro leaders, I sensed very quickly that they mean business. A generation ago, genial Booker T. Washington advised his peo-

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ple to till the fields the white man had left them. He kept busy asking for favors rather than demanding rights.

Today's Black Brain Trusters don't beg. These new Negro leaders have shed every tradition handed down from slavery days. They operate efficiently through official government agencies, through their press with a million and a half readers, through shrewd lobbying in Congress, even through direct pressure on the White House. Specifically the Black Brain Trust is divided into the government and non-government branches. The government branch in Washington consists of race-relations advisers in numerous departments who look out for Negro interests. But they would be fairly impotent if it weren't for the outsiders—union leaders, preachers, politicians, editors, and heads of national organizations who can turn on the political heat when ordered. The Washington boys provide the fancy footwork; the others provide the heavy punches. As a team, they work as smoothly as Joe Louis and his managers.

They're getting results, too—far below their own aspirations but far beyond the dreams of old-time Negro leaders. Negroes give the Black Brain Trust credit for obtaining, from a friendly administration, a presidential veto on discrimination against them in employment, for opening up the Air Forces to Negroes, for paving the way for advancements in the Armed Forces, for cracking the poll tax, for trebling the number of Negroes in government positions, for obtaining thousands of jobs for Negroes as skilled workers in war plants.

Of course, the movement is meeting bitter opposition. White leaders in some districts in the South charge that Negroes are trying to take over the country. Some declare they will never yield an inch. Others, including numerous liberals, grant that the lot of the Negro should be improved, but say it's dangerous to meddle with the social system in the midst of a crucial war.

But the Black Brain Trusters are not convinced by such protests. "You can't compromise with justice," one of them told me. "We must fight for our rights *now*. After the war, a wave of reaction may set in that will put us back half a century. Make no mistake, we Negroes know that the United Nations must win this war—but they must win on a truly democratic basis."

I TALKED with dozens of Negroes, soldiers and civilians. Many of them confessed that they had smiled ironically as they listened to broadcasts that the Japs, after the fall of Manila, had ordered all white men off the streets at 9 P. M. "Sure

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was turnin' the tables neat," one Southern Negro grinned. Many grumbled at Great Britain's treatment of India and said, "England got just what she deserved from the natives in Burma and Malaya." All of them trembled with rage at rumors of Negro soldiers being beaten and killed by white civilian cops and military police in the South.

But their outspoken loyalty was beyond question. All said they knew they were better off under a democracy, with its imperfections, than they would be under Axis masters. Generally, they subscribed to the recent statement of Negro Masons, who came out for the defeat of the Axis, then added: "Meanwhile, we must

not lie. It is a lie to pretend that we are happy about receiving the same sort of treatment we are asked to spare the anti-Axis world."

Axis propagandists are working frantically to cash in on the Negroes' dissatisfaction. But Negroes don't bite. Recently four Negroes and one white man were indicted for trying to launch a pro-Axis organization among Harlem Negroes called the Ethiopian Pacific Movement. After declaring that the campaign had been notably unsuccessful, the Federal District Attorney said:

"The colored people have been as quick as any others to repudiate all efforts to win them over to the Axis line by propaganda. Responsible leaders have expressed the indignation of all loyal Negroes at this attempt to identify Jap propaganda with the legitimate campaign against racial discrimination."

ON THE other hand, American Negroes today are virtually 100 per cent behind the Black Brain Trust in prosecuting this "legitimate campaign." A couple of days after the victory over poll-tax congressmen, I talked with Walter White, secretary of the aggressive National Association for the Advancement of the Colored People. When I asked him how he felt about the outcome, he shrugged, "It's a straw in the wind, but such a little straw. What we desperately need today is forthright action by President Roosevelt in collaboration with the leaders of the darker races—Chiang Kai-shek, Gandhi, Nehru, and Azad of India, Manuel Quezon of the Philippines, and Haile Sellassie of Ethiopia. They should draft a Pacific Charter to implement the Atlantic Charter. Nothing less will convince the brown, yellow, and black peoples of the world that the four freedoms really apply to them. Nothing less will give them a real cause to fight for and die for."

