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Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

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WALTER WHITE OF
THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR
THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE

by

Charles A. Pratt

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment
of the
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Masters Thesis

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>INTRODUCTION</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Scottsboro Case</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anti-Lynch Law Attempts</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Fight For an Integrated Army</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White's Background</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White's Early Investigations</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>THE SCOTTSBRO CASE</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The ILD</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The League of Struggle for Negro Rights</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The NAACP's Anti-Communist Attitude</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White's Analysis of the Communist Failure</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Communist's Criticize Themselves</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White Defends NAACP Actions</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White's Solution to the American Black Problem</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Communists Attraction for Blacks</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hugh Murray's Criticism of NAACP Action</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>WALTER WHITE AND THE ANTI-LYNCH BILLS</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The American Press Criticizes Lynching</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Southern Attack on Anti-Lynch Bills</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White's View of the South's Position</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dyer Anti-Lynch Bill of 1922</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defeat of Judge John Parker</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defeat of the Mitchell Anti-Lynch Bill</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td>PAGE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WALTER WHITE AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gavagan Anti-Lynch Bill of 1937</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VanNuys Anti-Lynch Bill of 1940</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Soldiers Experience in the First World War</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army Policies for World War Two</td>
<td>37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940 Presidential Election</td>
<td>37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Direction of the NAACP</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Integrated Division</td>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Army General Classification Test</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What to do With Black Troops</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Visits Europe in 1944</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944 Presidential Election</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note on Sources</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I INTRODUCTION

A study of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) between 1930 and 1955 reveals the directive force of Walter White. His own personality, moderation, use of political pressure and personal contact with government officials became synonymous with the NAACP itself. White, a moderate who avoided direct confrontation with the government over specific issues, was nevertheless unrelenting in his quest for Black equality. Because of his position in the organization White is an effective vehicle to examine the issues faced by the NAACP in this period.

White's first exercise in national leadership occurred in the Scottsboro case in 1931. In this case, which achieved international notoriety, nine Black youths were sentenced to die for the alleged rape of two disreputable white girls. The Communist Party of the United States (CPUS) seized the initiative with a program of pressure and agitation which they hoped would win the "boys" release and make the CPUS attractive to Blacks. White led the NAACP's resistance to what he considered a Communist encroachment on Black America. White and the NAACP had long worked within the American system, and they felt that any external attack on it would destroy Black America as well. Finally, there was the challenge to the NAACP's traditional leadership. This case thus became of greater significance than the
fight to save the lives of nine falsely accused young men.

In the 1930's White also led the NAACP's fight to make lynching a Federal offense. By using the threat of a Black bloc vote in the large Northern cities White exerted enough political pressure to keep an anti-lynching bill before Congress during the 1930's. Unfortunately, White was only strong enough to get these bills up for consideration; he was not stronger than Southern influence in the Congress and the NAACP, liberal Congressmen and Blacks had to settle for the attempt rather than the realization. This type of simulated action rather than implemented reforms will serve as a focal point for attacks on the NAACP by challenging Blacks in the post World War Two era.

In the early 1940's White and the NAACP turned their attention to the war. While giving general support to the defense effort, White called for Black participation on a full and equal basis. Historically, the armed forces had been as rigorous about segregation as the Southern states. He hoped that through full and equal participation in the war white Americans would recognize Blacks as full and equal citizens. Once again White did not call for militant confrontation, but expressed himself through various articles in popular magazines and a critical monograph.

White's background gives some clues to his moderation.
Under Georgia law, White and his family were Black, but not from outward appearances. White had blond hair, blue eyes and skin as fair as any white person. But his family's appearance mattered little. They were legally Black, and this alone made them despised by whites. A race riot in Atlanta in 1906 left a lasting impression on White, as it defined his place in American society:

I was a Negro, though as light as any white a human being with an invisible pigmentation which marked me a person to be hunted, hanged, abused, discriminated against, kept in poverty and ignorance, in order that those whose skin was white would have readily at hand a proof of their superiority, a proof patent and inclusive, accessible to the moron and the idiot as well as the wise and the genius.1

White worked his way through Atlanta University where the predominantly Northern white faculty tempered his anger with Christian pronouncements. The faculty was dedicated to turning out Blacks who were of the highest moral and religious character, and White early recognized the need for the support and recognition of white America.

Upon graduation White served for a short time in an Atlanta Black insurance company, but he did not lose his desire for an active role in the fight for Black equality. In 1918 he became an Assistant Secretary of

the NAACP with a salary of $1,200 a year, and stepped to the firing line in the battle against lawlessness and racial discrimination.

In the next five years White continually put his life in danger through personal investigations of lynchings and other injustices, his physical appearance making these personal investigations possible. He exposed his findings in such liberal magazines as the Nation, New Republic, and Harper's. His was a grisly tale. Nineteenth century lynchings had been simple affairs with the Black being hanged or shot by a small group of whites revenging some alleged crime. By 1915, whites often had turned revenge into community picnics. They traveled hundreds of miles to witness a lynching. They even came to see the Black roasted to death over an open fire, to see him tortured and to take away part of his remains as souvenirs. Lynching was a way to keep the Black man in his "place."

The lynchings moved North after the First World War, becoming race riots. These riots coincided with a "red scare" sweeping America. Southerners told America that any move toward racial equality was a move toward Socialism and thus toward Communism. White and the NAACP were faced with the challenge of disassociating themselves from Communist tactics and ideology and working within the American system for Black equality.
In recent years the NAACP has been much maligned by increasingly impatient voices. Yet the fight put up by Walter White and the NAACP was a good one and their failures were not so much personal as they were the failures of American society in general. A study of three of the more important crisis faced by Walter White and the NAACP in the thirties and forties depicts the battle fought by a man and an organization which always tried to bring about reform "within the accepted channels."
II. THE SCOTTSBORO CASE

In 1931, Walter White and the NAACP faced a challenge for the leadership of Black America. This challenge came not from within the NAACP or even the majority of the Black population, but from the Soviet directed Communist Party of the United States (CPUS). The Communist Party hoped to use the Scottsboro case to rally Black people to the cause of Communism. Nine young Black men were tried in Scottsboro, Alabama, for the alleged rape of two white women of doubtful character. Local Blacks put up the initial effort to free the youths but were defeated by the power of Southern mob rule, and a lack of money. This defeat condemned the youths to death. Walter White felt the NAACP could overturn the convictions in the Alabama or Federal Supreme Court. He based the appeal on the hostile atmosphere present during the trial.

