

“WE HAVE...KEPT THE NEGROES’ GOODWILL AND SENT THEM AWAY”:

BLACK SAILORS, WHITE DOMINION IN THE NEW NAVY, 1893-1942

A Thesis

by

CHARLES HUGHES WILLIAMS, III

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2008

Major Subject: History

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ABSTRACT

“We have . . . kept the negroes’ goodwill and sent them away”:

Black Sailors, White Dominion in the New Navy, 1893-1942.

(August 2008)

Charles Hughes Williams, III, B.A., University of Virginia

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. James C. Bradford

Between 1893 and 1920 the rising tide of racial antagonism and discrimination that swept America fundamentally altered racial relations in the United States Navy. African Americans, an integral part of the enlisted force since the Revolutionary War, found their labor devalued and opportunities for participation and promotion curtailed as civilian leaders and white naval personnel made repeated attempts to exclude blacks from the service. Between 1920 and 1942 the few black sailors who remained in the navy found few opportunities.

The development of Jim Crow in the U.S. Navy occurred in three phases. During the first, between 1893 and 1919, a *de facto* policy excluded African Americans from all ratings save those of the messman's branch. The second major phase began in April 1919 with the cessation of domestic enlistments in the messman's branch. This meant the effective exclusion of blacks, as the navy had previously limited them to this one area of service. Between World War I and 1933 thousands of East Asians enlisted as messmen and stewards, replacing native-born Americans. The third phase, between

1933 and 1942, represented a qualified step forward for blacks as the navy again began to recruit them, though it limited them to the messman branch. In their circumscribed roles on board ship, black messmen and stewards suffered discrimination and possessed few opportunities for advancement.

In the late-1930's and early-1940's public figures, including prominent leaders of the African American community, charged the navy, army, and defense industries with practicing racial discrimination. The navy, reflecting its general conservatism, responded slowly to demands for change. By 1942, however, the navy began detailing black men – to billets outside the messman's branch, a first step away from Jim Crow-style policies.

This thesis analyzes the evolution of discriminatory and exclusionary enlistment policies in the navy. While others have provided the basic outline of segregation in the navy, this thesis provides a more complete analysis of the navy's actions in the context of wider American society. This thesis also confirms that the navy was a slow-moving actor which followed the society's lead and did not substantially revise existing racial hierarchy.

DEDICATION

For Jenny.

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I am thankful for my parents and their willingness to support me and my dream of becoming an historian. I am thankful as well for all of my other family members and friends for their love and encouragement.

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I accept any errors contained herein as my own.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On 26 July 1948 President Harry Truman promulgated Executive Order 9981 stating that individuals serving in the armed forces of the United States would receive “equality of treatment and opportunity . . . without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.”¹ Although complete equality was not immediately realized, and arguably has never been achieved, Truman’s order signaled a dramatic shift away from open racism and discrimination within the military.

Since virtually the birth of the republic both the American army and navy enlisted African Americans to help fill the ranks. During peacetime, few blacks served in the army, but mariners of color and foreign birth were essential in sustaining the American navy, particularly in times of peace when native-born white mariners opted for other, more lucrative employment rather than national service. During the American Civil War African Americans, including thousands of former slaves, helped fill critical manpower voids within the navy. A small group of these individuals succeeded in winning praise from their officers and distinction through their service as pilots and guides to Union vessels operating along the southern coasts and through meritorious service in combat.

Despite their long and distinguished record of service, insult and injury to black

This thesis follows the style and format of the *Journal of American History*

¹ John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, eds. *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=60737> (April 2, 2008).

sailors from white shipmates formed a near constant part of the experience on nonwhites at sea. White sailors endeavored to produce unwelcoming conditions on station and on board ship. Commissioned and petty officers frequently denied blacks promotion and selected them for the most difficult and demeaning work. All of this while legislators made repeated attempts with varying degrees of success to limit or exclude nonwhites from participating in both the American armed services. Despite all of these hardships, African Americans persevered in the naval service.

This study considers the worst period in race relations for the U.S. Navy, spanning from approximate 1893 to 1942. The deterioration of the position of nonwhites generally and African Americans particularly during the time period reflected the changing nature of both the American navy and public at large. The development of the New Navy with its steam-powered, steel-hulled ships carrying modern rifled guns necessitated structural changes within the body of enlisted personnel and the procedures employed to bring such individuals into the service. While the navy was experiencing a veritable rebirth, the power and pervasiveness of the Jim Crow system of racial repression and limitation was steadily growing. The United States Supreme Court's 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* formally acknowledged the legality of segregation and upheld the notion of separate but equal in accommodation.

In 1893 the first clear, overt steps toward a policy of racial limitation in the American navy were taken with the creation of the messman branch. For much of the nineteenth century African American sailors had seen their service limited primarily to manual labor and service positions, though no policies specifically limiting or excluding

their service for other areas had existed for most of the century. The creation of the messman branch, however, marked a perceptible shift toward the drawing of a line of demarcation between white and black sailors. As blacks had served primarily as landsmen detailed for service, their conversion into messmen was a logical step in an era marked by the emergence of new, more specialized ratings. While seemingly few blacks managed to gain promotion into the seaman's ranks from the old landsman rating, even those limited opportunities were curtailed for members of the new messman branch because they were systematically denied transfer to other branches of the naval service.

Throughout the late nineteenth century individuals inside and outside of the navy advocated the drawing of the color line between white and black sailors. The presence of white and nonwhite sailors in the same spaces engaged in the same labors was seen by many as damaging or demeaning to the honest and intrepid white youth who were the focus of a fundamentally altered system of recruitment. Different branches of service for white and blacks facilitated maintenance of separate bunking and messing of the races. While physical barriers were being erected on board ship, such as could be accomplished given a relatively confined working space, perhaps the most damaging effect of the advent of a Jim Crow-like system for the navy was in the hearts and minds of sailors, white and black alike. The men who served in the messman branch enjoyed the opportunity for advancement through a variety of messmen and stewards ranks with accompanying raises in pay. Their advancements did not, however, carry with them the increases in respect and authority that typically accrued to those enjoying greater rank and seniority. The senior most members of the messman branch, holding a petty

officer's equivalent rank, were granted no authority over sailors outside of the branch. The U.S. Navy also developed a system of technical programs and schools in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries designed to fill the needs of a service demanding technicians skilled in the operation of the day's most modern machinery and equipment. As virtual domestics, members of the messman branch were unable to take advantage of the opportunities for intellectual and professional development such programs offered.

The color line in the navy did not appear with the rapidity and immediacy that affected black men and women in broader society. Events like the creation of the messman branch speak to the gradual development of a system of racial discrimination and repression rather than evidencing a beginning analogous to a court decision or the passage of separate accommodation laws and ordinances as occurred in civil society. The gradual emergence of the navy's color line was ultimately confirmed in 1919 when first enlistments of messmen were discontinued within the United States. Rather than allow new black messmen on board ship, the service elected to expand the decades old practice of recruiting East Asians to serve as messmen and stewards. As naval recruiters had previously largely succeeding in excluding nonwhites from all branches save that for messmen, this decision served to cut new enlistments for black men aspiring to service at sea.

Between 1919 and 1932 the navy relied exclusively upon East Asians, primarily Filipinos, to fill vacancies and new positions within the messman branch. Black messmen continued to serve alongside Chinese and Japanese sailors throughout the

period, but natural attrition resulting from retirements and other departures from the service meant progressively fewer African Americans. With all of the hardships thrust upon black sailors between 1919 and 1932, the perseverance of those who remained speaks to their independency and courage to resist the pernicious effects of Jim Crow.

In 1932 new realities compelled the navy to reexamine its policies concerning the enlistment of East Asians. The emergence of Japan as a potential American adversary presented the very real possibility that lines of communication between the United States and her territorial holdings in the Pacific would be severed, thus denying messmen to the fleet. In response to these threats the U.S. Navy again allowed the first enlistments of American blacks, but instituted clearer and stricter limitations on their service than had previously existed.

The advent of American entry into the Second World War again compelled reconsideration of the proper place of blacks within the nation's military. While the formal cessation of discrimination would have to wait until well after the defeat of Japan, as early as 1942 clear policies began to be articulated that spoke to the ultimate demise of Jim Crow in uniform. With numerous capable studies treating the termination of officially sanctioned racism, this study will conclude with the origins of this revision.

The last five decades have seen the emergence of a substantial body of historical literature devoted to understanding the role of African American in the U.S. Army during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though comparatively few studies of the type exist for the navy. Scholars have been particularly interested in the service of black men in the American West within the racially segregated Ninth, Tenth, Twenty-Fourth,

and Twenty-Fifth Regiments. William and Shirley Leckie's *The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Black Cavalry in the West* provides a classic introduction to the subject, while Garna Christian provides a more narrow study exploring the difficult relationship between black soldiers and their Texas hosts.² More recent scholarship, including Charles Kenner's *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry*, have attempted to resurrect the complex reality that was life in a black military unit.³

Scholars concerned with American maritime and naval activity have failed to produce a literature that quantitatively or qualitatively equals that devoted to soldiers of color. In the last two decades studies have begun to appear with greater frequency concerning black mariners. Martha Putney's *Black Sailors* employs a quantitative approach to demonstrate the importance and consistence of the antebellum maritime trades to the nation's black community.⁴ Michael Sokolow's 2003 work on *Charles Benson: Mariner of Color in the Age of Sail* serves to confirm many of the assertions outlined by Putney.⁵ He demonstrates that nineteenth century black men faced few opportunities for social and economic betterment in America. The sea, however, offered these individuals consistent work and wages that typically surpassed what could be earned in home towns. Like the majority of black sailors in the American navy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Benson and other antebellum mariners of color frequently shipped as stewards. The irony of this service was that these black

² William H. Leckie and Shirley A. Lecke, *The Buffalo Soldiers* (Norman, 2003); Garna L. Christian, *Black Soldiers in Jim Crow Texas, 1899-1917* (College Station, 1995).

³ Charles L. Kenner, *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry, 1867-1898: Black & White Together* (Norman, 1999).

⁴ Martha Putney, *Black Sailors: Afro-American Merchant Seamen and Whalemens Prior to the Civil War* (New York, 1987).

⁵ Michael Sokolow, *Charles Benson: Mariner of Color in the Age of Sail* (Amherst, 2003).

stewards typically earned more money than most, if not all, white crewmembers and were frequently viewed with contempt by their shipmates due to the perceived alliance between officers and stewards. Jeffrey Bolster's *Black Jacks* provides an excellent study approaching the lives of antebellum black mariners and employing a broader Atlantic history perspective.⁶

Studies of African Americans in the navy have also become more common in the last two decades, though the best works tend to offer analyses focused on a narrowly construed time period, typically one of the nation's major wars. The American Civil War is treated in *The African American in the Union Navy*. David Valuska offers new insights concerning life and activity on board ship, though the work's most significant contribution is the demand for a fundamental reevaluation of Herbert Aptheker's 1947 assertion in the *Journal of Negro History* that approximately twenty-five percent of the entire enlisted population of the navy during the conflict was black.⁷ Valuska contends that a figure close to eight percent seems more reasonable and more neatly accords with available statistical information. Steven Ramold holds in *Slaves, Sailors, Citizens* that the service "conducted a unique experiment in social equality" during the Civil War.⁸

Studies of the Second World War have provided insightful treatments of both the general service of black sailors and the specific realities encountered by these men and women. *The Port Chicago Mutiny* details the terrific ammunition explosion that rocked the facility and the subsequent trial of those men refusing to continue their potentially

⁶ W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, 1997).

⁷ David L. Valuska, *The African American in the Union Navy, 1861-1865* (New York, 1993), 182.

⁸ Steven J. Ramold, *Slaves, Sailors, Citizens: African Americans in the Union Navy* (DeKalb, 2002).

deadly labors in its wake.⁹ Author Robert L. Allen also explores the social conditions of the wartime navy and the utilization of blacks as ammunition handlers. Dealing at length with the Second World War in *Black Submariners in the United States Navy*, Glenn Knoblock demonstrates the unique conditions and challenges that black messmen faced on board some of the navy's smallest and most cramped ships.¹⁰

Unfortunately, race relations in the navy in the critical period between the American Civil War and the Second World War have received substantially less scholarly attention. One of the few volumes treating the subject is Richard Miller's *The Messman Chronicles*. Miller states that his purpose is to "elevate the messmen . . . to the heights of heroic adoration they deserved as American warriors but never experienced."¹¹ He demonstrates that the messmen who served between 1932 were generally hard-working and honorable men who competently discharged their duties on board ship, including associated with battle stations to which each messman was assigned. The author also demonstrates that the introduction of African American draftees into the messman branch during World War II fundamentally altered the very nature of the branch.

As part of a broader study exploring changes in naval recruiting policy and the body of naval enlisted personnel, Frederick S. Harrod provides arguably the best treatment of naval segregation and discrimination during the 1893 to 1942 time period in *Manning the New Navy*. Harrod holds that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth

⁹ Robert L. Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny* (New York, 1993).

¹⁰ Glenn A. Knoblock, *Black Submariners in the United States Navy, 1940-1975* (Jefferson, 2005).