A towering figure in the Black Brain Trust, Walter White is so pale-skinned—one anthropologist figures he has only $1/64$ Negro blood in his veins—that he could easily pass for white. But, as a child, he saw Atlanta, Ga., race riots in which "seven men died because their skins were black." A little later, White tells you, his father, gravely ill, was taken by mistake to the white ward of an Atlanta hospital. While indignant attendants were trucking him across the street to the black ward, he died in agony. After that, young White never thought of passing himself off as a white man, except, as he puts it, "where it would serve my race." In 1918, after being graduated from Atlanta University, he joined the staff of the NAACP as an investigator who looked white

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enough to circulate among lynching mobs.

In the Black Brain Trust, White performs the double function of front man and lobbyist. Former Senator James F. Byrnes of South Carolina, now Director of Economic Stabilization, paid tribute to his power during a debate on an anti-lynching bill a few years ago. "If Walter White should consent to have this bill laid aside," he declared, "its advocates would desert it as quickly as football players unscramble when they hear the referee's whistle."

Congressmen listen to him because his organization now lists a total of 600 branches, many of them in states where Negroes have an unimpeded vote. Ninety-one new branches were opened last year.

Probably the most telling action of the Black Brain Trust led to the second presidential executive order dealing with Negroes in American history, 78 years after the first, President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.

Early in 1941, Negroes throughout the country were grumbling about their exclusion from defense jobs. The Brain Trusters decided to take direct action. A. Philip Randolph, president of the International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, an A. F. of L. union with about 11,000 Negro members, proposed a mass march on Washington. Soon there were reports that an army of 50,000 Negroes would march on the capital and picket the White House on July 1.

As the deadline approached, politicians put the screws on Randolph. "Don't do it," they argued. "You'll just inflame Southern senators and you'll be worse off than ever." A few years back, that argument probably would have prevailed, but Randolph was adamant.

"The march must go on," he said. "I am sure it will do some good." Finally President Roosevelt himself summoned Randolph, White, and several other Negro leaders to the White House. Besides the President, Secretary of War Stimson, Secretary of the Navy Knox, and key officials of the then existing Office of Production Management attended the conference.

RANDOLPH told his story bluntly. He reported that doors of defense plants were being closed to Negro workers, and feelings were running high. He wanted a presidential antidiscrimination order "with teeth in it." A few days later, Randolph was called in again and shown the draft of an order committing defense industries only. "Not enough," said Randolph, in effect. Unless the order included government agencies as well as defense industries, he was sorry but the march would take place as planned. The Negroes stood pat, and the administration gave ground. Executive Order 8802 was issued:

". . . that it is the policy of the United States to encourage full participation in the national defense program by all citizens in the United States, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin . . . that all departments and agencies of the Government concerned with vocational and training programs for defense production shall take special measures appropriate to assure that such programs are administered without discrimination . . . and that all contracting agencies of the Government shall include in all defense contracts hereafter negotiated by them a provision obligating the contractor not to discriminate. . . ."

"It was purely a knock-down-drag-out af-

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fair," Randolph told me when I talked with him in his union office above a drugstore in a Harlem loft. "I don't want anyone to think I called off that march on Washington permanently. That's still our ace in the hole. We could rally thousands of Negroes to stage it next week."

As head of an all-Negro union, Randolph has waged a campaign to persuade the American Federation of Labor to force every local to remove clauses and ritualistic practices excluding Negroes from membership. "So far we have failed," he said, "but we haven't given up."

"The threat of the march on Washington proved one thing: The Negro gets only what he has the power to take. Sure, we're a pressure group. In the march-on-Washington movement, we have the support of the two big Negro organizations, the NAACP and the National Urban League. But more important, we have the masses on the street behind us. And that gives us the power to make conferences produce something."