Other groups wanted to free the youths for their own reasons. In the initial trial the International Labor Defense (ILD) sent a letter to presiding Judge A. J. Hawkins stating that he "would be held personally responsible unless the nine defendants were immediately released."¹ White knew that the ILD's threats and mass

¹Walter White, "The Negro and the Communists," Harper's, December 1931, p. 64.
action would only make things worse—Southerners hate to be told how to deal with their "Negro problem." White also felt that the ILD was more interested in the propaganda value of a losing case than in seeing justice.\(^1\) But no matter what the ILD did the Scottsboro case was tailor-made for Communist propaganda. Blacks would again be shown as losers in the capitalistic system. A 1928 conference in Chicago of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights—the Black wing of the CPUS—had debated the American Black problem and concluded that the time was right for action.\(^2\) In October of 1928, Moscow issued a lengthy resolution on how the Communists could capitalize on the oppression of the Black American. Black workers were urged to "form organizations which 'if properly organized and well led' could 'play a considerable role in the class struggle against American imperialism' and in leading 'the movement of the oppressed masses of the Negro populace.'\(^3\) Thus the home party organization charged the CPUS with the responsibility of recruiting Black Americans to Communism.

The CPUS felt that they could easily break down Black America's loyalty to the United States.

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\(^1\)White, *A Man Called White*, p. 131.


\(^3\)ibid.
ground work had been lain by "loyal Americans" whose bigotry and prejudice had given Blacks the status of being men in body only. The depression also helped the Communists. Blacks had been destroyed economically, with all hopes dashed for the present and the future. This lack of a future was especially exploited by Communists in an effort to convert Blacks to their cause. Communists urged Blacks to throw off capitalism and join the proletariat revolution toward a classless society.

To achieve leadership in Black America the Communists had to destroy Blacks' faith in the NAACP, the only influential and sensitive organization Blacks had in America. The Communist plan was simple. The Scottsboro case propaganda would be used to discredit the NAACP. The NAACP would be shown as cold-hearted and inept in its vain attempts to achieve equal justice for Blacks. It would also be shown as a tool of the capitalists. The case against the NAACP was made easy when White and the NAACP were tardy in entering the Scottsboro case after the ILD. Communist propaganda began to tell how the NAACP jumped on the band wagon with feeble attempts to free the "boys," only after the

ILD had already retained counsel for the boys. Throughout the initial trial the ILD contended that only working class pressure could free the defendants. White disapproved of mass pressure and preferred the legal approach. Thus the Communists and the NAACP were at odds over the method to be used.

This strong anti-Communist stand was not immediately accepted by all members of the NAACP. William Pickens, a NAACP Assistant Secretary, endorsed the ILD saying, "The only ultimate salvation for black and white workers was in their united defense, one of the other."\(^1\) Pickens, however, was soon pressured into accepting the NAACP's anti-Communist line.\(^2\) White felt that accepting Communist aid would be adding anti-red feelings to existing anti-Black feelings. The prosecution in the initial Scottsboro trial had exploited anti-Black feelings to the fullest. The NAACP had to be careful because the taint of Communism could destroy everything it had worked for.

The CPUS reacted strongly to NAACP opposition. They called the leadership of the NAACP traitors to the cause of equality for the Black American. William Patterson, Black National Secretary of the ILD, attacked the NAACP


\(^2\)ibid.
leadership in general and Walter White in particular, and appealed to the rank and file members to come over to a joint defense effort:

Scottsboro and the program of the I.L.D. are a call to struggle. The question of the defense of the Scottsboro boys is a political question. The denial of the Constitutional rights raised as an issue of this trial is an evidence of this. . . We call the membership of the N.A.A.C.P. . . . to join and build the Scottsboro Action Committees. . . Step over the heads of your leadership which has linked itself inseparably with the ruling class of America. . . ONLY MASS PRESSURE WILL FREE THE SCOTTSBORO BOYS. bold letters appear in the original

In a letter to the New Republic responding to an editorial on Communists in the Scottsboro case, Herbert Seligmann, Publicity Director of the NAACP, stated that "The N.A.A.C.P. could not in any way be associated with Communists tactics or their defense of the boys." He further stated, "The N.A.A.C.P. feels that the tactics of the Communists have already gravely inflamed sentiment in Alabama and have intensified the difficulty of saving the eight condemned boys." He finished by insisting that the NAACP had the best defense council in the country ready and available if the NAACP would be given complete charge of the case.

The next issue of the New Republic carried a response by Joseph Pass, Publicity Director of the ILD.

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1William Patterson, "Scottsboro," Labor Defender, August 1933, p. 22.

he concentrated on the publicity aspect of the Scottsboro case. He quoted Black newspapers that were disillusioned over the NAACP's role in the Scottsboro case, and their condemnation of NAACP inaction.¹ These Black newspapers, however, backed the Communists only because they felt the NAACP had not done enough; they did not accept the full Communist party line.²

It appeared Communism had the proper time and conditions to take over the leadership of Black America. But the Communists failed. Why? In an article in Harper's, White examined the Communist failure:

That the opportunity to take lasting advantage of this [the Scottsboro case] was lost is almost entirely due to the shortsightedness of the leaders of the Communist party in the United States. Had they been more intelligent, honest, and truthful there is no way of estimating how deeply they might have penetrated into Negro life and consciousness.³

White was referring to the CPUS practice of branding anyone who did not follow the Communist party line as a traitor and a tool of the capitalists. It was evident to White that the Communists were only out to gain propaganda from the case. White knew the Communists call for mass worker pressure would not be effective in the South—the only Southerners working for the

²Ibid.
"boys" freedom were prominent middle and upper-class whites, while white Southern workers were working hardest for the "boys" conviction.

White also felt that "Enemies of the Negro would surely utilize Communist agitation as a pretext for refusal to remedy bad conditions and for stifling legitimate protest by Negroes through attributing it to 'Communist' propaganda." Thus White felt that the Communists were only making things worse for Blacks in the South.

To show further the ineptness of the ILD, White quoted heavily from the Communist Party's Revolutionary Age:

Such is the poisonous blight spread in every direction by the new sectarian policies dominating the Communist Party today, that even this glorious page taking up the defense of the Scottsboro "boys" had been darkened by its ominous shadow. False and suicidal tactics have well nigh undone the achievements of profoundly correct principles! . . . Coupled with this... was an equally false estimation of the role of petty bourgeois organizations among the Negroes as an oppressed people. Nor was any sign exhibited of an appreciation of the importance of gaining a labor base among the white workers... Thus has the Communist Party again gotten itself into the unenviable position that it has been in altogether too frequently in recent months—that of a force for disunity and splitting.