¹¹ Richard Miller, *The Messman Chronicles: African Americans in the U.S. Navy, 1932-1943* (Annapolis, 2004), vii.

centuries, the American navy made the difficult transition from antiquated institutions and personnel policies designed for the old navy of sailing ships and muzzle-loading guns to institutions and policies more appropriate for a modern force composed of powerful steam driven battleships and cruisers mounting the newest breach-loading canons. The New Navy was forced to look beyond harbors and ports of the Eastern United States, beyond a multinational and multiethnic body of trained sailors, for the crews of the emerging battleships and cruisers. New recruitment policies combined with the development of Jim Crow to remove black sailors from navy rolls. In the World War I era the informal policy of racial exclusion solidified and became firm departmental policy. While Harrod's work is insightful and compelling, a relatively small portion of the volume is dedicated to issues concerning race in the service. The work also focuses extensively on policy and institutions, with relatively little analysis exploring the lives and experiences of black sailors.¹²

Based largely upon the research used in production of *Manning the New Navy*, Harrod also published two articles concerning race in the *Proceedings* of the U.S. Naval Institute. In "Jim Crow in the Navy (1798-1941)" Harrod argues that the service, virtually from its inception, has shown hostility towards African Americans. Legislators, Navy Department officials, and naval officers each tried at different times to limit or exclude black participation. Harrod argues that from the 1870's African American sailors, despite their "comparatively large numbers" faced growing hostility and resentment that eventually resulted in exclusionary policies and a dramatic reduction in

¹² Frederick S. Harrod, *Manning the New Navy: The Development of a Modern Naval Enlisted Force* (Westport, 1978).

the number of black sailors.¹³ “Integration of the Navy (1941-1978)” explores the changes wrought by and in the wake of the Second World War. Harrod holds that leaders within the black community demanded a more equitable place within American society for members of their race. When this pressure was directed at the U.S. Navy, the service responded by breaking down the institutional framework that had been erected to limit participation of racial and ethnic minorities. Efforts to remedy racial disparities in the service persisted however, and remained an issue at the time of the article’s publication.¹⁴

Several authors have produced volumes treating the cessation of discrimination within the navy and the beginning of integration within the service. Dennis D. Nelson’s *The Integration of the Negro into the U.S. Navy* provides a basic understanding of the events leading up to integration. He holds that the navy adopted policies based upon expediency that allowed the service to make the most efficient use possible of available resources. While acknowledging the political and social pressures directed toward departmental officials, he argues that the navy “has made no attempt to settle national racial problems nor can it be expected to.”¹⁵ Its changes to enlistment policy, however, made the navy the leading force for racial reform within the defense community.

Lee Nichols and Richard Dalfiume each describe the desegregation of the navy within a broader context treating the other services. Nichols agrees with Nelson’s interpretation of the navy as the initial leader in the effort to affect desegregation, but

¹³ Frederick S. Harrod, “Jim Crow in the Navy (1798-1941),” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 105 (Sept. 1979), 48.

¹⁴ Frederick S. Harrod, “Integration of the Navy (1941-1978),” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 105 (Oct., 1979).

¹⁵ Dennis D. Nelson, *The Integration of the Negro into the U.S. Navy* (New York, 1951), xii.

holds that such efforts were retarded by internal traditions. The Air Force, while slow to act during the Second World War, embraced President Truman's executive order calling for the end of segregation. The army, the slowest of the services to undertake revision of racial policy, was finally compelled to act when the demands of the Korean War finally rendered the bifurcated system untenable.¹⁶

Richard Dalfiume's *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces* provides a substantial revision to the argument forwarded by Dennis Nelson. Dalfiume holds that primacy in the move to desegregation rests with outside civilians, most significantly the participants in the Fahy Committee. The Committee was the driving force behind substantial revision in the military's racial policy; the developments of the Korean War only forced the more rapid implementation of these policies.¹⁷

The period of prominent and pervasive discrimination and racism in the American navy was an equally difficult time for people of color and race relations in American civil society. C. Vann Woodward, in the classic study *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, demonstrates that Americans in the wake of the Civil War and Reconstruction did not follow a predetermined path whose only possible conclusion was the development of a strict system of racism and state sponsored discrimination.¹⁸ Instead, the white American majority constructed a new reality limiting the opportunities of black men and women and rejecting an integral part of the Reconstruction settlement.

Black responses to the advent of the Jim Crow system have occupied substantial

¹⁶ Lee Nichols, *Breakthrough on the Color Front* (Colorado Spring, 1993).

¹⁷ Richard M. Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts, 1939-1953* (Columbia, 1975).

¹⁸ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (Oxford, 2002).

scholarly attention. The prominent and public debates between W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington over the proper role of resistance and accommodation to the dictates of the white power system still present problems to those wishing to probe race relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Washington's 1895 Atlanta Compromise called for members of his race to "cast down your bucket where you are" and apparently acquiesce to the forces of Jim Crow. Recent scholars, notably Louis R. Harlan, have demonstrated that Washington secretly supported legal action in test cases whose effect might be the repudiation of discriminatory statutes.¹⁹ Individuals like Marcus Garvey offered an alternative to the limitations of early twentieth century America not through the rhetoric, but through organizations created within the black community aimed at racial improvement outside of the conventional structure of white organizations. Although Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association met with ignominious failure, its very birth and popularity speak to the ability and desire of blacks to leverage their social and economic power for the betterment of their race.

This study investigates the conditions under which African American served in the U.S. Navy during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and explores the forces which influenced the evolution of naval policy toward minorities during the same era.

¹⁹ Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: Making of a Black Leader* (New York, 1972).

CHAPTER II

THE MESSMAN'S BRANCH AND THE ORIGINS OF NAVAL SEGREGATION

In 1893 stewards and mess attendant billets were created within the enlisted force of the U.S. Navy. Sailors had previously been assigned to serve as waiters, cooks, and servants to officers, duties that after 1893 were assigned exclusively to members of the messmen branch. These billets soon became the principle home for African Americans. To varying degrees, black sailors since at least the Civil War had been limited in their opportunities for complete equality. This reordering of the ratings marked the first clear step, however, toward the creation of a permanent policy of official, racial discrimination for the service.²⁰ Where previously opportunities for promotion to the highest enlisted ranks and service in the most desirable billets had been limited, after 1893 they rapidly disappeared. For the black men who had served on board the nation's naval vessels, the event marked a substantial revision and virtual repudiation of past honors and successes won at sea.

Within the New World African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American mariners enjoyed a distinguished, if underexplored, record of successes at sea and as leaders of community on land. Black sailors were found in substantial number on board the merchant vessels of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. These individuals also played an important part within their broader communities. Entire

²⁰ The culmination of this program was not realized until 1919 when the United States Navy officially curtailed first enlistments of African Americans. Between the 1919 decision, when more than 4,700 black sailors were serving in the navy, and the resumption of first enlistments for members of the race in 1932, the number of blacks serving in the navy fell to a mere 441.

families followed the sea, providing steady work and equal or superior wages to those offered to free black men who remained ashore. Such sailors often were highly regarded by their neighbors and formed a critical component of African American communities in coastal cities both before and after the American Revolution.²¹

The seafaring tradition and skill of these early mariners led to the inclusion of men of color in the service of the nascent American navy and the numerous state navies from their very inception. Approximately 15,000 men served in the Continental Navy over the course of the Revolutionary War. Of these, roughly 1,500 were African Americans.²² Black men are also known to have served in the navies of Connecticut, Massachusetts, Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia. As early as 1777 a pamphlet penned by “Antibaiastes” had declared that men of color “share in the dangers and glory of the efforts made by US, the freeborn members of the United States, to enjoy...the common rights of human nature; and THEY remain SLAVES!”²³ By 1777, if not before, military and naval service had clearly become linked with an inherent claim to freedom from bondage. In the North, such service frequently led to freedom of those who entered service while held in chattel slavery, though southern states were much less frequent to carry out similar manumissions.²⁴

Instituting a pattern that would be repeated in the wake of virtually every war in the history of the United States, the national government moved to reduce the costs

²¹ W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, 1997), 20, 21, 45.

²² J.H. Sypher to N.C. Barndollar, “Naval Service of Negroes,” Dec. 10, 1924, Photocopy of letter in Army War College housed at Navy Department Library Vertical File, Office of Naval Records and Library.

²³ Antibaiastes, “Observations on the Slaves and the Indented Servants, inlisted [*sic*] in the Army, and in the Navy of the United States,” (Philadelphia: Styner and Cist, 1777).

²⁴ Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 153.

associated with national defense by reducing the military. The Continental Navy was completely disbanded, but persistent threats to American commerce abroad (including that posed by the Barbary Corsairs) forced, by 1794, the creation of a small, but permanent naval force.²⁵ The first systematic attempt to remove black participants from the navy occurred during these tumultuous early days of the permanent service. Efforts were made to band the recruitment of “Negroes or Mulatoes [*sic*]” from both the navy and the Marine Corps, though this ban did not lead to any systematic purging of those men of color already in national service.²⁶

During the War of 1812 black Americans again played both a mathematically and historically significant role in service of the navy. Indeed, one of the much publicized acts of impressment that led to public outrage and helped precipitate the advent of hostilities quite prominently included black men. When the captain of HMS *Leopard* fired upon USS *Chesapeake* and sent on board a party “to search his Ship for the deserters from the [Royal Navy] Service”, he found four men who had absconded from HMS *Melampus*, three of whom were black.²⁷ Hostilities raged between 1812 and 1815 and thousands of men entered the army and navy of the United States. In the nation’s fleet alone approximately 1,500 black mariners offered up their service for national defense. Some vessels shipped crews containing a substantial number of black mariners; nearly half of the crew deployed on board USS *Hornet* in one of her cruises were men of

²⁵ Donald Chisholm, *Waiting for Dead Men’s Shoes: Origins and Development of the U.S. Navy’s Officer Personnel System, 1793-1941* (Stanford, 2001), 51.

²⁶ James Baker Farr, *Black Odyssey: The Seafaring Traditions of Afro-Americans* (New York, 1989), 109-114.

²⁷ Circular letter by Vice Admiral of the White, Sir George Cranfield Berkeley, quoted in Tucker, Spencer C. and Frank T. Reuter, *Injured Honor: The Chesapeake-Leopard Affair, June 22, 1807* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 4.

color.²⁸ According to Edward Johnson's 1890 *School History of the Negro Race in America*, the black men who entered naval service during the War of 1812 did not face discrimination concerning their enlistment or station on board ship. Even within the Marine Corps, a bastion of resistance to black participation for much of the nineteenth and twentieth century, approximately one in five servicemen was apparently African American.²⁹

In the immediate wake of the War of 1812 navy administrators made no effort to displace serving black sailors. An 1816 act of Congress did, however, prohibit slaves from serving on board ships or working in the navy's dockyards.³⁰ This discouraged both the enrollment of runaways and the practice followed by some owners of placing their slaves in service and drawing their wages—essentially leasing their chattel property to the navy. This legislation built upon an act of 3 March 1813 which defined who could serve in the nation's ships. It explicitly granted free blacks the opportunity to serve in the both the navy and the merchant marine.³¹ Black sailors in the early decades of the 1800's frequently represented ten to twenty percent of the entire enlisted force.³² A survey of the 1838-9 recruiting reports indicates that around eight percent of enlisted personnel were black, indicating a very modest decline from the ten percent in service at the termination of the War of 1812.³³

²⁸ Farr, *Black Odyssey*, 116-121.

²⁹ Edward A Johnson, *A School History of the Negro Race in America, from 1619 to 1890, with a Short Introduction as to the Origin of the Race; Also a Short Sketch of Liberia* (Raleigh, 1890), 76-9.

³⁰ Michael Lee Lanning, *The African-American Soldier: From Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell* (New York, 2004), 27.

³¹ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States*. 12th Cong., 2nd sess., March 3, 1813, 737.

³² Jack D. Foner, *Blacks and the Military in American History: A New Perspective* (New York, 1974), 24, 26.

³³ Lanning, *The African-American Soldier*, 27.

Repeated efforts were made between the War of 1812 and the American Civil War to restrict opportunities for African Americans to serve in U.S. Navy ships. Responding to complaints about the widespread enlistments of non-whites, the acting Secretary of the Navy declared in 1839 that “no greater a proportion of Coloured [*sic*] persons than five percent of the whole number of white persons enlisted shall be allowed to enlist, and absolutely no slaves.”³⁴ Navy Secretary Abel P. Upshur reported on the apparent success of this directive, informing the Congress that “not more than one-twentieth part of the crew of any vessel is allowed to consist of negroes.”³⁵ The five percent cap would remain intact until the difficulties of meeting wartime needs for new ships and crews for force revision during the Civil War.

African American sailors in the antebellum navy enjoyed comparatively equitable treatment on board ship concerning ratings and opportunities for advancement. In his article “Jim Crow in the Navy” Frederick S. Harrod demonstrates that black sailors in the antebellum navy were primarily enlisted in the landsman rating. The landsman rating was granted to unskilled laborers on board ship and was at the bottom of the service’s rating structure. As landsmen were frequently detained to service as stewards and domestics, Harrod likens this service to that discharged by black men in the wake of the establishment of the messman rating.³⁶ While Harrod’s analysis is likely true to a point, the comparison between antebellum landsmen and messmen after 1893 is

³⁴ “Recruiting for United States Navy,” Recruiting Circular for the United States Navy, Sept. 14, 1839, Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library, RG45, (National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

³⁵ U.S. Congress, *Colored Persons in the Navy of the United States*, 27th Congress, 2d Session, 1842, House document 282, Quoted in Frederick S. Harrod, “Jim Crow in the Navy,” 47.