TO THE thousands of Negroes now in the Army, the No. 1 Black Brain Truster is undoubtedly Judge William H. Hastie, soft-spoken, diplomatic civilian aide to the Secretary of War. He occupies a spacious office, staffed entirely by Negroes, in the huge Munitions Building in Washington. Like other members of the Washington branch, Judge Hastie is a race-relations adviser. As such, he suggests, recommends, petitions.

White officers in the War Department told me that Judge Hastie has won the respect of everybody from Secretary Stimson down. One white colonel said, "He never makes a suggestion before he has gathered all the facts and figures. Usually his proposals are so darned reasonable you can't do anything but accept them."

When I interviewed Judge Hastie, he minimized his own accomplishments, but other Black Brain Trusters credit him with playing an important role in liberalizing the attitude of the Army toward Negroes. The chief advance today, they say, is the acceptance of Negro officer candidates at the same schools with whites. Both black and white officers report little or no friction at the mixed schools.

Negroes are now being trained for the Air Force, but the Black Brain Trusters are disappointed that they are segregated at the all-black school at Tuskegee, Ala., where only a few pilots can be trained. They hope that facilities will be expanded if these pioneers make good.

Less spectacular, but no less important to Negro soldiers, is the recent regulation establishing Negro Military Police in areas heavily populated with Negro soldiers. For this order, Negroes unanimously give Judge Hastie credit, and heartfelt thanks.

Tall and slender, with tapering fingers and a black earphone button in his left ear, Judge Hastie is typical of the new generation of Negro leaders. His education and experience have carried him to a position far beyond the dreams of most Negroes, but he uses his opportunities more for his race than for himself. At Amherst College, in Massachusetts, he won high honors and starred on the track team. Amherst later awarded him an honorary degree, but meanwhile he had picked up a law degree from Harvard in 1930 and a doctorate in law two years later.

In 1937, President Roosevelt appointed him Federal Judge in the Virgin Islands—the first

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Negro to reach the federal bench, and probably the youngest federal judge in American history. He resigned after almost two years to become dean of the Howard University Law School, which granted him an indefinite leave of absence when he was appointed civilian aide in November, 1940.

Today, in his official capacity in the War Department, Judge Hastie holds aloof from political activities, but he maintains close relations with many other Black Brain Trusters. So far, none of them has persuaded the Army to adopt the project closest to their hearts—the establishment of a volunteer mixed unit of white and Negro soldiers. Negro leaders insist that one such unit would do more than any other step to make Negroes genuinely enthusiastic about the war.

Nowhere have the Negroes been more active than in their effort to obtain war jobs. The federal War Manpower Commission recently showed me figures listing increases in Negro employment in selected war industries between May 1, 1941, and September 1, 1942. Here are a few typical cases: At an Ohio powder company, Negro employment jumped from 0 to 625; at a Maryland shipyard, from 50 to 1,600; at a California aircraft plant, from 0 to 300; at a Missouri cartridge company, from 0 to 800; and at an Ohio aircraft plant, from 0 to 1,100.

Obviously, all employment has advanced tremendously in the last 16 months, and there is a genuine demand for any kind of labor, black or white. But that the position of the Negro worker has changed is due, in no small measure, to the Black Brain Truster next in importance to Judge Hastie in Washington—Dr. Robert C. Weaver. He was director of Negro Manpower Service for Paul McNutt's over-all War Manpower Commission, when I went to his office to interview him. I found him talking long-distance with a WMC West Coast representative.

"Listen," he said; "I hear that the Blank Co. is hiring white skilled workers as far east as Ohio. Don't they know they're supposed to hire all the available workers in the locality, black or white, before going outside? Find out whether the company or the unions are turning thumbs down on Negroes, and, if so, we'll go after 'em."