White cited the total swing away from the Communists, even by Black intellectuals. Paraphrasing Dr. W.E.B. DuBois' September, 1931, Crisis article on the Scottsboro case, White was ed of a white "backlash" in the South:

1ibid.


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That if the Communists had been really intelligent they would have joined hands with any and all bodies and individuals who honestly sought to provide the best legal defense possible, and the case won, they could have proceeded to point out that legal defense alone, even if successful, will never solve the larger Negro problem but that further and more radical steps are needed. Unfortunately, American Communists' tactics were neither wise nor intelligent. If the Communists want these lads murdered, then their tactics of threatening judges and yelling for mass action on the part of white Southern workers is calculated to insure this.

White then went on to defend the action of the NAACP in the Scottsboro case:

Clarence Darrow's entrance into the cases at Scottsboro effectively silences in the minds of all but the most intransigent the argument that 'capitalists' are trying to murder the nine Negro boys of the Scottsboro cases. In the meantime the United States can, if it will, learn a lesson from these cases, tragically so typical of three centuries of oppression of the Negro here. The Negro is not turning red just yet; but that circumstance is due chiefly to the blunders of the Communists.2

White deduced that because the NAACP had hired the best legal council in the country, they were the best bet to free the "boys" from the death sentence. He also warned the American people that they must stop prejudice and injustice or there would be a Black-Red union in America.

After telling how the Blacks might turn to Communism, White offered an alternative solution:

There is but one effective and intelligent way in which to counteract Communist efforts

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1 ibid.
2 ibid.
at proselyting among American Negroes, and that method is drastic revision of the almost chronic American indifference to the Negro's plight. Give him jobs, decent living conditions, and homes. Assure him of justice in the courts and protection of life and property in Mississippi as well as in New York. Put an end to flagrant and unchecked disregard of the Negro's constitutional right to vote. In brief, the only antidote to the spread among American Negroes of revolutionary doctrines is even-handed justice.\(^1\)

To White it was the American system that was about to drive the Black American into the arms of the Communists. The only solution was for the United States and all of its citizens to live up to the fundamental principles that they had put forth in all of the articles of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Even if White had agreed with the Communists' philosophy he could not have deserted his cause of equal justice for the Black American. To him Communism meant that Blacks would have two strikes against them. Blacks were aliens in a white society, where skin color was more important than initiative or intelligence. Blacks would also be reds, which would mean a double dose of hatred from white Americans.\(^2\) White still believed in America, and anyone who was a member of the Communist party no longer believed in America, because the Communists were out to destroy the American system of government.

White used the Communists to help in his propaganda

\(^{1}\)Ibid.
\(^{2}\)Ibid.
for equal rights and justice for Blacks. He warned white America that Blacks would no longer stand for unequal treatment and that they would choose alternatives that whites might find unacceptable. The Communist theme of racial and economic equality was a point that Black Americans could see and feel. Reports by the CPUS told of the total equality of all people in the Soviet Union. This was not a strong selling point for whites but for Blacks who never had equality it was impressive. White pointed out that black men could easily respond to the call for class agitation. They were the lower class of American society and it would be easy for them to feel close to the white worker who was a member of a party that would free them from their new bondage.1

White told in plain language why Blacks would look to Communism. America's talk about freedom—while practicing hate and injustice—was weak compared with the Soviet boast of "equality" for the masses.2

If White and the NAACP had joined the CPUS the Black American would have been destroyed. Just being Black put a person in the lowest American cast, and to also be red would make him a man with no friends or future. Every Black would be identified as a red agent and subject to the type of mass persecution that swept German Jews after

1White, "The Negro and the Communists," p. 70.
2Ibid.
1932. The only road for White to take was to work within the system. He knew the Communists were only out to strengthen their position and not to help Blacks.

White and the NAACP have recently been attacked by scholars who think that they were derelict in their defense of the Scottsboro "boys." One such scholar, Hugh Murray Jr., felt the NAACP should have joined with the ILD and made a joint effort to free the "boys."1 But as previously explained, this would have been impossible for the NAACP, which could not afford to be accused of becoming a Communist-front organization. Blacks would have been denied all rights and privileges they had already won on the pretext they were no longer citizens of the United States and because they adhered to a doctrine that was anti-American. To remain independent, the NAACP could not use the same arguments that the ILD had used to challenge the convictions of the "boys."

The ILD challenged the convictions on three grounds: the mob atmosphere in the courtroom prevented a fair trial; the local judge's appointment of an incompetent council; and the exclusion of Blacks from the jury.2 The United States Supreme Court chose to examine only the correctness of the defense procedures. If the NAACP had taken this line of argument they would have exposed their

2ibid.
own incompetence. They had been saying that they were the first on the case and that they backed Mr. Roddy the first defense council to the hilt. The ILD pressed its point and won a new trial for the "boys." Murray felt the ILD was the only group that could have won new trials as the NAACP did not have the proper frame of mind to challenge itself. The NAACP did not challenge itself, but was able to leave this case to the ILD and still not lose face in the Black community because Scottsboro was only one of many efforts that the NAACP was making and had made.

In his autobiography, White gave the best possible summary of the injustice done at Scottsboro:

In the intervening years it has become increasingly clear that the tragedy of a Scottsboro lies, not only in the bitterly cruel injustice which it works upon its immediate victims, but also, and perhaps even more, in the cynical use of human misery by Communists in propagandizing for Communism, and in the complacency with which a democratic government views the basic evils from which such a case arises. A majority of Americans still ignore, . . . the plain implications in similar tragedies.  