³⁶ Harrod, “Jim Crow in the Navy,” 47-48.

overdrawn. As is demonstrated below, the later rating was, from its inception, racialized and carried with it terms of service that restricted opportunities for promotion and command. Although the antebellum landsman might have discharged very similar labors to his messman counterpart, these attachments were not associated with the former rating.

When the U.S. Navy next faced the prospect of war black men again demonstrated their commitment to the service and to their nation. The army's segregation, dating to the Seminole Wars, was not duplicated in the navy, where more than 1,000 black men served during the Mexican War. Non-white sailors were essential to the success of the blockade of Mexican ports and also served on board many of the supply and transport vessels that helped make the relatively quick victory of the United States possible.³⁷

During the American Civil War the U.S. Navy underwent a spectacular expansion. From a relatively minor player in the world's contest for naval superiority in 1860, the fleet became the largest in the world in terms both of men enlisted and vessels in commission. The construction of ironclad warships and other new technologies, like powerful rifled guns capable of firing shells weighing over one thousand pounds, also meant that the fleet was among the most advanced afloat. To man this newly expanded fleet, the navy needed thousands of additional officers and sailors. In the wake of the attack upon Ft. Sumter about 300 black sailors, many of whom had previously served on board American warships, offered themselves up for their nation.³⁸ Such was but the

³⁷ Lanning, *The African-American Soldier*, 29.

³⁸ Joseph Reidy, "Black Men in Navy Blue During the Civil War," *Prologue: The Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration* 33, No. 3 (Fall 2001), 156.

beginning of African American entry into the navy. By the end of the war's first year six percent of serving blue jackets were men of color, by late 1862 fully fifteen percent of the force was composed of non-whites.³⁹ The height of African American participation came late in the war as the induction for former slaves, labeled "contraband" of war and often known by that descriptor, pushed black enlistment figures to approximately twenty-five percent of the total force.⁴⁰ In total about 18,000 black men went to sea for the Union cause and composed roughly fifteen percent of the enlisted population during the conflict.⁴¹

The decision to employ contrabands—former slaves—on board the ships of the United States was one of the most important made by the navy during the Civil War. As with black participation in the army, naval service allowed for the winning of freedom through martial pursuits, a critical step toward equality and integration in the minds of many abolitionists and leaders within the African American community. As early as 22 July 1861 Union Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles had acknowledged the potential import of contrabands and their contribution to the war effort. He stated that to return African American runaways "would be impolitic as well as cruel," adding that these individuals "may be serviceable aboard our storeships."⁴² In total at least 7,000 freedmen found their way into the navy and into its yards and ships as uniformed personnel.⁴³

³⁹ Reidy, "Black Men in Navy Blue," 156.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 158.

⁴¹ "Introduction," Black Sailors: The Howard University Research Project. http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/sailors_index.html

⁴² Gideon Welles to S.H. Stringham, 22 July 1861, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* series 1, vol.6 (II Series, XXXvols., Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922.), 10.

⁴³ Reidy, *Black Men in Navy Blue*, 156-8.

In authorizing the enrollment of freedmen on board the ships of the Union Navy, Secretary Gideon Welles initially stipulated that these individuals could not exceed the rating of boy. This rating, which had previously been applied exclusively to youths lacking experience at sea, was granted without regard to previous maritime experience of demonstrated ability.⁴⁴ The motivation for exclusively enlisting contrabands with the rank of boy was not logical. These black men were intended primarily to function as menial laborers, thus they should hold the lowest position on board ship. While this logic was applicable to the army, the realities on board the ships of the Civil War meant that all embarked had to have sailing and fighting competencies; the combatant/noncombatant distinction disappeared nearly as quickly as these black men were dispatched to their vessels.⁴⁵

The inequality faced by freedmen was further exacerbated by the prior existence of black men in the navy's uniform, a feature that did not exist in the armies of the United States. Black men already serving in the ranks, among others, were not saddled by the limitations placed upon former slaves. Secretary Welles gradually eased the restrictions placed upon black sailors. Contrabands were first allowed to rate as landsmen and ultimately as seamen. Captains were also allowed to extend higher temporary ratings to such men, but their temporary nature meant that if a mariner was transferred he lost his advanced status. While racist sentiments accounted in part for the limitation in opportunities for black sailors, the desire for economy on the part of Welles in the face of dramatically rising costs of propagating the naval war helped dissuade the

⁴⁴ Farr, *Black Odyssey*, 132.

⁴⁵ Steven J. Ramold, *Slaves, Sailors, Citizens: African Americans in the Union Navy* (DeKalb, 2002), 49.

service from effecting full equality in rank and pay.⁴⁶

Despite the limitations imposed by Welles and the Navy Department, some black men were able to achieve important positions of leadership and responsibility on board ship. In total, some eight percent of African American mariners who served during the conflict achieved status as non-commissioned officers, although the majority of these individuals served in comparatively menial positions as cooks or stewards.⁴⁷ From these positions, black sailors were not likely to be placed in positions of authority over white sailors. Concern for the perceived impropriety of white men taking orders from non-whites, a theme frequently repeated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to justify discrimination against black sailors, was clearly extant, if not yet pervasive, in the navy of the Civil War.

A few black men also achieved acting warrant or commissioned ranks, though lacking official sanction. The need for pilots skilled in navigating the difficult waterways of the South provided opportunities for former mariners and boatmen who had found their way to Union vessels. By 1863 Rear Admiral Samuel DuPont reported that he “made use of the services of certain contraband pilots, and have authorized the payment of them sometimes of \$30 and sometimes \$40 per month.”⁴⁸ These individuals were granted pay comparable to senior non-commissioned officers, but apparently lacked official, advanced standing. Later that year, however, the Navy Department officially allowed for the recruitment of full-time African American pilots who were to

⁴⁶ Ibid., 49-51.

⁴⁷ Reidy, “Black Men in Navy Blue,” 159-160.

⁴⁸ *Official Record of the Union and Confederate Navies*, series 1, vol. 14, 251.

be paid \$100 per month plus a one dollar per day food ration.⁴⁹ In January 1865 pilots began to be afforded the ranks of acting ensign pilot and acting master pilot. These ranks were equal to the two lowest commissioned officer's ranks, but were discretionary and lacked permanent standing. At least seven black men are known to have held these positions during the conflict.⁵⁰

Black sailors in the Civil War also won honor and distinction for themselves through their gallantry in combat. The exploits of Robert Smalls were among the conflict's most impressive and celebrated. A South Carolina slave, Smalls absconded with the steamer *Planter* carrying other bondsmen to the nearby Union blockade and the freedom that it offered. Smalls served as a pilot and was also involved with the United States Colored Troops of the U.S. Army. During Reconstruction such exploits helped the former slave win election to the South Carolina legislature.

Although Robert Smalls is perhaps the best known black mariner of the Civil War, he was by no means the only man of his race singled out for distinction. Eight of the 307 Medals of Honor issued by the U.S. Navy during the Civil War went to black men. Robert Blake became the first in December 1863 when he earned the award for gallantry under fire while serving in USS *Marblehead*. Four followed suit while serving in David Farragut's flagship USS *Hartford* at the Battle of Mobile Bay. Another African American sailor was honored for his bravery in the battle between the *Kearsarge* and the *Alabama*.⁵¹ Hundreds of other black men, many whose accomplishments have been lost through the passage of time, bravely fought and laid down their lives in defense of their

⁴⁹ Ramold, *Slaves, Sailors, Citizens*, 89.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 129-132.

vessels, their shipmates, and their nation.

After the American Civil War the U.S. Navy again undertook a drastic reduction in the size of the active fleet with a resulting reduction in the body of officer and enlisted personnel. During this postwar reduction, the majority of black men left the navy, having helped to defeat the southern rebellion and win freedom for the men and women of their race. The navy did not consider race or previous condition of servitude relevant when examinations for benefits resulting from wartime service; black and white men alike benefited from the system of postwar pensions.⁵²

African American men continued to enter the navy in the three decades following the termination of the Civil War and did so upon terms of relative equality to those of their white counterparts. For the remainder of the nineteenth century black men could be found in all of the service's enlisted ranks. Five to seven hundred black men were typically enrolled in a postwar navy that included between five and six thousand enlisted men and non-commissioned officers.⁵³ The origins and nature of black men electing to enter naval service in the wake of the Civil War did gradually shift. Where these individuals had traditionally been drawn primarily from the Northeastern states—those possessing large bodies of skilled sailors, including African Americans expert in the maritime trades—those entering in the 1870's, 1880's, and 1890's gradually shifted to southern states like Virginia and Maryland. In part this reflected the growing importance of the navy's presence in these areas and their overall value in recruiting, but Frederick S. Harrod argues that this shift demonstrated that the service became more concerned

⁵² Ibid., 182.

⁵³ Ibid; Harrod, *Manning the New Navy*, 8-12.

with recruiting men who could serve as laborers and domestics than those who would work at the sails and the great guns.⁵⁴

Reflecting their service in the antebellum navy, black men in the 1870's and 1880's enlisted and served primarily in the landsman's billet. While landsmen were charged with a number of unskilled tasks on board ship, the billet came to be dominated by African Americans. Rather than serving as general laborers, these men came to be engaged primarily as cooks, waiters, and servants. Jonathan H. Paynter, a black sailor who served in the 1880's, defined the billet as "the service designation for domestics."⁵⁵ Despite the association in the navy between the landsman rating and service as a domestic, service in the rating did not disqualify a sailor from advancement or assignment to other labors. Likewise, the rating had come to be defined as one of service to others, but was not, *per se*, racialized. With the advent of the messman's rating, however, this reality was dramatically altered.

The establishment of messman and stewards billets in 1893 represented the single most definitive statement of a desire to affect race based segregation within the American navy in the history of the service. In the late nineteenth century American presidents were vested with the authority to regulate the navy's enlisted grades and their rates of pay. Utilizing this authority, lame duck president Benjamin Harrison promulgated General Order No. 409 on 25 February 1893. The order served to adjust the pay rates for seventy-one different ratings and specialties. Its most important function was the creation of seven new billets: six grades of stewards' billets and the

⁵⁴ Harrod, "Jim Crow in the Navy," 49.

⁵⁵ Jonathan H. Paynter, *Joining the Navy; or, Abroad with Uncle Sam* (Hartford, 1895), 10.

billet of mess attendant. Messmen served primarily as the cooks, waiters, and personal servants of officers while the officers were serving on board ship. The order authorized a hierarchy of steward positions reflecting the officers to whom these individuals were assigned: the most modest stewards served warrant officers and were to receive twenty-four dollars per month in compensation, while those at the opposite end of the spectrum received forty-five dollars for their service to commanders-in-chief of squadrons.⁵⁶

The creation of the designation of mess attendants and stewards provided a separate space, both within the personnel structure of the Navy and the physical confines of its ships, for African Americans.⁵⁷ Naval recruiters and senior officers tended to enlist black sailors in the newly created billets during the late nineteenth century, but for more than a decade no definitive policy denied these individuals entry into other branches of the naval service. Some African American sailors succeeded in gaining access to the lowest ratings in the engine room force, but these individuals likely represented a minority of new black entrants and found their station on board ship and opportunities for advancement equally if not more curtailed than their messman compatriots. While recruiting policy did not technically limit the enlistment opportunities for African American sailors, other factors, most notably the actions of white enlisted personnel, served to discourage access to more highly regarded (and often better paying) specializations. In coming years the implications and underlying meaning of Executive Order 409—an order which initially received little public attention—would become

⁵⁶ General Order 409.

⁵⁷ Sailors in the late nineteenth century typically worked, ate, and slept with individuals engaged in the same or similar employment on board ship. The designation of mess attendants and stewards allowed for the segregation of these individuals in accommodations.

abundantly clear as the very face of race relations within the United States Navy was altered.

CHAPTER III
BLACK SAILORS, LITTLE BROWN BROTHER, AND THE GREAT WHITE
FLEET: RACE AND THE NAVY, 1893-1912

The period between 1893 and 1912 was of major significance in the history of race relations in the American navy, for it was in this period that the full meaning of the 1893 decision to create segregated spaces on board ships and within the rating structure for non-white sailors was implemented and its full meaning became clear not simply to those within the service, but to the broader public. The U.S. Navy was nothing, however, if not conservative, and a radical revision of racial policy that was substantially divergent from occurrences within civilian society was unlikely. As a conservative institution, perhaps nothing afforded more legitimacy to the effort to restrict non-white sailors on board ship than the landmark 1896 Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*. While the case afforded states and municipalities the opportunity to create what they justified as separate facilities and accommodations, the development of such a system for non-whites within the fleet was virtually impossible. Instead, black and Asian sailors were relegated to an explicitly second-class status and were denied opportunities for advancement, command responsibilities, and transfer into ratings which were, in effect, reserved for whites.

