

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.


For the past twenty-three years, Walter White has been the executive secretary of The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He is the author of numerous magazine articles, several books and a syndicated newspaper column. —The Editors.

NONE 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 sped on his way after an official visit 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



Helen Johnson, Louis Dees, Mary Barr and Florence Barnes select courts at a Washington park. The city has made "revolutionary changes" in race relations, the author reports, but shortcomings remain.

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Negro slums near the Capitol building. According to White, Negroes occupy sixty per cent of the city's privately owned substandard housing.



Anyone can use Washington pools run by the Interior Department. But segregation is still the rule in pools operated by the District Recreation Board.

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 fainthearted 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 revealed 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 "lost laws" was filed by the Department of Justice as the first govern-

mental action by the Eisenhower Administration implementing President Eisenhower's campaign pledge to continue the drive against segregation in Washington.

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 swift are the changes taking place here is 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 stops 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 the 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 emboldened 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

PHOTOGRAPHY BY OLLIE ATKINS



The James Smiths bid friends good-bye. Negroes can now move into some of the city's better areas.

HOW WASHINGTON'S COLOR LINE LOOKS TO ME

extraordinarily 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 forward.

Housing is still bad for Negroes, whatever their capacity to buy or build, and in one respect is getting worse. Public schools remain tightly segregated, although the Supreme Court will hand down a decision soon which may materially alter the rigid pattern of public education. Jobs are still limited so far as upper-bracket and 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 aid in improving the number and types of jobs for Negroes.

Facilities at the Robert E. Lee House, home of the famed Confederate general, are unsegregated because it is operated by the Department of the Interior. But those at Mount Vernon, home of George Washington, "father of his country," under the control of a nongovernment organization, are tightly segregated.

Samuel Spencer, president of the Board of Commissioners of the District of Columbia, issued an order on November 24, 1953, to abolish segregation immediately in all District of Columbia institutions except the Fire Department, the Home for the Aged, the District of Columbia jail and the Institution for Children. Exemption of these four organizations—particularly the Fire Department, whose union has defied all attempts at integration—may do much harm in that other agencies may attempt evasion of the order on the basis of the exemptions. Police brutality against Negroes has materially lessened during recent years, but it is still a serious problem. Congress still stands adamant against giving residents of the District of Columbia the right to vote, because Southern legislators bitterly oppose such a move since approximately one third of the citizens who live in metropolitan Washington are Negroes. Even more potent, but less publicized, is the fact that as long as the District of Columbia is governed by Senate and House committees, the enormous patronage in jobs and contracts for so large a city is very valuable to politicians. The race issue, therefore, is most useful in covering up the fact that most of the jobs in Washington can be parceled out to "deserving" henchmen from almost every section of the nation except Washington.

To understand the nation's capital and evaluate intelligently the true significance of such recent developments as abolition of the color bar in restaurants and movie houses, a little history is necessary. One of the most baffling contradictions in American history is that the advent on the Washington scene of Woodrow Wilson, a man proclaimed as a great intellectual liberal, caused the most abrupt descent of the

Negro's status in the District of Columbia. Up to that time, Negroes were admitted to theaters, restaurants and hotels. A considerable number of Washington Negroes were college graduates, but even most of these were restricted under Republican administrations to jobs as clerks and messengers. Yet there was little segregation based on race, according to Judge James A. Cobb, of white and colored clerks in governmental restaurants, toilets or other facilities.

Then Woodrow Wilson, gifted exponent of a liberal philosophy, entered the White House. His first wife focused her attention on less global points of view. She visited the Government Printing Office one day shortly after her husband's inauguration to find, to her dismay, that white and colored employees were using the same facilities. She launched an attack through the newspapers against "such un-American practices." Postmaster General Albert Bursleson, of Texas, was assigned the task of being the axman to end such practices. He summoned to his office several prominent Negroes to announce that if they would accept segregated divisions in Government, more Negro supervisors would be appointed.