The Scottsboro case and other acts like it would make a person who did not have a great love for the United States and what it stands for go over to the Communists or to even leave the country as many American Blacks did in the pre-World War Two era. These men who

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2 White, *A Man Called White*, p. 133.
left were not the share-cropper farmers but the intellectuals who would have made many great contributions to the thought and life of the American people; but they left rather than have to submit to the humiliations and prejudice that were practiced in America, both North and South. White had a great faith in the American system, and he felt that if justice could be done the United States would become the greatest country on earth. This is the only explanation for the man who made so many great efforts to combat injustice by working within the system, even though he knew that the cards were stacked against him.
III. WALTER WHITE AND THE ANTI-LYNCH BILLS

The fight against lynching started before the First World War and continued well beyond the Second World War. In the 1930's this movement gathered force among concerned citizens, both Black and white. A 1919 survey prepared by the NAACP for Senate investigators revealed fifty lynchings during the first six months of that year, and all but four of these were Black, ten of whom were burned at the Stake.¹ The Literary Digest expressed the concern of white citizens in an article entitled, "Mob-rule as a National Menace," which asked, "Must Americans admit that they share with the Germans the cruel and bloodthirsty qualities that go with the name 'Hun'?"² The war had brought out a humanitarian concern that America's policies toward Black citizens would be classified on the same level as the atrocities committed by the Germans and their Turkish allies during the World War. Concern was so strong even Southern church women denounced the evil of lynching. Why was nothing ever done to destroy lynching? Simply stated people with the power to correct social problems seldom do anything until the problem hurts them, and lynching was a problem

¹"Mob-rule as a National Menace," Literary Digest, October 18, 1919, p. 9.
²Ibid.
peculiar only to Blacks.

Southern Senators and Representatives zealously attacked the anti-lynch bills under consideration. They knew the true reasons for lynching were not the stated cause of rape but rather race and economics. After the great 1919 riot in Chicago, Walter White insisted that the causes were first, race prejudice and second, economic competition. The growing economic power of Blacks was even being felt in the South. When the great post-World War One Black migration to the North was over, the Southern planter found himself deprived of one of his greatest assets—cheap Black labor. Now Blacks could almost demand the wage that they expected to receive and be assured of somewhere near that price. Studies made of the period 1890 to 1940 comparing the number of lynchings to the rise and fall of cotton prices and land values showed that during periods of low cotton prices Blacks were lynched with greater frequency for some suspected crime. Whites used lynching to keep Blacks from receiving the benefits of American citizenship. Southern Congressmen knew equality for Blacks would put them out of office and Blacks were a majority in a number

1Walter White, "Chicago and its Eight Reasons," Crisis, October, 1919, p. 299.

2Ibid.

of Southern districts. No man, Black or white, wants an unresponsive or irresponsible representative.

The position of Southern Congressmen was outlined by Walter White in testimony before the Sub-Committee, of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary:

In many of the states, where most of the lynchings take place, Negro citizens are disfranchised in flagrant violation of the Federal Constitution. As a result, the law-enforcement officials in those states, and those charged with the duties of preventing lynchings and seeing the law is upheld, feel they have no responsibility to Negro citizens, who are voteless in most of these states, and prefer to yield to the pressure and to the threats of the mobs themselves.1

A decline in the number of lynchings during and after the First World War led many people to believe that the evil of lynching was dying. But it was not, as each lynching committed caused a great outcry from the nation's press. The St. Louis Star felt that an answer must be found before "the mob becomes a greater menace to America than German militarism was to Europe."2 With the liberal voices of the nation pushing Congress closer to a federal law or some other action against lynching, the lynchers began to cover up their deeds. Though fewer lynchings were reported in the press, they were at their peak of cruelty. Cold blooded murder was not enough; mobs needed

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sadistic revenge to calm their passion for blood. White investigated one of these sadistic events in 1918. He found evidence that many Blacks had been executed in Lowndes and Brooks counties in Georgia. The killings ended with a pregnant Black woman being tied to a tree and burned alive, after which she was split open and her child still alive was thrown to the ground and stomped to death by some of the brave members of the lynch mob.1 In both the North and the South mobs had returned to the kind of barbarism common to pre-Christian Rome, but these men professed Christian virtues. The small time preachers, using their eloquence and a mastery of mob psychology, swayed mobs to the belief that Blacks were lower than dogs and must be kept down at all costs—even if this meant using anti-Christian actions.

This is the atmosphere Walter White found when he investigated lynchings for the NAACP. His light skin and a knowledge of Southern folkways, made it easy for him to win the confidence of the local people.2 Most of the information that he handed over to state officials was taken directly from participants in lynch mobs—though significantly enough, this information was never used to convict any lynchers in any states. His travels


2Walter White, A Man Called White, p. 41.
both North and South exposed lynchers for what they were—sexually tormented, perverted cowards. Both White and James Weldon Johnson, the NAACP Secretary during the 1920's, felt Blacks were being misused by a combination of white hysteria and local officials' unwillingness to protect Blacks from this hysteria. To correct the problem they guided NAACP efforts to secure the passage of a federal law to protect Blacks from their fellow citizens.

The Dyer anti-lynch bill of 1922 was the first piece of legislation passed by the House of Representatives (231 for; 119 against) since reconstruction that specifically protected Blacks from lynching. The Dyer bill, however, never became law. When it arrived in the Senate, Southern Senators threatened a filibuster and it died in the Senate Committee on the Judiciary. The filibuster or threat of a filibuster was the strongest weapon in the Southern arsenal of tricks. They argued, they talked and they used every parliamentary move to keep the bill from being debated, much less coming to a vote. In his autobiography, White blamed Senate rules for the bill's death: "The archaic Senate rules which permit any Senator to filibuster by speaking twice on any bill and on each amendment thereto for as long as he wishes again stymied our efforts," said White.¹ The filibuster or its threat

would kill all of the anti-lynching bills ever brought before the Senate. The threat of a filibuster kept the Dyer bill in the Senate Committee on the Judiciary until the 1922 session came to a close, thus automatically killing the House-passed bill.

The NAACP attempted to force the Dyer bill's passage by flexing its political muscle but found it seriously lacking. It called attention to its cause by a series of anti-lynching parades in New York and across the nation, and it issued a statement saying that twelve persons had been lynched in May and that five of these had been burned at the stake. The NAACP's thirteenth annual conference issued a statement threatening all those Congressmen who opposed the Dyer bill with an uphill fight in their next try for election. These tactics were of no consequence, for the Dyer bill never reached the Senate floor. Each new Congress would find a new anti-lynch bill presented but the NAACP was never able to muster enough political strength to get one out of either the House or the Senate.

By the late 1920's, White felt that the American public was not interested in pressing a Federal anti-lynch bill through Congress because there was no threat of an outbreak of the infamy as there had been in the early 1920's. The NAACP reported 18 lynchings for 1925 and 20

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for 1926. After an extremely brutal lynching in Aiken, South Carolina, in late 1926, White again began to urge the passage of an anti-lynching bill.