Throughout the period, the navy actively maintained that no discrimination took place in enlistment policy or within the fleet. Despite these public declarations of innocence and equality, the senior uniformed and civilian population of the service

undertook a systematic campaign to ensure the subservience and circumscription of non-white sailors. While no mass effort was made to drive black sailors from the ranks of the navy, more subtle actions taken by the commanding officers of ships, shore facilities, and local recruiting stations ultimately led many capable men to leave the service. In taking these actions the navy largely succeeded in ridding itself of black men outside of the messmen branch. Officers and white enlisted personnel came gradually to consider such men a greater problem as the intensity of segregation increased and as black petty officers and ratings not serving as domestics on board ship declined in both numbers and prominence. By driving out these remnants of a bygone era, the leaders of the “New Navy” attempted to eradicate what had been perceived as one of its greatest internal threats: black men working alongside whites, black men sleeping and eating with whites, and ultimately, black men having command of and giving orders to white sailors.

That the America navy would move to institutionalize segregation and racial discrimination in the late nineteenth should come as no surprise. In the wake of the Civil War the United States had attempted and failed to reconstruct the South. Southern Bourbon politicians had, by century’s end, long ago redeemed their territories from Republicans and produced a solid Democratic voting block. By the 1890’s Jim Crow had pervaded much of the nation, sanctioning the denial of equal opportunities and accommodation for black men in women in the former Union and Confederacy alike. The landmark 1896 Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* afforded official sanction to discrimination that had, in many cases, already existed for decades. For the U.S. Navy, as for broader American society, the growth of Jim Crow and the offering of

legal sanction only served to solidify and accelerate the development of racist institutions and policies.

For the navy particularly, the 1880's and 1890's were also important for the changes that were emerging within the corps of commissioned officers. Officers like Alfred Thayer Mahan and William T. Sampson who had earned their commissions following training at the U.S. Naval Academy were gradually replacing those pre-academicians who had commanded the navy's ships, squadrons, and bureaus during and immediately after the Civil War. Time at Annapolis had served to standardize the views of these officers, including their views of non-white sailors. Unlike the previous generation of officers trained on board ships possessing a substantial black minority reasonably well integrated into crews and not infrequently holding petty officer ratings, the academy-trained officers experienced black men in a fundamentally different way. The instructors at the academy called their subjects "young men" or "young gentlemen" and not "boys," for "Only the Negro servants at the Academy are 'boys.'"⁵⁸ Officers confident in their superiority to black men and trained to believe that black men should rightly function as servants would be assuming command at such a critical juncture in naval race relations. Under their leadership Jim Crow would become more pervasive and more explicitly practiced than previously within the navy.

The creation of messmen and steward ratings in 1893 provided a framework into which non-white servants could be placed, but did not, in itself, effect the segregation of the U.S. Navy. Instead, the service developed a complex set of rules, customs, and

⁵⁸ Holden Evans, quoted in Peter Karsten, *The Naval Aristocracy: The Golden Age of Annapolis and the Emergence of Modern American Navalism* (New York, 1972).

unofficial agreements that gradually institutionalized segregation. The first and most critical step if a black/white bifurcation were to be created within the navy was the cessation of recruitment of black men for service other than as mess attendants or stewards. Typically, the navy made formal announcements of changes in recruiting policy with circulars dispatched to concerned parties, like recruiting officers and ship commanders. Jack Foner notes that the navy disseminated information concerning racial restrictions governing enlistments of blacks after 1 April 1893 “apparently by verbal instructions . . . rather than by written orders.”⁵⁹ Despite the restrictions placed upon black enlistees, for two decades the navy strenuously maintained that it and its officers practiced no segregation or racial preference.

Traditionally, sailors benefited from opportunities to transfer from one branch to another if they were displeased with their current station or believed that working in another station on board ship would be more beneficial to themselves and to the service. To be eligible to enter one of the specialty ratings, a sailor was expected to have a good record with positive evaluations and to have the support of his commanding officer. Previous knowledge or experience with the labors undertaken in the desired branch was an asset, i.e., a sailor employed in civilian life as an electrician’s assistant seeking transfer for service and training as an electrician’s mate helped make reassignment more likely and was necessary for some specialties.⁶⁰ If blacks were accorded such opportunities for transfers of this type, the racial hierarchy being developed within the adjusted rating structure would be threatened, therefore, from the inception of the

⁵⁹ Jack D. Foner, *Blacks and the Military in American History: A New Perspective* (New York, 1974), 103.

⁶⁰ Bureau of Navigation, U.S. Navy Department, *The Making of a Man-o'-Warsman* (New York, 1906), 12-14.

messmen branch, the navy maintained a policy that messmen, regardless of race or color, were not to be transferred for other service.⁶¹ This injunction went so far as to preclude the non-white sailors of the messman branch from serving with white bakers and cooks, despite the obvious similarities in their labors.

The creation of the messman branch defined a clear space in which black (and other non-white) sailors might reasonably be expected to serve and carried with it a unique set of racially motivated regulations. As the nineteenth century drew to a close and the twentieth century began, many sailors of color remained in naval service, outside the confines of the space newly designated for them. With the apparent sanction of segregation on board ship, these men gradually became more of an anachronism. Rather than merely being a curiosity on board ship, sailors and the uniformed and civilian leaders of the navy perceived these men as a clear threat to proper order. Their presence meant the possibility (indeed the reality) of non-white petty officers giving orders to white men in uniform. In the tight confines of the period's warships, in which men hung their hammocks and ate with their peers of similar rating and branch of service, integration functioned not merely as an abstract concept but as a physical reality. The sailors of the period succeeded in producing a hostile environment that drove out many capable black sailors. White officers also attempted to block the service of these men through a variety of means.

⁶¹ The words of an official Navy Department publication are worth quoting at some length. The authors of the publication state that "It is contrary to the established policy of the Bureau to authorize transfers in ratings of men in the Messmen Branch to ratings in any other branch of service. In view of the *special training* involved the Bureau does not desire to authorize any deviation from this established policy" (emphasis added). The Bureau of Navigation placed no such limitation on the *white* sailors who served as ships' cooks, bakers, and commissary stewards, discharging virtually the same functions on board ship as their *non-white* counterparts. "Promotion of Enlisted Personnel in the U.S. Navy," 33. Navy Department Library.

The decision to initiate *de facto* segregation in the fleet appeared to some within the service to imply that white men were free to create an unwelcoming environment for black shipmates, especially those outside of their perceived proper place. Events at the Washington Navy Yard in 1895, the year before the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling by the Supreme Court, and the proceedings of a subsequent court martial case provide clear evidence of the widespread dislike and mistreatment of black men. Four white sailors assigned to the training course systematically hazed the African American students in the integrated program of instruction. What ultimately developed was a veritable reign of terror directed at four black sailors. While the white ringleaders were tried and convicted, the events speak to both the changing racial climate and the position of the Navy Department concerning issues of race.

The navy detailed four black sailors to the Washington Navy Yard in 1895 to participate in a course of instruction in ordinance and gunnery. Individuals selected for the gunnery training program were drawn from the most intelligent and capable enlisted personnel in the navy.⁶² Upon successful completion of the program, a sailor was typically returned to the fleet to serve as seaman gunner and fast tracked for promotion to the warrant rank of gunner and an annual salary of \$1800, this at a time when ordinary seamen received a paltry \$228 per year.⁶³ While the individuals selected for the gunnery training school appear upon first examination to have been exceptional, their ideas and beliefs potentially different from common sailors, all of these men had previously served one full term of enlistment and had logged at minimum five years in the navy prior to

⁶² "Race War in the Navy," *Washington Post*, Nov. 22, 1895, p. 2.

⁶³ "Gunners Disliked the Negroes," *Washington Post*, Nov. 28, 1895, p. 9.

their Washington appointment.⁶⁴ Their service in the seaman's branch, life on board ship, and social interactions with peers no doubt exposed these individuals to prevalent beliefs concerning issues of race and ethnicity.

Four white men, Ramsey Smith, Edward Murphy, Archibald Lamont, and Raymond Fox, each rated seamen and a member of the training class, were singled out by the officers of the training class and by the subsequent court martial for their leadership in the hazing affair. Although the navy tried only the four leaders of the anti-black campaign, testimony clearly indicates that the opinions concerning black sailors shared by these individuals were the same as the majority, if not the totality, of the white members of their class. It therefore is valid to consider the ideas and views expressed by these individuals as indicative of, if not necessarily representative of, the sentiments common to broader body of white naval enlisted personnel.

The simple presence of African Americans represented a threat to the sense of common propriety shared by the enlisted personnel of the naval service in the closing years of the twentieth century. As James McDermott testified during the court martial, white sailors "don't like to see the niggers placed on an equal footing with us."⁶⁵ According to Chief-Master-At-Arms Henry Alver, associated with the gunnery training program in Washington for more than four years by the time of the 1895 incidents, "the colored gunners were generally disliked all through the service."⁶⁶ The racial strife

⁶⁴ Thus, the four black men who counted among the group had entered service prior to the creation of the messman branch with its veritable injunction against the service of black men in other areas, like the seaman's branch.

⁶⁵ Proceedings of a General Court Martial for the Trial of Ramsay W. Smith, Edward Murphy, Archibald J. Lamont and Raymond W. Fox, Seamen, U.S. Navy, Court Martial Records, Vol. 577, 1896: No. 7894, p. 33, Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General, RG 125 (National Archives, Washington DC).

⁶⁶ "Gunner Disliked the Negroes," *Washington Post*, Nov. 28, 1895, p. 9.

caused by the presence of these individuals was clearly not an isolated and limited phenomenon.

White students feared that their association with black classmates would follow them beyond their time at the Washington Naval Yard. These individuals expressed fears of a permanent mark upon one's record and irrevocable damage to one's reputation. One sailor observed that, "it seemed to be an understood thing, in fact it is all over the service, [that] if a man has anything to do with a colored association, he is looked down upon, and is avoided by his ship-mates."⁶⁷ M.D. Rose, a carpenter at the Washington Navy Yard not attached to the group of sailors under instruction, reported that the students feared that following their graduation and rejoining the fleet, fellow sailors would insultingly refer to them as members of "The Checker-board Class."⁶⁸ For the white members of the class, such fears justified the directing of assaults and insults at the African Americans present

The training of African American seamen at the Washington Navy Yard presented a special challenge, and a particular affront to the racist sensibilities of the white sailors, beyond merely compelling association with men considered to be racially inferior. Upon completion of the program, graduates would return to the fleet and would be given added responsibilities in the maintenance and handling of ships' weapons.⁶⁹ As shipboard segregation occurred primarily by area of employment, this meant not simply a possibility, but a probability that these black individuals would supervise integrated gun

⁶⁷ Court Martial of Smith, Murphy, Lamont, and Fox, Court Martial Records, p.36, Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General.

⁶⁸ 'Disliked "Checker-Board" Classes,' *Washington Post*, Dec. 8, 1895, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Bureau of Navigation, *The Making of a Man-o'-Warsman*, 14.

crews.

Following the initial report of hazing lodged by black class members, Ensign George W. Williams, then temporarily given charge of the seamen under instruction, conducted an investigation. His interviews revealed that one of the primary factors motivating the conduct had been the widespread belief that “the course of the department in ordering negroes . . . for instruction, with a likelihood that they would qualify as seamen gunners and be put over white men on board ship, was wrong.”⁷⁰ Association and equality with individuals of an inferior race were both things to be avoided, but the added insult of being party to the preparation of black men who would be in charge of whites demanded action.

White trainees manifested their fears and frustrations with their African American classmates in a progressively worsening series of abuses and assaults. The mildest form of white resistance included requests that black sailors dine and sleep separately within the common areas prescribed for the group. The gunnery students traditionally took their meals together at a single large table. At the time no rules governed seating arrangements. The advent of the four black trainees, however, led to the insistence that a separate table be provided for them within the dining area. One African American sailor reported that a white classmate told him that he “ought to have had better sense than to sit there” with the rest of his mess.⁷¹ A separate table temporarily housed the black students until superiors intervened to halt the practice.

Likewise, in their berthing space students were given bunks in close proximity to

⁷⁰ Court Martial of Smith, Murphy, Lamont, and Fox, Court Martial Records, p.346, Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General.

⁷¹ Ibid., 86.

one another within a space far larger than what was needed to accommodate the group. Raymond Fox, one of the principal instigators in an effort to compel the black trainees to sleep at the end of the room opposite their white counterparts, offered numerous justifications for his actions, including the observation that “the coons’ feet stunk so that I could not sleep.”⁷² Through this initial round of insults and indignities, indeed throughout the whole sordid affair, the black sailors quietly and respectfully resisted their oppressors while attempting to retain their honor and dignity. William Johnson, one of the African Americans subjected to these insults by Archibald Lamont, explained during the court martial proceeding why he had taken offense. “I knew that I was human, as he was.”⁷³ When asked if he considered himself on par with any American citizen, high or low, Johnson stated, “I don’t know high or low. I consider that I am as much as either one of them.”⁷⁴ Just as white sailors were willing to assert their manhood and take actions they deemed necessary to preserve their honor, so too were their black classmates.

Attempts to impose an internal segregation scheme proved largely unsuccessful because of the defiance demonstrated by both black trainees and white superior officers. Disappointed class members also made numerous requests that the black trainees quit the program. Interestingly, if the black trainees had agreed to quit the result likely would have been that the black sailors returned to their former positions in the fleet—returned to their former positions, still within the seaman’s branch.⁷⁵ As black trainees

⁷² Ibid., 64.

⁷³ Ibid., 103.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ “Race War in the Navy,” 2.

stood their ground, refusing to leave, refusing to bow to the wishes of their classmates, the whites became progressively more firm in their resolve and intensified their campaign.