The bait failed to attract. But despite the stand of Negro leaders, Negroes were barred from the restaurants of both Senate and House. Bills were introduced in Congress to establish segregation on street cars and other public carriers. There was an increasing demand for the rejection of every concept of racial equality which had been inaugurated since the Civil War.

In 1913 the United States Supreme Court, reflecting the temper of the times, ruled that the 1875 Civil Rights Act did not apply to Washington. The rout was on. Negro residents of the District of Columbia and dark-skinned visitors to the nation's capital were progressively subjected to greater and greater restriction of rights until the Administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933.

Two individuals who came to Washington with the new Administration were shocked by what they found. One was Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt. Through the spoken and written word and by example she advocated integration of colored Americans in all phases of Government and in American life as a whole. In incident after incident, she acted and spoke her mind in a forthright way. It took courage to make such a stand in a city which had become completely Southern in its mores and practices. Members of the Congress from Southern states and some of the President's Cabinet brought all manner of pressures on him to stop Mrs. Roosevelt's campaign against the color line. President Roosevelt, however, knew his wife too well to make such an attempt even though he occasionally ran into political squalls because of her position against segregation.

The other newcomer who acted specifically against the Washington pattern of race was the late Harold L. Ickes. He was astounded to find a rigid pattern of segregation in the Department of the Interior. With characteristic impetuosity he ignored the customary predictions of calamity and ordered immediate abolition of all segregated facilities. When an angry delegation of white employees called on him to demand restoration of segregation, Mr. Ickes ordered a secretary to take the names of the protesters and informed them that he would hold them responsible if any trouble developed.

The rebellion ended there.

Mr. Ickes, as Secretary of the Interior, had jurisdiction over many of the parks, picnic grounds, tennis courts and swimming pools in the District of Columbia. After abolishing racial segregation in the Interior Department itself—an example which eventually was followed by other governmental departments and agencies—Mr. Ickes and Assistant Secretary Oscar L. Chapman tackled Washington's Jim Crow recreational facilities.

Here were some of the precautions which had been taken at Chapman's instructions when the district's swimming pools were desegregated. Carefully selected Park Service policemen and policewomen were assigned to the most pleasant job imaginable in tropic Washington—swimming in the pools controlled by the Interior Department. Without uniform or badge, they could not be distinguished from other swimmers. When a white man acted obstreperously a white policeman would quietly swim alongside the troublemaker, identify himself, and suggest that he either behave or leave the pool. White women police did the same with white female swimmers while colored Park Department employees performed similar duties when Negroes of either sex acted improperly.

Pools operated by the District of Columbia Recreation Board continue to be segregated because the board refuses to emulate the successful procedure worked out by the Interior Department. The Rosedale pool, for example, is located in a section of Washington where the racial balance is exactly equal. On one of the hottest days of the very hot summer of 1952 white children swam happily in the pool while hundreds of colored children peered enviously at them through the bars of the high iron fence which the Recreation Board had erected around the pool.

One evening after the pool had been closed for the day, a twelve-year-old Negro boy climbed over the fence and entered the water. When through inexperience he began to drown, no one could get through the locked gates or climb the fence in time to save him. A riot developed when angry Negro parents picketed the pool and were challenged by white neighbors who were determined to keep the pool white. Negro picketers were arrested and the skull of one of them fractured. The situation became so serious that the pool was closed, thereby depriving whites as well as Negroes of its use during one of the most cruelly hot spells Washington has ever experienced.

Basic to the problem of Washington race relations is residential segregation, as it is all over the nation. As long as Negroes, by one means or another, can be restricted to certain areas, complete integration of schools, employment, recreation, places of public accommodation, places of worship and political institutions can never be achieved. Thus housing in Washington presents the toughest nut of all to crack, and one which, unless cracked, will make all other gains mere palliatives instead of permanent cures. The nation's capital is the most glaring example of how the Federal Government has not only failed to act on this problem but actually has fostered and expanded racial segregation.