White found not only Blacks but also whites being ruled by mob terror, as most residents of Aiken were so frightened they would not even talk about conditions, and the state officials were powerless to do anything. Only the federal government could correct the problem, but the furor White raised in both Northern and Southern newspapers was soon forgotten. By 1928, there were eleven lynchings—the lowest number since records began some forty years before. Lynchers knew their work must go underground, because decent Americans would have insisted on an anti-lynch bill. The small number of lynchings lulled many well intentioned Americans into thinking the South had finally become civilized.

White, however, continued his moral arguments for an anti-lynch bill. "Congress is apathetic about lynchings," he wrote in 1927, "but it is very much interested in baseball scandals. The race problem in this country has

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resolved into the saving of the bodies of Blacks and the souls of whites.\textsuperscript{1} Furthermore he argued that if states could or would not protect all of their citizens the federal government must step in and use its authority and power to protect all citizens.

Southern Congressional reaction to any proposed anti-lynch bills was predictable. One common argument was that any anti-lynch bill would make for open season on the honor of Southern womanhood. They also argued that lynching was the only law that Blacks understood. They felt that any form of anti-lynch bill passed would raise the number of attacks on Southern womanhood to heights never before recorded. These statements and others were calculated to appeal to any emotional fears they could find in the rest of the nation.

White rebutted these Southern objections with statistics proving less than 20\% of the Blacks lynched had committed the crime of rape, or any other crime of passion. Blacks were lynched for crimes white businessmen wanted to cover up, or even worse for no real reason. It was no crime of passion for a man to ask for the wages he had earned, nor was it a crime of passion for him to walk down a street and not jump into the gutter when a white person approached. Blacks were not asking special treatment but only the same treatment that should have been awarded

to all United States citizens. If the states could not or would not provide justice it was the responsibility of the federal government to step in and provide for the protection of all citizens.

Southern Senators also attacked the constitutionality of the anti-lynch bills. They concentrated on the power that must be retained by the states and the danger of putting too much authority in the hands of the federal government. They argued that anti-lynch bills would make the Southern states administrative departments of the Northern-dominated federal government. States rights, local control, and the American way of government would be destroyed. White countered the constitutional question with another moral answer. He felt the duty of the federal government was to protect all citizens regardless of the feelings of state and local officials. He also felt that the constitutional issue was just another smoke screen:

"A great many of those persons who bring up the constitutional issue," he wrote, "are primarily concerned with masking motives for opposition to the legislation, which are considerably less worthy than honest concern of danger in the constitutionality of the anti-lynch bill."¹ For White it was better to be morally right and legally wrong than to be legally right and morally wrong.

¹Walter White, Congressional Digest, June-July 1935, p. 192.
The stock market crash of 1929 and the onset of the depression caused an increase in lynchings. Ten were reported in 1930 with a peak of twenty-eight in 1933, and then a steady decline to eight in 1936 and three in 1939. After the crash of 1929, White felt the economic crisis would allow the rope to again become the dominate instrument of terror—keeping Blacks in an inferior position and keeping them from the fruits of economic recovery. The increase in lynching led White to strengthen his efforts to make lynching and mob violence a violation of federal law. He was convinced that federal action would no longer allow white citizens the freedom to attack Blacks without fear of punishment.

White's quest for an anti-lynch law was supported by many Northern Senators and Representatives. There were several reasons for this support. Some congressmen felt the time had come for justice with full and equal citizenship for the Black American, but along with this there were political considerations. Blacks in the North had voted faithfully for the Republican Party ever since Reconstruction—even though the Republican Party had cast them aside in the 1920's. By 1934, Black voting power had shown it could be an effective political weapon. Black votes found the strength in 1930 to defeat the bid of Judge John Parker for a seat on the Supreme Court. President Hoover had nominated Parker to strengthen his power in the South. White expressed it this way: "The

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nomination was nothing more than a political sop to that section and group which believes in nullifying the political rights of United States citizens because of their color."\(^1\) White and the NAACP also opposed Parker because, "the utterance made by Judge Parker in a 1920 political speech, contravening the spirit and letter of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, disqualified him from sitting on the Supreme Court bench."\(^2\) White thus directed the NAACP's campaign to work for the defeat of the nomination in the Senate by using the voter pressure that they had acquired. After the final vote Judge Parker had lost by the narrow margin of 41 to 39. This was a clear victory for White, the NAACP, and the Black citizens of the United States.\(^3\)

White was not content with defeating Parker; he also wanted to make an example of those Republican Senators who had voted for confirmation. He chose Ohio as his test ground. The state was predominantly Republican and it looked impossible for anyone to defeat incumbent Roscoe McCulloch, but a strong effort by White and the NAACP was able to defeat McCulloch by the narrowest of margins. The 1930 election served as a warning that Blacks would


\(^2\)ibid.

\(^3\)Walter White, *A Man Called White*, p. 110.
no longer vote Republican just because it had been the
party of Abraham Lincoln.

Blacks made their final break for the Republican
Party in the election of 1932. Blacks voted in large
numbers in Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio and Massachussets
for Franklin D. Roosevelt the Democratic candidate,
although many Blacks were apprehensive of John Garner,
Roosevelt's running mate from Texas, a state that was near
the head of the lynching list. Congressmen from these and
other Northern states were now conscious of the Black vote
when they voted on legislation affecting Black citizenship.

The Dyer bill of 1922, the Castigan-Wagner bill of
1935, the Gavagan bill of 1937, and the VanNuys bill of
1940 all followed the same pattern. The bills attacked
local and state officials who were negligent in the dis­
charge of their responsibilities toward the citizens under
their jurisdiction. Without protective laws, local
officials felt the need to look into the Black problem
only when a Black gained higher social status or higher
wages, or otherwise became an acceptable member of society.

White could not be turned away from his goal of a
strong anti-lynch bill. While the debate fumed over the
Gavagan bill of 1937, Southern senators tried a new
strategy. Hatton Sumners of Texas proposed a weak
substitute bill through his fellow congressman, Arthur W.
Mitchell, a Black Democrat from Chicago. White saw the
Mitchell bill as "so innocuous that we were convinced that

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it would do little if anything toward eradicating lynchings or punishing lynchers." Sumners remained confident and told White the NAACP did not have nerve enough to oppose an anti-lynch bill proposed by the only Black congressman. Sumners was wrong in his evaluation of White's integrity. White put pressure on anti-lynch supporters and the Mitchell bill went down to defeat 157 to 122. The Mitchell bill was defeated only because it was not what White wanted. In the fifteen years after 1922 the NAACP under the direction of White had gained considerable political power and it was no longer afraid to use it.