Dr. Weaver, 34 years old, holds the only Ph.D. in economics ever awarded to a Negro by Harvard. In 1934, soon after he was appointed to a post in the Department of the Interior, he and Judge Hastie, then an assistant solicitor, struck a preliminary blow for Negroes in Washington. Together, one noon, they entered the Department's cafeteria, from which tradition had always excluded Negroes.

Flabbergasted, the girl at the door finally admitted them after taking their names. Some officials were shocked, but when word of the incident reached Secretary Ickes, he supported the two Negroes. After that, Weaver and Hastie continued to eat in the cafeteria.

TODAY, these two men are the pioneers of the Washington branch of the Black Brain Trust. Often they invite the other members to their homes for evenings of poker and informal discussion. Both are sons of minor government officials, and both had their eyes on government posts from the time they went to high school together in Washington. Like Judge Hastie, Weaver obtains his ends diplomati-

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cally. When one Southern city, running short of workers for war contracts, started importing them, Dr. Weaver approached the city fathers through WMC field representatives.

"Look," they said, in effect; "if you bring in all these men, you'll have to build houses for their families, and schools, and sewers, and hospitals. That'll cost your taxpayers a lot of money, to say nothing of using up strategic materials, if you can get 'em. After the war, you'll have a lot of idle workers asking for relief. Now, lots of Negroes are already right there within a few blocks of your factories. They already have homes, and schools. Don't you think it might be a good idea to give them a chance?"

This approach didn't work a miracle, Dr. Weaver said, but it cracked the wall of anti-Negro prejudice. A year ago, one plant in that city employed only 37 Negroes in menial jobs. Today, it employs more than 300 Negroes, many of them skilled workers.

"If we'd gone in there and talked about abstract justice, we'd probably have got a polite brush-off," Dr. Weaver smiled. "But they start scratching their heads when we give them sound economic proof that the Negro is entitled to a real post in industry."

I FOUND Black Brain Trusters working with equal determination in other departments across Washington. Six-foot-three William J. Trent, Jr., son of the president of a Negro college, is race-relations adviser to the Federal Works Agency. Recently, FWA advanced \$67,000 toward a \$75,000 project in a Deep South town. "The mayor wrote us he wouldn't hire any Negroes as skilled workers," Trent told me. "Said we were trying to force social and economic equality on the South. I reported to my superior that the terms of the offer, under the President's anti-discrimination order, required that at least 12 per cent of the skilled workers be Negroes, if they were available—which they certainly were. He backed me up, and we held up the money."

In Elmer Davis's Office of War Information, Ted Poston, ex-reporter for Negro papers in Pittsburgh and New York, supervises the news stories that go out to the Negro press. He helped spread the Negroes' nationwide Double V for Victory campaign—victory abroad and victory at home. Dr. Frank S. Horne, originally trained as an optician and now race-relations adviser to the Federal Public Housing Agency, looks out for Negroes' interests in war housing projects and fights "segregation of whites and blacks in areas where they previously lived peacefully together."

One Black Brain Truster occupies a unique position—Mrs. Mary M. Bethune, mother confessor to the whole group. At 67, Mrs. Bethune is director of Negro Affairs in the National Youth Administration. Although decades separate her in age from the other members of the Black Brain Trust, she apparently agrees with their thesis that new times call for new techniques. When she was young, the Negro who wanted to advance his people looked around for benevolent and generous white people. "Seek ye first some kind white folk," went the old Southern adage, "and the Kingdom of Heaven will be yours." But today she gives her blessings—and shrewd advice—to the younger men who stand on their own feet, and work for, instead of begging for, their future.

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These—and other Black Brain Trusters—insist that they are wholeheartedly for the victory of the United Nations. They readily admit that the lot of the Negro in the United States has improved tremendously in the last ten years, particularly since Pearl Harbor. They argue that their campaign is to carry out to the letter President Roosevelt's ban on prejudice and discrimination. But their critics, in the South and elsewhere, reply that they may be jeopardizing not only the future of the Negro but the future of the war itself, by demanding "too much, too quickly."

THE END ★★

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