Their more innocuous efforts having failed, frustrated white trainees began a prolonged series of minor actions against the bodies and property of their black classmates. White sailors began routinely hurling balls and clubs at unsuspecting victims. On at least one occasion a well-laid plan was executed whereby buckets of cold water were dumped upon the heads of classmates who were walking under a second-story window.⁷⁶ One of these assaults had resulted in an injury substantial enough to leave a prominent wound upon Seaman Jackson's face. Ensign Williams, investigating the incident, was confident that no assault had taken place as "about twenty of the...class men had disavowed all knowledge of its cause."⁷⁷ For the white officer, the statements of white enlisted personnel clearly outweighed the physical evidence of the altercation. Reports were made of dirt being placed into bunks and foot lockers, of spittoon contents emptied into beds, of mattresses and other items necessary for sleeping being damaged and removed.⁷⁸ Repeating earlier insensitivity to the claims of the black students, action was not taken until the senior officer of the yard required a formal investigation into the suspected incidents of hazing.

On numerous occasions groups of white trainees discussed the possibility of creating a lynching party, to do by deadly force what their previous efforts had been

⁷⁶ Court Martial of Smith, Murphy, Lamont, and Fox, Court Martial Records, p. 71-74, Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General.

⁷⁷ "Inquiry into Hazing Case," *New York Times*, Nov. 26, 1895, p. 9.

⁷⁸ "Thompson Tells of the Hazing," *Washington Post*, Dec. 3, 1895, p. 3.; "Gunners Disliked the Negroes," 9.

unable to achieve—the removal of the blacks from the program. The initial request was made in public, that the group should be gotten up to carry out the lynching. In a supposed private conversation in the washroom of the sleeping quarters, Seaman Murphy made a call to his fellow white classmates, arguing that they should “hang the nigger.”⁷⁹ Although nothing apparently ever came of these entreaties, these do not appear to have been merely idle threats or exhortations. In the name of stopping the Court of Inquiry that preceded the Court Martial, these threats were resurrected during that preliminary investigation—this time apparently more seriously—though again nothing came of the discussions.

In its final and most extreme form, the white sailors who had been unable to drive away their black counterparts attempted to physically remove these individuals so offensive to their sensibilities. In the week preceding 21 November 1895 Johnson and Thompson, two of the four black class members, were bodily removed from their beds and thrown into Anacostia River adjacent to the Washington Navy Yard when they refused one final plea to quit the class.⁸⁰

Attempts at deploying insults and assaults with the aim of driving away black gunnery trainees ultimately failed to produce their desired result. For the white men of the class, their failures only combined with the perceived indignity of association with men of color. One of the defendants, Edward Murphy, refused to have his sense of honor further impinged. Threatened with the loss of dignity growing not merely from

⁷⁹ Court Martial of Smith, Murphy, Lamont, and Fox, Court Martial Records, Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General, 629-630.

⁸⁰ “To Investigate Navy Yard Hazing,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Nov. 22, 1895, p. 1.; “Race War in the Navy,” 2.

his association with black sailors, but from his inability to modify or control the situation, the veteran sailor took his examinations to satisfy his duty to the Navy, but refused to pass. When told that he did not have a choice in the matter, that he would be passed or failed depending upon his examination marks, Murphy intentionally did poorly on his exams. According to Gunner Michael Gilmartin, the officer charged with instruction of the seamen, Murphy stated that “the department cannot punish him for being ignorant.”⁸¹ Murphy’s goal was to return to general service and secure his release based upon his ignorance as demonstrated by his failure in gunnery training. Clearly, for Murphy, and likely many other sailors in the late nineteenth century navy, the ability to control one’s own fate, to assert one’s own manhood, and ultimately to determine the racial composition of one’s circle of associates greatly outweighed the stigma attached to publicly being declared ignorant and dismissed from service for ineptitude.

On 17 January 1896 the court rendered its verdict. The four defendants were found guilty of a litany of specifications indicating that they had tormented and hazed their classmates. For their crimes, for carrying on the “campaign of terror” against fellow sailors, the court determined the appropriate punishment to be two months imprisonment, loss of between forty-two and forty-four dollars in pay, and dismissal from the service.⁸² While the punishment initially appears lenient given the persistent and offensive nature of the infractions, the sentence was reasonable given the specific charges upon which the four defendants were found guilty. Oddly enough, the most

⁸¹ Court Martial of Smith, Murphy, Lamont, and Fox, Court Martial Records, Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General, 334-5.

⁸² “Race War in the Navy,” 2; Court Martial of Smith, Murphy, Lamont, and Fox, Court Martial Records, Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General, 678-682.

serious of all possible offenses, the bodily removal of Johnson and Thompson from their bunks and subsequent deposition in the nearby river, was not listed among the offenses. Unfortunately, the 700-page case file and dozens of newspaper articles treating the incidents, investigation, and court martial offer no evidence to explain why this specific incident was not included as part of the case.

For the sailors in the aforementioned case, race, masculinity, and identity were fundamentally linked. White and black sailors alike attempted to assert themselves to create an environment in which they could work and succeed. The case against Murphy, Lamont, Fox, and Smith and the conviction of the four defendants clearly demonstrated the willingness of the navy to address wrongs within the service. As Assistant Secretary of the Navy William McAdoo had observed at the outset of the proceeding, “the question of color would not be permitted to enter into the investigation at all....Those found guilty of...offense[s] will be summarily dealt with.”⁸³ Unfortunately for the thousands of black men still serving in the Navy of the United States, the period of relative racial equality that allowed four black men to enter the gunnery training course was rapidly drawing to an end. Naval administrators, officers, and enlisted personnel were actively turning their back on their historical toleration of racial and ethnic minorities. Created as a separate and controllable space for minorities within the navy two years before the hazing incidents in the Washington Navy Yard, the mess attendants’ and stewards’ billets were rapidly on their way to being an exclusive home.

Demonstrating the prevalence of the sentiments that sparked the hazing case of 1895/6, white sailors repeatedly attempted for compel their black shipmates to mess and

⁸³ “Race War in the Navy,” 2.

live under segregated conditions. Unlike the officers present at Washington in 1895, those present in the fleet in subsequent years appear much less willing to defend the rights of black sailors. Indeed, in numerous cases the attempts to segregate the navy originated with the officers.

In 1905 a black sailor wrote to President Theodore Roosevelt and complained “that they had separate tables on the USS *Richmond* for white and colored” sailors. Unlike the incidents at Washington, the decision to produce segregated spaces for white men and black men appears to have been granted the sanction of the officers responsible for the vessel.⁸⁴ No record of a reply by Roosevelt or anyone within the Navy Department exists.

Racial incidents resulting in pressures to alter the social structure extant within the navy were occasionally deflected by the intercession of other events, as occurred during President Roosevelt’s 1902 trip to South Carolina. Attending the Charleston Exhibition in February, the President delivered an address on the ninety-third anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. Media outlets discussed his trip, the significance of a Republican President speaking on Lincoln’s birthday in the birthplace of the Confederacy, and of the passing of the era of politicians who had participated in—and often achieved prominence during—the American Civil War.⁸⁵

Largely lost amidst the President’s visit and the discussion of its significance was a brutal killing on board USS *Cincinnati* in Charleston Harbor. Fireman James Payne, a

⁸⁴ “Negro, USN” to Theodore Roosevelt, Oct. 11, 1905, Entry 88, Box 623, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, RG 24, (National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

⁸⁵ “The President’s Trip,” *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 1902, p. 3; “The President and Charleston,” *New York Times*, Feb. 12, 1902, p.8.

Caucasian, attacked and killed his black superior, Water Tender Agnes Williams.⁸⁶ A court martial examined the details of the case, but ultimately exonerated Payne for the killing, holding that he had acted in self-defense.⁸⁷ The court accepted testimony indicating that no immediate threat had existed, but that Payne “*believed* Williams to have been *preparing* to assail him with a razor” and had employed a handy pair of blacksmith’s tongs as a weapon in a preemptive strike.⁸⁸ Although the case received only limited coverage in the press, and did not itself result in the reformation of any navy policies or procedures, the fact that Payne was not held responsible for the intentional killing of his direct superior speaks to an erosion in the former equitability that had existed in the administration of naval justice. Less than a decade after Lamont, Fox, Murphy, and Smith were convicted, albeit on limited charges and with lenient punishments, for merely harassing blacks of equal rating and station, a white man escaped punishment entirely for killing a black man of higher rank.

Among the serious problems faced by black men in the service, particularly as time passed and the institutionalization of *de facto* segregation and discrimination hardened, was the unwillingness of naval officers and administrators to take seriously or act upon any complaints of non-white sailors. When the black men on USS *Louisiana* complained about their living conditions and treatment in 1912, the navy conducted an investigation. Despite dozens of charges, the navy ascribed blame for unsettled conditions to the black men themselves. Investigators dismissed out of hand the

⁸⁶ Payne’s name also appears in articles as James Paine.

⁸⁷ “Bad Practice Discontinued,” *Dallas Morning News*, May 4, 1902, p.3.

⁸⁸ “It Was Kill of Be Killed: Paine Slew Williams in Cincinnati in Self-Defense,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 26, 1902, p.3. Emphasis added.

complaints of four black men who had recently faced court-martials. Other complaints of unfair treatment were labeled “slight or childish” and were likewise not considered worthy of further investigation. Rather than taking seriously the remaining concerns, the concerned parties lumped blame on one sailor, George Sayles, who “had come to the U.S.S. *Louisiana* with a bad record, and had endeavored to do as he thought fit.” In sum, the investigation determined that “no discrimination against colored men existed on board the U.S.S. *Louisiana*.”⁸⁹ Clearly, the fact that black men were denied access to training, promotion, most of the service’s ratings, and command of white sailors did not constitute discrimination for the U.S. Navy of 1912.

The final years of the nineteenth century added a complex new dimension to the lives and experiences of black men in the uniform of the United States. The advent of a colonial empire provided a ready source of men who were willing and able to assume the positions on board America’s ships that many within the navy were happy to see African Americans vacate. Preference on the part of the navy and of naval officers for non-Americans rather than native-born black men only added insult to the injury created by restrictions placed upon black enlistments.

The Spanish-American War of 1898 allowed the United States to stake a legitimate claim to Spain’s former colonial holdings. The powers moved quickly to bring the conflict to a resolution; late in 1898 Spain formally effected transmission of control of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines to the United States under the terms of the Treaty of Paris. Cuba also left the Spanish fold and became a protectorate of the

⁸⁹ Acting Secretary of the Navy to Rev. J. Milton Waldron, Aug. 28, 1912, Entry 88, Box 265, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel. Italics added.

world's newest imperial state. The subsequent pacification of the Philippines through military action established American dominion over the territory, but left the control of government operations and institutions, such as existed at that time and in that place, in the hands of the military.⁹⁰

Administration of the new colonies presented challenges to the United States. Unlike previously established territories (in the American West) with substantial white populations that might reasonably be expected to progress from territories to states and possessing relatively small settled non-white populations at the time of territorial organization, the former Spanish lands contained huge permanent populations that were culturally, racially, and politically distinct from the United States and its white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant power structure. Part of the imperial challenge of the United States then, had been to determine the proper governmental structure for these new holdings.⁹¹ The Spooner Amendment to the Army Appropriations Act passed by Congress in 1901 provided for a program of civilian government for the archipelago.

The messman branch was the one area of naval service that did not make American citizenship a necessary prerequisite for enlistment in the early twentieth century. A strong preference was, however, demonstrated for individuals, especially Filipinos, who were natives of the new American colonies. Filipinos were therefore allowed to enlist for regular service as messmen, but as with black messmen recruited in the continental United States, these men were denied the opportunity to enter other

⁹⁰ For additional information on the war and insurrection in the Philippines, see Brian McAllister Linn, *The Philippine War, 1899-1902* (Lawrence, 2000), especially p. 3-41, 185-224.

⁹¹ Lanny Thompson, "The Imperial Republic: A Comparison of the Insular Territories under U.S. Dominion after 1898," *Pacific Historical Review*, 71 (Nov. 2002), 537.

branches within the enlisted personnel system.

Realizing the difficulty of maintaining the American navy in East Asia and of providing a sufficient number of sailors to man the fleet, President McKinley issued an executive order on 5 April 1901 authorizing the enlistment of 500 Filipinos into the Insular Force of the U.S. Navy. The order authorized the navy to enlist these men in one of eleven different ratings ranging in prestige and pay from mess attendant (\$11 per month) to machinist 1st class (\$28 per month).⁹² Sailors in the Insular Force served on board American ships with white sailors and in support capacities for the navy, but were restricted to service in East Asia and the Pacific. Although these sailors operated within the limited and circumscribed Insular Force, the navy was willing to provide more opportunities for service to residents of the Philippine Islands, large regions of which were in open rebellion to American rule, than to members of the native-born African American population of the United States.