Congressman Mitchell had been at odds with the NAACP ever since becoming a member of Congress and this weak anti-lynch bill was just another in a long series of disputes. In Mitchell's first speech before Congress he had said that he would not work for any "race" issues and he was the congressman of all the people, even though elected by the Black community of Chicago. Mitchell had made so many anti-Black statements the NAACP felt they could not depend on him in pushing for an effective anti-lynch bill.

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2Ibid.
The defeat of the Mitchell bill was only part of the NAACP's strength. Immediately after the Mitchell bill's defeat there was one of the most brutal lynchings on record in Duck Hill, Mississippi. This lynching played on the conscience of many who were only half-hearted supporters of an anti-lynch bill and also it played on the hearts and minds of the constituents of the congressmen who were not fully committed to the Gavagan anti-lynch bill. Because of the Mitchell Bill's defeat, the Gavagan bill was finally brought to a vote and was approved 277 to 119 by the House.

White's efforts in the anti-lynch fights of 1935 and 1938 were monumental. So strong were they, in fact, that the Southern filibuster lasted fourteen days in 1935 before the Castigan-Wagner bill was taken out of consideration and it took seven weeks and half a million dollars to defeat the Gavagan anti-lynch bill. White's congressional power had come to be recognized. James F. Byrnes of South Carolina stood in the Senate and said, "One Negro... has ordered this bill to pass and if a majority can pass it, it will pass. If Walter White should consent to have this bill laid aside, its advocates would desert it as quickly as football players unscramble when the whistle of the referee is heard." White's word was the only thing that kept the bill before Congress. Congressmen in

Northern states with large Black populations could not maintain secure positions with the threat of a Black vote against them in future elections. The Senate filibuster against the Gavagan bill continued until the pressure of starving millions in need of food and money was used as an excuse to get it set aside.

The VanNuys anti-lynch bill of 1940 was the last to pass the House, but it never received the attention the previous bills had. The war in Europe and Asia had averted the attention of public opinion. Even the Crisis stopped talking about lynching and ran headlines like "When do we Fly?" and "Jim Crow in the Army Camps."1 Blacks still wanted to be accorded full citizenship and the honor of fighting the Nazis to keep Hitler's racial attitudes away from the few freedoms they had already won.

White's activity in supporting anti-lynch bills was indicative of his whole career as NAACP Secretary. He did not call for mass action, nor did he shout political slogans, and he definitely did not threaten the opponents of anti-lynch bills. He went about his work quietly and without fanfare. He worked with men who had the power to accomplish his ends. His personal approach to these men in power was effective. He managed to put Blacks in a position they had never held in American society. He would be criticized by later Black militants for his lack

1Cover, Crisis, December 1940.
of achievement, but White's work was to make the NAACP an organization that could put pressure on officials and be sure that there would be a fair hearing. White, like the NAACP itself, was a product of the early 20th century and not of the mid-20th century. If either had called for mass demonstrations and disruptions, the place Blacks occupy today would assuredly be similar to the position of Blacks in South Africa.
IV WALTER WHITE AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Writing today it seems incredible that there was a time when people were offended by not being allowed to participate in war, but in 1940 Black Americans were upset because they were not going to be allowed to fight in the forthcoming war. After their experience in World War One, they felt the time had come at last for them to be 100% Americans. The Army, however, made no provision for Black troops, and World War One policies of exclusion and segregation were continued. Army policy makers felt that Blacks were supposedly incapable of holding up under combat conditions and lacked the mental qualities to make good soldiers; thus they would only impair the war effort if they were given an equal opportunity to participate. Walter White and the NAACP struggled throughout the war to give Black men equal responsibility and participation in the war effort.

During the First World War, Black troops in Europe had faced humiliating problems. They were either attached to French units or placed into segregated labor units. They were not allowed to speak with the French—especially the women. They were given fewer leave privileges, and they faced harsh discipline—all because they were Black. In spite of these handicaps Black troops have an impressive
First World War record.¹

Army policies at the beginning of World War Two were based on what was thought to be the lessons of the First World War and Black troops again were used exclusively in segregated labor battalions. The few Black troops who had seen combat in the First World War had been attached to the French Army; thus white commanders had no knowledge of the use or the capacity of Black troops. If the situation of the Black enlisted man was bad, the Black officer fared even worse. First World War Blacks were seldom allowed to become officers, and when they did they were treated as though they were still second-class citizens and not officers in the United States Army. Thus it was difficult for Black officers to command respect from Black troops, and they were not allowed any authority in the discipline or conduct of white troops. Black officers were used exclusively to make an impression on the Black press and on Black leaders, so they would not stir up Black resistance to the war effort. These officers were carefully chosen so none of them would rebel against army authority and treatment. White reflected in his autobiography why he was not chosen for officer candidate school—his skin was too light.² A war rumor had made the rounds that the


²Walter White, A Man Called White, p. 36.
Kaiser planned to subvert the American army by using light-skinned Blacks who would then rise up and massacre white people in their beds; thus "light skinned Negroes who could easily pass as white" could not be trusted and Walter White was by passed even though he had the talent, education, and desire to become an army officer.¹

Between 1919 and 1940 the War Department's policies had remained the same. Blacks were excluded from officer ranks in the regular army, although some were admitted to reserve and national guard units. Thus in 1939 there were only three Black officers in the regular army and 1,640 enlisted men.² Navy policies were even more stringent, Blacks were not allowed to rise above the rank of messboy and the Marine Corps did not accept any Blacks.

With the approach of the 1940 Presidential election Blacks again put pressure on the government for a change in policy. The election was crucial to Franklin Roosevelt. He was going against the two-term tradition and to win he was advised to court the Black vote.³ Black leaders, however, did not acquiesce. White told both the Democrats and the President that "any candidate for President meriting the colored support must stand first for the elimination

¹Ibid.
³Walter White, A Man Called White, p. 186.
of the color line from the armed services."¹ The War
Department, however, continued to resist any type of
change. In September, 1940, White, A. Phillip Randolph,
and T. Arnold Hill met with President Roosevelt to discuss
the possibility of an end to the War Department's policies
of exclusion. White as spokesman told the President of
the low morale among Blacks because of exclusion and
expressed the hope that the President would consider the
use of Black troops as both officers and enl. men in
all branches of the armed forces without regard to race
or color.² After about an hour of discussion the inter­
view ended. White and the others left with the impression
that Mr. Roosevelt would look into the situation and make
needed changes in policy and report to them at a future
date.