It is supremely ironic that this has been done as part of one of the most commendable governmental programs of the twentieth century—helping American citizens to build homes which were obtainable neither through their

own resources nor private enterprise. Washington, like many other American cities, has been encircled during recent years by new housing developments. Virtually none erected during the past twenty years came into being without some form of governmental financial assistance. But Negroes, and in some degree the members of other racial and religious minorities, have been excluded from most of these areas just outside the city, even though their taxes helped make them possible.

As a result, Negroes have been forced to remain within metropolitan Washington even when they were economically able to pay for better homes in suburbs. Only a few were able to buy land and build homes in areas not too distant from transportation, shops and schools. This type of segregation was accomplished, until 1948, through racial restrictive covenants in deeds to property which blanketed Washington and vicinity until the United States Supreme Court ruled that such agreements among property owners could not be enforced by any governmental unit—judicial, legislative or administrative.

Even more restrictive of mobility of Negroes have been the methods used by real-estate agents and the Washington Real Estate Board. In the latter's code of ethics is a provision that no member may sell, lease or rent any property to Negroes in a block which is considered white. In case of doubt, members are required to seek advice of the Real Estate Board as to whether the block in question has been determined by the board itself to be white or Negro.

The new suburban housing for whites has, however, eased somewhat the problem Negroes face in buying somewhat better homes in metropolitan Washington. White home owners who wanted to move to the suburbs discovered they could obtain better prices from Negro purchasers, and the 1948 Supreme Court decision against restrictive covenants freed them from agreements not to sell to colored customers.

Col. Campbell C. Johnson, the only colored member of the National Capital Housing Authority, told me about some of the efforts which are proving successful in cracking the iron curtain of housing which has encircled Negroes in Washington.

"Two important things," he said, "have happened in recent months. Exodus of white families from blocks into which a Negro family moved has been greatly decelerated. These white owners are more and more saying to real-estate agents who try to persuade them to sell, 'I am perfectly satisfied with my home and I do not care who my new neighbor is as long as he is respectable and maintains the character of the neighborhood.' Second, an increasing number of apartment buildings which were taken over with the idea that they would be converted to all-Negro use have not had the expected change in racial composition. Some white families have not desired to move, with the result that a number of excellent apartments in the better sections of the city today have mixed racial occupancy."

Colonel Johnson, who is assistant to Gen. Lewis Hershey, of the Selective Service System, is too modest to relate the role he has played in bringing about this and other changes in the pattern of racial housing in Washington. He was named by President Truman in 1950 as a member of the National Capital Housing Authority after citizens' groups

had campaigned for many years for such representation of one third of the city's permanent population. Shortly after taking office, Colonel Johnson introduced a resolution to end segregated public housing within the city of Washington and include all low-income people in such housing on the basis of need, without restriction as to race, religion, color or national origin. Time and time again over a period of eighteen months his resolution was decisively defeated. It was argued that the general pattern of Washington was segregation and thereby school and recreational facilities were not available to Negroes in areas where white housing projects were located or being erected. It was feared that Congress, holding the purse strings, would be made even more hostile 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, 87 per cent of all public housing in the District of Columbia—as distinguished 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; Cicero, Illinois; or Kansas City, Missouri—in all of which cities friction occurred when Negroes moved into white neighborhoods. "Dire 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 whites. Not 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 3500 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 pastorship of the Rev. A. Powell Davies, is fully integrated racially and is one of the few Protestant institutions where interracial 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 six Protestant ministers out of four hundred," the Right Rev. Stephen G. Spottswood, of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, told me, "are genuinely on our side in 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 Protestants, Catholics have achieved a degree of integration which was described to me enviously and penitently by a distinguished Protestant as "nothing short of terrific." Catholic University, for example, admitted Negroes on the sole 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 imminence 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 when on June 8, 1953, the Supreme Court ordered re-arguments, 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 obtain 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 stenographers and typists 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 1.7 to 3.0 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 mélange 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 as 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 church, 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 1948, have made Washington as well as the nation increasingly aware of the need to correct long-standing evils.

The inexorable 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 measurably 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. THE END