The service experience of Filipinos in the navy's Insular Force was not the only demonstration of the willingness of the navy to adjust its racial system for the sake of local expediency. As with Filipinos, the navy allowed hundreds of residents of American Samoa to enlist in capacities other than messmen. Commander Benjamin Tilley began by recruiting 50 *fitafita* in 1900. Tilley drew these men primarily from the local chiefs, or *fitafitas*, whose title he appropriated for his group of sailors. He understood that the presence of marines could upset the delicate relationship between the navy and the indigenous leaders in the area by presenting the spectre of military occupation and

⁹² John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, eds. *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=69216> (April 2, 2008).

dominance.⁹³ Samoans, enlisted in the navy and trained to discharge the same functions as marines and sailors assigned to shore patrol duties in guarding the government property and policing sailors, helped wed the local power structure to the naval service.⁹⁴ Perhaps most significantly, the Bureau of Navigation authorized Commander Tilley “to enlist 58 Samoans[:] four of these to act as musicians (drum and fife) and six as petty officers for the company of 48 landsmen.”⁹⁵ Unlike the Filipinos enrolled in the Insular Force, the *fitafita* were part of the regular navy, although they were only to be detailed for service within Samoa. Clearly, the navy accepted the presence of Samoans in the regular force for reasons of politics and expediency. Again the service placed the interests of residents of colonial holdings above those of black men from the mainland United States.

In the early twentieth century the U.S. Navy demonstrated a willingness to allow inhabitants of the nation’s new colonial holdings to enlist under more advantageous terms and offered them substantially different opportunities than those offered to black men recruited domestically. The growing importance of colonials in the navy represented only half of the period’s critical racial equation. Alongside the growth in enrollments of Asian and Pacific Islanders was a hardening of ideas about African American sailors. Anachronistic black petty officers, the greatest perceived threat to the service’s racial hierarchy, became a point of particular attention in the first and second

⁹³ The navy maintained a substantial presence within the islands and was also responsible for their administrations. Uniformed naval officers served as military governors of the islands after their transfer to the control of the United States.

⁹⁴ Touetu Faaleava, “*Fitafita*: Samoan Landsmen in the United States Navy, 1900-1951” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2003), 153-158.

⁹⁵ Bureau of Navigation to Benjamin Tilley, quoted in Faaleava, “*Fitafita*,” 159.

decades of the new century. Black sailors outside the messman branch were also targeted for exclusion in more overt ways by officers and civilian administrators than had previously been the case, though the navy persisted in holding that it did not discriminate according to race or ethnicity.

In 1903 an incident at the Brooklyn Navy Yard focused national attention on the difficult position of enlisted black personnel not in the messman branch. Isaac Miller, an African American sailor whose initial enlistment apparently predated the advent of the messman branch, was examined and promoted to chief carpenter's mate. Miller attempted to sit alongside the other chief petty officers on USS *Columbia* at mealtime. His presence at the table drove away his peers who refused to dine with him and stated that they would ignore any orders that he might be required to give while carrying out his duties. *Columbia's* captain observed that the ship had "plenty of negroes aboard and . . . that they associated with the white men" prior to Miller's promotion.⁹⁶ Fearing that the animosity generated among white sailors by Miller would spread throughout the fleet, calls immediate began for the exclusion of blacks. The *Dallas Morning News* decried attempts by the administration to keep open the "door of opportunity...in the South" for black sailors.⁹⁷ A group of prominent officers suggested that the navy should follow the leadership of the U.S. Army and place black sailors on their own vessels under the leadership of white officers.⁹⁸ The plan would allow blacks more opportunities "for promotion to petty and warrant officers, which they do not now enjoy." Failure to enact the plan, it was held, would mean that "steps [would] be taken to eliminate the

⁹⁶ "Object to Negro Officer," *New York Times*, Aug. 7, 1903, p.1.

⁹⁷ "Current Comment," *Dallas Morning News*, Aug.14, 1903, p. 6

⁹⁸ "What Is President Roosevelt Going to do About It?," *Dallas Morning News*, Aug. 15, 1903, p. 6.

black men from the naval service.”⁹⁹

Realizing the difficult position in which they had placed the service, Navy Department officials moved quickly in an attempt to deflate the issue, observing in the *Army and Navy Journal* that “it is difficult to understand how a person otherwise qualified could be denied enlistment on color grounds alone.” The editors noted that such a plan for exclusion would be a “plain violation of the Federal Constitution.”¹⁰⁰ Despite the navy’s public statements of revision in recruiting practice, at least some recruiting officers took the directive to heart. Lieutenant Boyd, responsible for enlisting new sailors at New Orleans, denied twenty black men the opportunity to enter the service in April 1904. According to a published account, he told the African American men that “the United States Navy did not care for negroes in any capacity.”¹⁰¹

For America’s non-white sailors the sailing of the Great White Fleet, one of the most noteworthy public relations successes of the U.S. Navy in the early twentieth century, marked a new low. The Spanish-American War had but recently confirmed that America’s ambitious naval building program represented more than a paper tiger. Persistent fears of the fleet’s inability to function effectively combined with a desire to show the nation’s flag abroad to bring about a massed circumnavigation of the globe. While many of America’s battleships were obsolescent by the time of the fleet’s departure, its trip confirmed the service’s ability to manage a combined fleet and to project power on an unprecedented worldwide scale (for the United States).¹⁰²

⁹⁹ “The Negro in the Navy,” *New York Times*, Aug. 5, 1903, p. 3.

¹⁰⁰ *Army and Navy Journal*, Aug. 15, 1903, p.4.

¹⁰¹ “Negroes Not Wanted in Navy,” *Dallas Morning News*, April 23, 1904, p. 2.

¹⁰² James R. Reckner, *Teddy Roosevelt’s Great White Fleet* (Annapolis, 1988).

As the fleet gathered at Hampton Roads, Virginia, in preparation for sailing, senior navy officers and officials in the Navy and State Departments expressed concerns about security on board ship. Rear Admiral Albert S. Barker, who led a squadron of nine ships from the Atlantic to Manila in 1898-99 (a major fleet movement for the time), pled with Admiral George Dewey to remove or discharge all Japanese stewards and messmen from the fleet.¹⁰³ Officials feared that the Japanese might prove disloyal to their American employers and, as spies, provide information on the fleet and its vessels. The navy opted to unceremoniously dump these sailors, but refused to acknowledge the transgression. Officials claimed that ships traveling to the Pacific needed extra men, so captains should transfer those with little time remaining on their service commitments to allow for better men to occupy their births. Using this excuse approximately seventy-two Japanese sailors, virtually all in the fleet, were transferred to receiving ships on the east coast to be assigned to other ships. The navy apparently filled vacated positions with African Americans. If the decision to replace Japanese sailors with black sailors provided any sense of vindication to the later group, the success was short-lived. Upon its return in 1909 all of the black petty officers who had traveled around the world were reassigned to billets ashore.¹⁰⁴

Under the personnel system of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a sailor completed his period of enlistment (typically four to six years) before being discharged. If the sailor elected to reenlist, the navy allowed what amounted to a paid leave of absence before service formally resumed. This structure provided mechanisms

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰⁴ Foner, *Blacks and the Military*, 104-5; Reckner, *Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet*, 22.

by which black petty officers could be excluded from service. After completing their enlistment and passing from the service, officials in the Bureau of Navigation need only disallow reenlistment. A man named Williams, an experienced sailor rated gunner, had completed an enlistment and wished to reenter service. A report to the recruiting officer to whom Williams applied noted that “it is the wish of the Bureau of Navigation that he should not go on active duty. It seems that he is a negro.” “Williams’ case,” the report’s author observed, “is settled.”¹⁰⁵

While the denial of reentry did not guarantee the immediate segregation of the service, many sailors besides Williams were no doubt driven out simply because of their race. Properly applied, this mechanism could have rid the navy of black petty officers in well under a decade. The significance of this incident and others like it is amply demonstrated when one considers the state of enlisted personnel in the early 1900’s. For much of this period the service was “very desirous of inducing as many discharged men as possible to re-enlist.” The navy had judged it “more profitable to persuade experienced men to re-enlist” than to train new men.¹⁰⁶ But this logic was not applied to black sailors, many of whom were denied reenlistment. In the early 1900’s the navy adjudged its desire for racial segregation and for the exclusion of black petty officers at least as important as economy and the general good of the service.

While resistance on the part of naval officers and administrators to continued service by black petty officers was particularly intense during the first decade of the

¹⁰⁵ Recruiting Division, Bureau of Navigation to H.G.O. Colby, Oct. 12, 1905, Entry 35, Recruiting Letter Book 1, p. 70, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

¹⁰⁶ Lt. Commander, Recruiting Division, Bureau of Navigation to Commanding Officer, Navy Recruiting Station, Minneapolis, Nov. 10, 1905, Entry 35, Box 288, Recruiting Letter Book No.2, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

twentieth century, many equally vocal officers expressed the displeasure of having *any* African Americans under their command. J.F. Hellweg, for instance, asked that black sailors not be detailed to USS *Macdonough*, then based in Florida, because “the crew’s quarters on this ship are the poorest ventilated in the flotilla...and the men are crowded. . . . With these existing conditions,” he observed, “the presence of black men would be very unpleasant; and...would seriously affect the efficiency of the ship.”¹⁰⁷ The sentiments expressed in 1896 by Raymond Fox in his court martial case had, merely a decade later, percolated upward to such a degree that a ship’s commander would employ the same arguments against black sailors in official communications.

Between 1893 and 1912 the American navy began to systematically apply Jim Crow policies to the body of enlisted personnel. The messman branch provided a segregated space into which non-whites were gradually pushed. White sailors and officers resisted the continued service of black men outside the messman branch and devised diverse strategies to rid the navy of these unwelcome intruders in what was deemed to rightly be reserved for whites. The acquisition of the Philippine Islands during the Spanish-American War provided a population offering a ready source of mess attendants and stewards—individuals who white naval officers judged superior to native-born African Americans—resulting in the further curtailment of already limited opportunities for black men in the fleet. While the two decades following 1893 presented real hardships for the navy’s African Americans, black men would come to face an even more pernicious manifestation of Jim Crowism in the eight years of the

¹⁰⁷ J.F. Hellweg to Secretary of the Navy, Nov. 6, 1906, Entry 88, Box 687, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

presidency of Woodrow Wilson.

CHAPTER IV

WOODROW WILSON, JOSEPHUS DANIELS, AND JIM CROW

The election of 1912 brought to the White House the first southern-born president of the United States since Andrew Johnson. While initially Woodrow Wilson's presidency seemed to offer hope of positive revision in the nation's race relations, Wilson's policies and those of many of his cabinet secretaries only served to more sharply draw the color line than at any time since the abolition of slavery. This was the reality for the U.S. Navy where the racist attitudes and practices that had been on the rise for the previous two decades received explicit government sanction. Although black soldiers fought in Europe and repeatedly won the appellations of their Allied hosts, such honors would be denied the African Americans who entered naval service. With the conclusion of the First World War, the navy disregarded the sacrifices and substantial contributions made by black men in navy blue and undertook the most prolonged and intense period of black exclusion in the service's history.

In his 1912 bid for the presidency, Woodrow Wilson became the first Democrat to receive widespread support and endorsement from leaders of the African American community.¹⁰⁸ W.E.B. DuBois rationalized his support for Wilson, arguing in *The Crisis* that Wilson "will not seek further means of 'Jim Crow' insult, he will not dismiss black men wholesale from office and he will remember that the Negro in the United States has a right to be heard and considered."¹⁰⁹ Despite the hopes that many black Americans

¹⁰⁸ Kenneth O'Reilly, "The Jim Crow Policies of Woodrow Wilson," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 17 (Autumn, 1997), p. 117.

¹⁰⁹ *The Crisis*, IV, 4 (Aug., 1912), p. 181.

held for the new administration, Wilson quickly demonstrated his desire to maintain and expand segregation within the federal government.

Woodrow Wilson and his Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, were both southern-born men possessing derogatory views of the African American race. Under their leadership attitudes of white superiority and black inferiority became institutionalized and publicized. The acknowledgement and adoption of the Jim Crow ideology of racial separation was part of a broader transformation that was occurring and had occurred within the various agencies and departments of the federal government. As Wilson wrote, “We are trying—and by degrees succeeding—a plan of concentration which will put [African Americans] all together and will not in any one bureau mix the two races.”¹¹⁰ For Woodrow Wilson and many of his cabinet officers, the establishment of Jim Crow within the government represented a positive, scientific step forward in administration and race relations.¹¹¹ Responding to a letter of complaint about segregation drafted by Oswald Garrison Villard, the President noted that “It is as far as possible from being a movement *against* the negroes. I sincerely believe it to be in their interest.”¹¹² Failing to comprehend why segregation would displease Villard, Wilson observed that “what distresses me about your letter is to find that you look at it in so different a light.”¹¹³

The formal Jim Crow system within the navy, though new for the service, was

¹¹⁰ Woodrow Wilson to Thomas Dixon, Jr. in Arthur S. Link, ed., *Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (69 vols., Princeton, 1966-1994), XXVIII, 94.

¹¹¹ In addition to Wilson, a native Virginian, and Daniels, a newspaper editor from North Carolina, Postmaster General Albert S. Burlison and Attorney General James C. McReynolds were native southerners who embraced Wilson’s racial ideology. See O’Reilly, “The Jim Crow Policies of Woodrow Wilson,” 118.