In early October the three Black leaders were shocked
to read a release by President Roosevelt's press secretary
Stephen Early stating that War Department policies were
not to be changed: Blacks would serve only in segregated
units, they would have only manual labor jobs, and they
would be excluded from the marines.³ The Black press
accused White of selling out to the government. White
and the others reacted quickly to the charges and issued

¹Richard Dalfiume, Desegregation, p. 31.
²Ibid. p. 37
a copy of the presentation made to the President showing that they had demanded an end to the War Department's segregation policies. White and other Black leaders also added that they could not support the President in his bid for reelection unless he changed his mind.

White had gone so far as to write a letter to President Roosevelt complaining that his position as a Black leader had been "seriously impaired." Roosevelt was forced to decide whether to soothe hurt Black feelings or lose the Black vote to Wendle Willkie, who was making a strong bid for Black support by calling for an end to segregation in the armed forces. Roosevelt decided to soothe feelings. In a political move the week before the election, Benjamin O. Davis was promoted, making him the first Black general in United States History, William Hastie was appointed as Assistant Secretary of War, and Campbell Johnson was made advisor to the Director of Selective Service.

Roosevelt's work was not in vain. White wrote Roosevelt on the eve of the election, "We have worked night and day during recent weeks to take personally to the people the things you did and wrote, and I am certain tomorrow will reveal that Negroes know the

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1 Richard Dalfiume, Desegregation, p. 41.

2 Ibid. pp. 35-36. and Walter White, A Man Called White, p. 188.

3 Ibid.
truth.\textsuperscript{1} White felt the President had done an acceptable job of trying to end segregation in the armed forces. Other Blacks were not as pleased as White with Roosevelt's action. The Baltimore \textit{Afro-American}, which had long been at odds with White and the NAACP, wrote in an editorial, "We asked Mr. Roosevelt to change the rules of the game and he counters by giving us some new uniforms."\textsuperscript{2} The \textit{Afro-American} felt Roosevelt had again duped Black Americans.

The NAACP's attack on the War Department's policy of segregation, however, was a new trend in the organization's thinking. During the 1930's the NAACP had concerned itself with attempting to correct violent infringements on Black citizens civil rights and particularly it had worked for a Federal anti-lynching bill. Now it was concerned with the social impact of segregation as a way of keeping Blacks in their "place." Civil rights were worthless without equality and equality was not possible in a segregated society. World War One had taught Blacks that the patterns of segregation practiced by white Americans if left to continue would destroy the Black race in America, or would soon return it to a position similar to the Africans in the Union of South Africa. Segregation

\textsuperscript{1}Richard Dalfiume, \textit{Desegregation}, p. 43.  
\textsuperscript{2}ibid.
if left to continue could only destroy.¹

The outbreak of war in 1941 and the subsequent call for draftees and volunteers brought the problem to a head. Blacks were asking for a share in prosecuting the war. Many whites too wanted more Blacks to serve, as War Department policies of exclusion meant that more whites would have to be drafted.² Finally what was to be done with the Blacks who were entering the army—many special new segregated facilities had to be built and maintained.

In December of 1941 White tried to break War Department segregation policies from another angle. He proposed the army form an integrated division composed of volunteers. After activation, the division "would serve as a tremendous lift to the morale of the Negro... and would also have tremendous psychological effect upon white Americans, and it would give the lie to the attacks made by Nazi Germany... to the effect that the United States talks about democracy but practices racial segregation and discrimination."³ From the War Department came the expected reply: "Your comments have been made a matter of official record for such reference as circumstances may warrant."⁴ There was no support in the War Department and

²Richard Daifumé, Desegregation, p. 36.
³Ibid. p. 48.
⁴Walter White, A Man Called White, p. 222.
none from anyone else who could rectify the situation, even though many young men—both Black and white—were willing to join such a unit if it were ever activated.¹

By insisting on a policy of segregation the War Department was working against itself. Graduates of segregated Southern Black schools with inferior educations were failing the Army General Classification Test (AGCT). To some this was proof that whites were superior, and thus Blacks should be excluded from the armed forces. But even the Blacks who scored higher than poorly educated Southern whites became laborers while the whites became technicians. But because AGCT standards were found to be too rigid—many men would have been exempt—and they had to be relaxed to allow men with lower qualifications the privilege of joining and Blacks were in this category.²

Even with this relaxation of the mental standards many Blacks had been passed over in favor of whites because there were too few all Black divisions for the influx of Black volunteers, and the army was reluctant to authorize any new all Black divisions.³

To make use of the Black draftees and volunteers, the War Department made special plans in February of 1942 to place them into labor divisions. The army had committed

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²Richard Dalfiume, *Desegregation*, p. 57.
³ibid., p. 48-49.
itself to a quota of 10% Black strength for the war.¹ The War Department went out of its way to make work for the men and to give their divisions high sounding titles like "port battalions," "water supply battalions," "gasoline supply battalions," "ammunition battalions," "station maintenance companies," and "metropolitan service companies."² These units were to do all of the dirty hard jobs the army had; there was even talk about some Black units being used to pick cotton.³ These units also were designed to keep the Black soldier in his "place." This situation broke down the morale of Black people both in and out of the military. Black soldiers worked reluctantly because they were not allowed an active and equal part in the war effort. Black civilians were not excited about supporting the war because there were many war related industries that still would not allow them the opportunity to work, though there was a shortage of men to fill the jobs that were available.⁴

White went to Europe and Africa in 1944 as War correspondent for the New York Post. His findings after interviews with great numbers of Black troops and white

¹Richard Dalfiume, Desegregation, p. 36.
⁴Walter White, A Man Called White, pp. 224-225.
officers were published in a book entitled *A Rising Wind*, which was a social and military history of Black Americans during the Second World War. Upon arriving in England he found the military surprisingly cooperative. But he also found War Department policies being followed to the letter, with all Black soldiers in segregated labor units. Black soldiers laboring in segregated units also caused America's peculiar racial attitudes to be transferred to Europe. If Blacks did only manual labor they must be inferior. Service organizations were segregated—at great expense; towns were put off limits to Blacks and others put off limits to whites; white soldiers told fantastic tales of Blacks being devils with tails; and finally military discipline was used to break down Blacks who dared to speak out against injustice.

