

Thursday, August 22, 1940

Acts to End Jim Crow Rule in Army and Navy

Efforts by Negro organizations to wipe out race discrimination in recruiting the nation's armed forces were encouraged today by Senator Barbour of New Jersey. He has announced he would introduce an amendment to the draft bill now before the Senate opening all defense branches to volunteer enlistments regardless of race or color. Other amendments may also be offered providing for equal treatment of all races under any conscription plan that may be adopted.

If Congress decides to draft a peace-time army, there are 1,000,000 Negro men between 21 and 31 who will be eligible.

Right now the regular U. S. Army keeps its Negro soldiers carefully segregated in colored units. The Air Corps accepts no Negroes at all. Neither does the Marine Corps. In the Navy the highest rank to which a member of the colored race may aspire is that of mess attendant. No Negro has ever been graduated from Annapolis, and only one admitted since Reconstruction days. Only four colored men have graduated from West Point.

The Navy Department explains its exclusion policy as necessary for the "efficiency of the Fleet." General Arnold, Chief of the Air Corps, simply advises that "no provision has been made for the establishment of Negro air units," and therefore "enlistments are not being accepted from members of the colored race." Secretary of War Stimson warns that "unity can be destroyed by attempting to establish a (colored enlistment) program which is contrary to War Department plans."

Negroes who try to join the only defense service open to them on any terms at all—the regular Army—often find themselves turned away when they attempt to enlist. Testifying before a House committee, General Marshall, Army Chief of Staff, said:

"In the colored organizations, a much larger percentage of men re-enlist than in white organizations. The result is that there are very few vacancies for new soldiers as compared with the vacancies in white organizations. In other words, it takes no recruiting effort at all to find men for the colored organizations."

Present regular Army expansion plans provide for 10,000 colored soldiers out of a total of 375,000 enlisted men, or approximately one man in 38. Negroes make up about one in 11 of the country's male population. The National Defense Act says that "no Negroes, because of race, shall be excluded from enlistment in the Army for service with colored military units"—another way of saying that Jim Crow organizations are open to any Negro unless they are already filled up.

Most of the 1,000,000 draft-age Negroes, therefore, do not have a shot at even a segregated, regular Army unit and must take their chances with conscription. Of the 400,000 colored men drafted for the World War, all but some 40,000 were assigned to service as laborers, hostlers, kitchen help and the like. Prospects this time are not much better.—P. K.