¹¹² Wilson to Oswald Garrison Villard, July 23, 1913 in Link, ed., *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, XXVIII, 65.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

but a piece in a larger program of discrimination and segregation. Throughout the federal government black were dismissed from their positions and forced into segregated occupations and spaces. Speaking of Wilson in his diary in 1913, Josephus Daniels noted that the president “believed segregation was best for the negro and best for the [postal] Service . . . he did not wish to see them have less positions than they now have, but he wished the matter adjusted in a way to make the least friction.”¹¹⁴ For a service that already thoroughly circumscribed and limited opportunities for black participation, Wilson’s program of increased segregation necessarily meant the reduction of African Americans. For the navy, like the postal service, the Wilson administration brought increased segregation and decreased opportunity—a reality that would be fully implemented in the period of confusion and adjustment following the conclusion of the First World War.

When Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated in June 1914, the U.S. Navy had an authorized strength of 48,000 sailors and 3,500 apprentice seamen. The United States responded slowly to the threat posed by the destabilization in Europe, and by the time of America’s entry into the First World War Congress had authorized only a modest increase of 23,200 total enlisted personnel for the navy. The subsequent wholesale expansion of the naval service and dramatic increase in the number of vessels in operation required that new men be brought into all of the existing ratings and into new ratings created to meet the needs of the war. Increased need for messmen and manual coal heavers, those few areas of the service that since 1893 had been, to some

¹¹⁴ Josephus Daniels, *The Cabinet Diaries of Josephus Daniels, 1913-1921*, ed. E. David Cronon (Lincoln, 1963), 33.

degree, open to black enlistments, allowed for a peak in the wartime era of 5,668 black sailors in 1919. The same factors led to substantial increases for other racial and ethnic minority groups within the service. Filipino enlistment increased to 6,134, Hawaiian to 227, Native American to 56, and Puerto Rican to 225. Some groups, like Samoans and Guamanians, benefited from postwar personnel adjustments to achieve their highest enlistment rates in more than a decade during 1920.¹¹⁵ Only Japanese sailors did not achieve any increase in participation during or after the war. Rather, Japanese participation in the American navy had been in steady decline since the turn of century and would continue to decrease annually until 1936, by which point the last remaining Japanese sailor had left the service.¹¹⁶

The First World War provided only limited opportunities for African American participation in the navy. Like the United States Army, the Navy enforced strict segregation. For the army it was possible to create entirely black units that could be employed in service capacities or assigned to combat duties as distinct entities apart from whites.¹¹⁷ The navy, on the other hand, was unwilling and largely unable to assign all black crews to any of its vessels. Lacking commissioned and petty officers possessed

¹¹⁵ U.S. Navy, *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Navy* (Washington, 1918); U.S. Navy, *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Navy* (Washington, 1919); U.S. Navy, *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Navy* (Washington, 1920); Frederick S. Harrod, *Manning the New Navy: The Development of a Modern Naval Enlisted Force, 1899-1940* (Westport, 1978), 183.

¹¹⁶ Harrod, *Manning the New Navy*, 183-4.

¹¹⁷ Approximately 400,000 African Americans served in the U.S. Army during World War I. While all branches of the service were technically open to them, more than 380,000 served in segregated service regiments, primarily as common laborers, stevedores, and domestics. Those who were assigned to combat fought in the segregated 92nd and 93rd Divisions. The 369th, 370th, 371st, and 372nd Infantry Regiments of the 93rd Division fought with great distinction under the French, the 369th becoming the war's most highly decorated American unit. See Neil A. Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War* (New York, 1976), 6-7 and Michael Lee Lanning, *The African-American Soldier from Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell* (Secaucus, 1997), 133-143.

of specialized, technical skills, the establishment of all black ships would have presented a real challenge to such a scheme. The racist sentiments of the uniformed and civilian leaders of the Navy ensured that a training program to remedy such shortcoming would not develop.¹¹⁸ Writing in response to an inquiry from a member of Congress in 1917, Rear Admiral L.C. Palmer of the Bureau of Navigation, observed that “it is not good policy for negroes to be enlisted as apprentice seamen [thus giving them access to the petty officer ranks through promotion] and be required to live under the congested conditions which frequently prevail on board ship.”¹¹⁹

The service therefore persisted in its policy of restricting African Americans to inferior positions, primarily within the messman branch.¹²⁰ By 1917 the number of ratings within the branch had been expanded to meet the need for increased specialization. The six ratings of stewards, ranging from individuals engaged in service to warrant officers through commanders in chief, had been supplemented with six complementary grades of cooks. The navy also subdivided the mess attendant’s rating, creating mess attendant 1st class, 2nd class, and 3rd class.¹²¹ Members of the branch still discharged the same duties, however, serving as waiters, cooks, maids, and attendants to

¹¹⁸ The Army experienced a similar situation, but following persistent pressures from the black community it created a training program to produce black commissioned officers.

¹¹⁹ L.C. Palmer to Thomas D. Shall, May 15, 1917, Box 329, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, RG 24, (National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

¹²⁰ African Americans were also given some limited opportunities to enlist as firemen, thus giving them access to the chain of promotion in the engine room force. Such opportunities were tightly limited and petty officers not typically selected from among the ranks of black firemen. One especially noteworthy exception to this firm rule was the service of approximately thirty black women enlisted as “yoemanettes” for employment in the Navy Department in Washington, D.C. See Jack D. Foner, *Blacks and the Military in American History: A New Perspective* (New York, 1974), 124.

¹²¹ Bureau of Navigation, U.S. Navy Department, *Enlistment Instructions Pay and Advancement in the United States Navy* (Washington, 1916), 11.

white warrant and commissioned officers. Enlisted personnel continued to have their meals organized and prepared by members of the commissary branch.

In theory the navy continued to allow non-whites to enter service as firemen during the First World War although departmental policy seemed to disfavor enlisting black men for this service. The history of the “fireman’s” billet itself demonstrates the desire on the part of the navy to exclude blacks. In 1842, to meet the needs of the initial introduction of steam engines into naval vessels, the service created the coal heaver’s rating. An executive order of February 1893 redesignated men serving in the specialty as coal passers.¹²² In 1916 the billet’s name was again changed, this time to fireman 3rd class, although the incumbent’s place and purpose on board ship remained unaltered. Rear Admiral Victor Blue, chief of the Bureau of Navigation, feared that white sailors were disinclined to serve as coal passers. Encouraging their enlistment was apparently an important factor in prompting the redesignation.¹²³ During the First World War opportunities existed for black service as firemen 3rd class, though the navy expected that *black* recruits for the specialty have previous experience and training.¹²⁴ The fate of qualified recruits still rested with recruiting officers, in whom the navy vested a substantial amount of discretionary power.

One noteworthy exception to the rule of exclusively enlisting black men as messmen or firemen occurred in the former Danish West Indies, which were purchased

¹²² William Shepherd Edwards, *Enlisted Ratings Established in the Naval Service by the Act of 1 July 1897 and Subsequent Actions* (Washington, 1951).

¹²³ Harrod, *Manning the New Navy*, 59.

¹²⁴ L.C. Palmer to Thomas D. Schall, May 15, 1917, Entry 89, Box 324, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

in 1917 and redubbed the Virgin Islands of the United States.¹²⁵ Governance of the new territory was assigned to the navy. Shortly after the transfer bandleader Alton Augustus Adams, a black islander, and his band of Afro-Caribbean musicians were inducted into the U.S. Navy.¹²⁶ Adams was rated a bandmaster, giving him chief petty officer's rank, while the majority of his instrumentalists received musician second class, or petty officer second class, ratings.¹²⁷ The Governor of the Islands, a naval officer, secured the group a release from sea duty, which allowed them to remain in the islands.¹²⁸ This release insured that Adams and his black musicians did not upset race relations within the fleet. Instead, they remained within the predominantly black population of the islands where they served as a "bridge of communication" between civilians and the navy.¹²⁹ Ultimately, participation in the messman's branch was judged a better billet for the majority of blacks than firemen or musicians because it allowed for separation on board ship, ensuring that "no embarrassment is caused to either race."¹³⁰

During the war the messman branch, which had formerly been dominated by non-white sailors, was also opened to large numbers of Caucasians. This meant that opportunities for enlistment in the one area of service formerly reserved for racial minorities were curtailed.¹³¹ The naval recruiting policy during the conflict also served to limit access of black men to the ratings. Initially the Navy relied upon an all

¹²⁵ The United States had previously attempted to purchase the is

¹²⁶ Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., "Alton Augustus Adams: The First Black Bandmaster in the U. S. Navy," *The Black Perspective in Music* 5(Autumn, 1977), p. 175.

¹²⁷ Mark Clague, "Instruments of Identity: Alton Augustus Adams Sr., the Navy Band of the Virgin Islands, and the Sounds of Social Change," *Black Music Research Journal* 18 (Spring/Autumn, 1998), p. 26.

¹²⁸ Floyd, "Alton Augustus Adams," 175.

¹²⁹ Clague, "Instruments of Identity," 26.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

volunteer force, which made the selective exclusion of African Americans a relatively easy matter. Recruiting officers were left essentially free to deny blacks entrance to the service. At the time the U.S. Army was receiving its enlistees from a national draft. Regulations required that ten percent of draftees be black—mirroring the nation’s ten percent black population. By not participating in the draft, the navy initially was able to avoid taking a substantial number of black men into the ranks.¹³²

In 1918 however, this policy was amended as the steadily growing naval service was forced to join the army in turning to conscription to fill the ranks. While blacks entered the navy as a result of the draft, they did not achieve the same proportional representation that would develop in the army.¹³³ The African American men who entered the navy continued to face the strict limitations in the areas of their potential employment that the members of the race had experienced for more than two decades.

In the name of breaking down the racial hierarchy which the navy had established, prominent leaders and publications within the African American community encouraged light-skinned black men who could pass for white to hide their racial heritage to allow them to gain access to the service and to effectively desegregate the service against its will.¹³⁴ In a novel program of resistance to the institutional racism, the

¹³¹ White Americans were drafted in large numbers to fill vacancies created within the expanded messman branch during World War I. After the conflict, however, navy leaders desired to return to a racially segregated body of servants. The Navy therefore allowed whites who had enlisted in the messman branch to transfer. The temporary relaxation of policy only served to benefit whites as black and Asian members of the branch were not afforded opportunities to transfer to more highly regarded and higher paying ratings.

¹³² During the Second World War the shift from an entirely voluntary force to a service participating in the draft increased the number of blacks in the navy and helped to further steps toward liberalization and equalization in the service.

¹³³ “Thousand Negro Selectives Called for Naval Service,” *Dallas Morning News*, Oct. 15, 1918, p. 1.

¹³⁴ “Joining the Navy,” *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 24, 1917, p. 10.

Chicago Defender repeatedly called upon light-skinned African American men to disguise their racial identity to infiltrate the navy and accomplish a complete, if unofficial, integration of the service. In addition to the positive social impact, this trick would allow access to the highly desirable technical training offered by the service, thus benefitting the individual along with his race generally. If such men “enlisted by the thousands [they could] get this education that is denied us.”¹³⁵ While it is impossible to determine the number of individuals who availed themselves thusly of the opportunity afforded by lighter skin, the fact that such entreaties were put to the African American public clearly demonstrated the importance attached to both the image and substance of the navy and its racial policy.

One of the greatest accomplishments inherent in the mobilization of so many sailors and their quick transfer to the fleet was the ability of the service to develop training programs that rapidly transferred uninitiated landlubbers into sailors capable of operating the complex systems found on board World War I vessels. In the U.S. Navy’s first century sailors largely relied upon on the job training to develop their necessary skills. Increased complexity of systems and weapons, a growing fleet, and the advent of large-scale inland recruiting of sailors without prior maritime experience compelled the creation of facilities offering both basic training and advanced, specialty courses. The first of the advanced courses was established at the Washington Navy Yard in 1883 for the purpose of training seamen gunners.¹³⁶ Before the turn of the century electricity schools had been initiated in New York and Boston, reflecting the need for technicians

¹³⁵ “Pass for White and Join Navy Anyhow,” *Chicago Defender*, March 31, 1917, p. 7.

¹³⁶ Harrod, *Manning the New Navy*, 89.

trained in modern technology.¹³⁷

African Americans were not entirely excluded from these education programs, but their overwhelming relegation to service as messmen meant that the most desirable courses were off limits. Prior to the advent of the First World War the U.S. Navy had established a school for the training of messmen at St. Helena in the Norfolk-Hampton Roads area of eastern Virginia.¹³⁸ As the war progressed and more messmen were demanded to fill billets on board newly commissioned vessels hundreds of messmen completed the training program at St. Helena and another one Great Lakes in Illinois. The training these men received was, however, offered to fewer personnel and was of inferior quality and value to that offered to other navy sailors.

The standard World War I era advanced naval training course required weeks of study that blended theoretical and hands on instruction, attempting to produce technicians who could both understand and operate their equipment. The U.S. Navy Radio School at Harvard University, for instance, required sixteen weeks of instruction in sixteen different areas.¹³⁹ Material covered included such diverse topics as magnetism, static electricity, radio regulations, radio power circuits, and high frequency measurement. The skills that sailors developed at the Harvard radio school and other, similar facilities provided instruction in the most modern technology with clear value for sailors who returned to the civilian world.

The St. Helena messman program, in sharp contrast, did not prescribe a set

¹³⁷ Ibid., 89.