To his surprise White found that Englishmen did not believe these tales, and in fact some pubs were made off limits—voluntarily by the owners—to white American soldiers, for the exclusive use of Black soldiers and Englishmen.

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2*ibid.* p. 16.


5*ibid.* p. 11.
Englishmen were pleased by the behavior of Black soldiers and were astonished at the actions of white soldiers and commanders in their personal and professional relations with the Black soldier.¹

Placing Black soldiers in labor battalions was depressing, but even worse was the policy of placing white officers in charge, especially when the officers were too insensitive or too prejudiced to care for the feelings or morale of the Black soldier. Without exception, Black soldiers told White of the uneven administration of justice. For the same offence committed by a white soldier or even a lesser offence Black soldiers received the maximum punishment. One of the many examples White cited in A Rising Wind concerned a Black soldier who was given six months in the stockade for missing bed check, plus an additional twelve months for calling the court prejudiced, while a white soldier was given only three months for beating up his superior officer and calling him every name in the book.²

In addition to the tension caused by prejudiced white officers, segregation caused many other emotional problems for Blacks. Many studies of the efficiency of American soldiers after the war found that men placed in a segregated

¹Walter White, A Rising Wind, p. 22-23.
²Ibid, p. 24-25. also Walter White, A Man Called White, pp. 244-245.
unit are already made to feel inferior and not a part of the real army.\textsuperscript{1} Everything that happens is blamed on racial prejudice and not on the army system.\textsuperscript{2} White was convinced the only way to make Blacks feel that they were finally American citizens was to make them an integral part of the army.

The War Department did not alter its policies of segregation until December, 1944, when the Germans began a counter attack popularly known as the Battle of the Bulge. This battle forced the need for more troops in a hurry and the only available ones were Blacks in labor battalions stationed in England. These Black troops sent volunteers who were integrated into white divisions on a platoon basis— one Black platoon to each white company. Total integration was thus still ignored by the War Department.\textsuperscript{3} This token integration was, however, quite successful. For the first time Blacks were able to show what they were capable of and they preformed in an exceptional manner. But as soon as the danger was past, and the Americans were again driving the Germans back, there was no longer a need for the extra man power, and the Black troops were returned to their segregated labor battalions.

\textsuperscript{1}David G. Mandelbaum, \textit{Soldier Groups and Negro Soldiers}, (Berkley, California: University of California Press, 1952) p. 95.
\textsuperscript{2}ibid.
\textsuperscript{3}Walter White, \textit{A Man Called White}, P. 230.
In 1944, as in 1940, the Black vote loomed decisive in the Presidential election. White estimated that at least 17 states with a total of 281 electoral votes were balanced by the power of the Black vote. Black leaders knew that they had the power to make demands and to control the vote for the party that responded. In a June meeting White and a number of other Black leaders drafted an open statement to the two political parties to see what the response would be:

No injustice embitters Negroes more than continued segregation and discrimination in the armed forces. The national policy of segregating Negroes in the armed forces violates every principle of democracy. Any party or candidate that hopes to win the support and respect of Negroes and all progressive groups must prove their belief in democracy by adopting a democratic program for the integration of all Americans into unsegregated military forces. . .

Neither party was responsive to this plank in the Black platform, but the Democrats had proved themselves to be more responsive to other Black needs; thus, as in 1940, the Black vote again went to Franklin Roosevelt.

The war ended with only some small gains for Blacks in the armed forces. They were now promoted in both the Navy and Marines, and in some units the punishment was on an equal basis, but a lot still needed to be done.

1Walter White, A Man Called White, p. 262.
2Ibid. p. 264.
The three challenges faced by Walter White and the NAACP in this paper illustrate only a part of his life. He was constantly working for Black equality even though he could have easily passed over into the white community. His was the conviction that one day there would be an America where the Black man would be looked upon as an equal citizen. In all of these cases, White worked quietly and in the background; he was not the type of man who sought the spotlight. Although he was an intellectual, the readers of his books cannot miss the impact and intensity of his work.

When we look at White we must avoid placing his life in the context of the 1960's. Seen from today's perspective, he seems cautious and satisfied with minor gains; in fact, he would be called an "uncle tom" in today's vernacular. This is not the case. An "uncle tom" always proves ready to give in; White, however, never compromised his ideals. His approach was noninflammatory but nevertheless directed toward achievable goals. If we take the example of two radical white groups of his time, the Industrial Workers of the World and the Communist Party of the United States, we see that they were literally destroyed by the majority of the people who felt a threat to their American dream. White had to work quietly while making a political base from which to launch his attacks on prejudice and dis-
He was not able to work effectively in Congress until after 1930, when along with Black support through the NAACP, he was able to defeat the Senators who had supported Judge John Parker. Once established, this political base gave Blacks a bargaining point from which to work. White also was a master strategist; he was able to concede a few battles to win the overall war for Black equality.

Because of White's long tenure as head of the NAACP, that organization is even today staffed in the top positions by men who were under the direct influence of White's philosophy. They saw patience and hard work paying off and they were willing to remain patient until their work was done. But to say the patience of White implied a lack of courage is a totally false assumption. In everything that he worked for there was determination and courage of the first degree. In his investigation of lynchings in the South, he was close to being lynched himself but was able to escape just before they found his true identity. From these early investigations came the many first-hand articles he wrote for Northern newspapers and magazines. In White's work for an anti-lynch bill there were numerous occasions where White stood up to the top congressional leaders and told exactly what he wanted for the Blacks of America. To even stand up to top officials was somewhat of a new role for a Black man to play as the twenties and thirties were times when the
Black man was treated as less than dirt in many parts of the country. This example of White should show the present leaders of the NAACP, the Congress and the many cities across the United States that for Blacks the American dream—whatever it may be for millions of others—must be something that can be realized.
VI BIBLIOGRAPHY

In my research into the life of Walter White, I had hoped to make more of a biographical study of his early life as an investigator of lynchings. But a lack of any personal information on White's life other than that included in his autobiography precluded a more definitive study. I was, however, left with large amounts of White's published material and felt that some effort should be made to at least put his life into the perspective of his time.

Included in the bibliography are many articles that do not appear in the footnotes, they were used as a background and I felt that to include these would give the person who is interested in White a look at some of the many articles he wrote. This bibliography is in no way definitive as I have included none of the articles he wrote on other events than the three included in this paper.

Books


Periodicals


Archivist Documents

Yale University. Archives, Carl VanVechten Collection.

Yale University. Archives, Walter White Manuscript file.