¹³⁸ Michael D. Besch, *A Navy Second to None: The History of U.S. Naval Training in World War I* (Westport, 2002), 58.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 178.

duration for the completion of the course.¹⁴⁰ Instead, sailors remained under instruction until achieving successful completion or being dismissed. The areas of instruction stand in sharp contrast to those offered to (white) sailors in more desirable specialties and speak to the perceived inferiority of mental faculties among non-white personnel. “How to set the table for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and how to serve these meals,” “how to make tea and toast and serve it,” “how to make up the Officers bunks,” and “how to take care of Officers Uniforms and the names of the different garments belonging to certain uniforms” were among the skills which messmen were expected to develop.¹⁴¹ Where white sailors were offered opportunities to study radio, electricity, engineering, and aviation technologies, black sailors could develop skills that would, at best, aid them in gaining postwar employment as waiters or servants. The lack of standardization served only to undermine the already limited value of this instruction; if officers believed the immediate need for messmen to outweigh the value gained by increased training, the navy would simply detach these individuals, guaranteeing no opportunity to master even the basics of a trade of somewhat dubious value.

The nation’s black leaders and black press were not satisfied with the limited opportunities afforded members of their race in the messman branch and the limited and inferior educational opportunities available to black Americans. Throughout Wilson’s presidency these shapers of black opinion demanded that the service academies cease their racial restrictions. An author writing in the *Chicago Defender* asked that

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 59.

¹⁴¹ Syllabus of Course-Mess Attendants School, Entry 420, box 3, Records of the Bureau of Navigation, quoted in Besch, *A Navy Second to None*, 60.

opportunities not be limited to service as “scullions and chambermaids.”¹⁴² Authors were not above employing their own racist rhetoric to advance their championed cause. The same author asked, “the Filipinos and Japs and Chinese [to] tell us what either race mentioned has done for the flag? Nothing is the answer.”¹⁴³ The domestic justifications for increased black participation were reinforced by references to examples drawn from other nations.

Of vital importance to those advocating increased opportunity for black sailors were the experiences of non-whites in foreign armies and navies. “In the military colleges the world over,” one author held, “there is no such thing as Jimcrowism.”¹⁴⁴ The successes of black soldiers serving Europeans states during the First World War provided an early demonstration that blacks did not, as some detractors claimed, lack the innate fighting ability of whites. France, in particular, made extensive use of black soldiers drawn from its colonial holdings. The wartime French army included 340,000 North Africans, 250,000 West Africans, and 30,000 from the West Indies.¹⁴⁵ Their combat service served to silence domestic French critics and offered up a demonstration of the capabilities of non-whites that would have far-reaching consequences around the globe.

Members of the African American community had been deeply divided over the rising tide of segregation that they witnessed not merely within the navy, but within all

¹⁴² “More Recognition Demanded in Army and Navy Than Scullions and Chambermaids,” *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 16, 1915, p. 3.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴⁴ “Equal Recognition in Military Schools Asked,” *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 23, 1915, p.5.

¹⁴⁵ William E. Alt and Betty L. Alt, *Black Soldiers, White Wars: Black Warriors from Antiquity to the Present* (Westport, 2002), 75-77.

branches of the nation's military. With prominent leaders arguing that discrimination should be accepted as the price for service—service that would demonstrate to white Americans the loyalty and capacity of the black race—those who asserted that Jim Crow in any form was wrong and harmful were largely undermined. This internal division weakened the attempts of black Americans to improve their position during World War I.

Most of the African American population of the United States felt compelled to follow a course that neither acknowledged the validity of the navy's racially discriminatory policies nor roundly condemned the service for its inequalities. Participation in the American military, to help "make the world safe for democracy," was lauded by many African American leaders. By fighting, black men could prove their commitment to their nation, demonstrate the manhood present within their race, and show the white power structure that nonwhites should be afforded more complete participation in society and politics. That such struggle was conducted under the present Jim Crow system, whether in segregated army units or in the rudest ratings on board ship, constituted, in the minds of many within the community, the cross that must be born in the name of racial uplift.

Throughout the duration of the war and in its wake the black public celebrated the service of black men in uniform, including the sailors in the navy. An August 1918 article in the *Chicago Defender* observed that two black sailors, Joseph Swain and Godfrey Nicholson, were "fortunate enough to play an important part in the great struggle now going on in the defense of democracy."¹⁴⁶ The author also noted that members of the community "look forward to valiant deeds and accomplishments" from

¹⁴⁶ "Our Boys Doing Heroic Work in U.S. Navy," *Chicago Defender*, Aug. 31, 1918, p.2.

the sailors.¹⁴⁷ The support afforded to these black men in uniform echoed the sentiments expressed by community members toward those serving in other areas of the military.

Pragmatic parties and individuals attempted to ensure that the separate but equal provisions under which the military supposedly operated actually resulted in analogous facilities for white and black alike. Under the banner of the “Central Committee of Negro College Men” leading figures at some of the nation’s most prominent institutions of higher learning challenged the government to afford opportunities for the training of black officers to lead black regiments being enlisted.¹⁴⁸ The very success of the committee’s efforts, however, only serves to demonstrate the added hardships under which those seeking a revision of policy within the navy operated. While calls for “black” ships had been made before, were made during the war, and would be made for two decades after its conclusion, the structure of the navy’s fleet virtually ensured that such a program would not develop.

Long present in the navy, racially motivated violence grew in frequency during the war along with the substantial expansion of the service itself. Extant evidence does not permit the determination of relative rates of or differing causes for this violence, but violence provoked exclusively by the race of the victim clearly posed a serious threat to men of color in uniform. The experience of Henry Simmons at the Brooklyn Navy Yard might stand in for the experiences of many of his comrades in arms. While Simmons

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴⁸ Prominent black men were drawn from leading institutions dedicated to the training of African Americans including Howard (M.H. Curtis) and Lincoln (W. Douglas) as well as institutions admitting blacks which were more traditionally associated with white students and faculty, for example Cornell (L.H. Russell) and Amherst (C.H. Houston). Emmett J. Scott, *Scott’s Official History of the American Negro in the World War*. Reprinting. (New York, 1969), 82-87.

was washing his clothes near the vessel to which he was assigned, three armed guards launched an unprovoked attack upon him, and, according to an account in the *Chicago Defender*, sparked a minor riot that was only broken up by the arrival of marines. Henry Simmons ended up in the base hospital.¹⁴⁹

Along with the increase in the respective sizes of the enlisted force, officer force, and fleet, the service required a substantial expansion in civilian support personnel. Black Americans sought the wages offered in the navy yards and in other facilities and also wished to do their part to help to achieve victory in the Great War. Although a few African Americans succeeded in gaining civilian positions within the Navy Department or, for those already employed by the department, moved up within the civilian hierarchy, men and women of color found employment opportunities as circumscribed, if not more so, than those of their brothers who served in uniform.

One month after the United States entered the war, black women in Charleston, South Carolina, sought employment in a clothing factory attached to that city's navy yard. The six hundred positions created to produce items for new servicemen within a newly built facility went exclusively to white women. In response to threats made by local leaders of the African American community, the local official responsible for the new facility, Marvin J. Taylor, indicated that continued agitation would lead the navy to remove the plant and related production operations from the city. That Taylor was apparently operating under the guidance of administrators in Washington demonstrates a desire to, at minimum, check the entry of non-whites to civilian positions within the

¹⁴⁹ "Attack Sailors on Duty Because of His Color," *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 13, 1917, p. 6.

department.¹⁵⁰

By late 1918 feelings of frustration and resentment toward the federal government and the military services had grown substantially among the African American population. Raymond B. Fosdick, chairman of the Committee on Training Camp Activities, outlined for President Wilson a litany of complaints made by black men and women in and out of uniform. Blacks he noted, felt “uneasy about the future[,] look upon the government as unfriendly, and seeking to do them harm[, feel] that negro troops are discriminated against and badly treated[, and believe] that the war cannot be won without the negroes.”¹⁵¹

Between the inauguration of President Woodrow Wilson in 1913 and the conclusion of the First World War, black Americans witnessed steady erosion in their opportunities for employment in government, including in the U.S. Navy. For President Wilson and Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels the application of Jim Crow to the government was not pernicious racism, but a progressive reform built upon solid evolutionary and biological science. Black leaders and the black press fought to bring more opportunities for black participation in the defense industries and in the military, but opportunities were few and the limited number made available were at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy and came with the undeniable badge of Jim Crow.

While thousands of white sailors received cutting edge technical training to allow them to operate the service’s most modern weapons and systems, blacks, if they were lucky, could only take a mess attendant’s course that offered none of the knowledge and

¹⁵⁰ “Refused Employment in the Charleston Navy,” *Chicago Defender*, May 19, 1917, p. 1.

¹⁵¹ Raymond B. Fosdick, “Status of Negro Problem at Newport News,” in Link, ed., *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, V, 51, 136-138.

experience that benefitted whites in service and after their enlistments had ended. In the wake of the First World War black sailors were set to receive the ultimate sign of ingratitude on the part of their nation. Less than one year after black Americans fought and died to help protect freedom and democracy around the globe, the U.S. Navy officially stopped enlisting black men.

CHAPTER V

A DECADE OF BLACK EXCLUSION

Late in the First World War and in its immediate wake, the United States experienced tremendous racial upheaval and strife. Leaders within the national and state governments sought to counter the threat they perceived from African Americans who had participated in the war effort and believed that from their actions they had earned a stake in the peace. Race riots and a perceptible increase in the number of lynchings targeting the nation's black population occurred alongside (and often in a close relationship with) social and political disruptions resulting from the fear of communism. The Red Scare of the communist threat and the blood flowing literally and figuratively from the nation's African Americans led to 1919 being dubbed the "Red Summer." Though the Red Summer passed into memory in relatively short order and the social, political, and economic climate had largely stabilized by the mid-1920's, the implications of the period for the nation's black population and the naval service would continue to reverberate for decades.

The period between 1919 and 1932 was equally tumultuous for the African American men who had served in their nation's navy. The era represented the apogee of racism and discrimination in the American navy. For the first time official, *de jure* policies were put in place to exclude African Americans from the naval service. The First World War and its aftermath demonstrated a subtle but important shift in the racial attitudes present within the service and its approach not merely to black sailors, but to

the broader African American community.

In 1918 and 1919 social unrest throughout the United States sparked dozens of lynchings which presented a very real and immediate threat to the existing social order. The deployment of violence and intimidation proved essential tools in the arsenals of a white American society interested in imposing controls on the nation's racial and ethnic minorities. Between 1880 and 1930 an estimated 3,220 blacks were lynched in the South alone.¹⁵² The years immediately preceding the advent of American participation in the First World War did not prove substantially different from this tradition of extralegal justice; in 1916 fifty-four African Americans were lynched.¹⁵³ Politicians and editors employed rhetoric of war for the preservation and propagation of democracy and as a mechanism to increase support among the people of the United States for intervention in Europe. For the nation's black population, the flowery oratory on freedoms and self-determination proved hollow. In 1917, thirty-eight lynchings were recorded, by 1918 lynchings reached sixty-four nationally.¹⁵⁴ The conclusion of hostilities offered no reprieve from the violence, for in 1919 eighty-three black men's lives ceased at the end of the hangman's noose.¹⁵⁵

At least twenty-five significant race riots also erupted during the First World War and in its immediate wake.¹⁵⁶ These riots, often the product of white resistance to black social and economic success, flared up in East St. Louis, Washington, D.C., Omaha,

¹⁵² W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana, 1993), 8.

¹⁵³ Lee E. Williams, II, *Post-War Riots in America, 1919 and 1946: How the Pressures of War Exacerbated American Urban Tensions to the Breaking Point* (Lewiston, 1992), 2.

¹⁵⁴ Williams, *Post-War Riots in America*, 2.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Charleston, South Carolina and other places. Unlike previous race riots in the United States, blacks in the late 1910's frequently armed themselves and resisted the assaults by whites. In the minds of many whites this resistance only served to confirm the violent tendencies and potential of African Americans, justifying further retrenchment in the Jim Crow system.¹⁵⁷

The armistice of 1918 promised an end to the mass killings on the battlefields of Europe, though the United States faced new social and political upheavals at home. As hundreds of thousands of soldiers and sailors returned home, they found a stagnant economy which was largely unable to absorb their influx into the domestic labor market. During the conflict hundreds of thousands of black men and women responded enthusiastically to the call for war workers by migrating from homes in the rural South to industrial centers in the North.¹⁵⁸ These migrants often took the most unpleasant, physically demanding, and lowest paying jobs within the expanded industrial sector. The post-war contraction of the industrial economy threw many of these black men and women out of work. White Americans too found fewer opportunities for employment. Many whites erroneously believed that the employment of blacks was the cause of their limited opportunities. As Lee Williams has observed, the African Americans, including former soldiers and sailors, provided a perfect scapegoat upon whom blame could be placed not simply for contracted economic opportunity after the war, but for social disruption and the higher cost of living as well.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 2-4.

¹⁵⁸ Vincent P. Franklin, "The Philadelphia Race Riot of 1918," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 99 (July 1975), 337.

¹⁵⁹ Franklin, "The Philadelphia Race Riots of 1918," 16.

More than 400,000 former black service personnel left the ranks of the army and navy between 1918 and 1920. During the conflict, and particularly upon their return to the United States, these African Americans experienced the pernicious realities of the Jim Crow system.¹⁶⁰ As uniformed personnel, however, many had developed a new consciousness that led them to challenge problems that they perceived within American society upon their return home. W.E.B. Du Bois commented on the spirit of the returning soldiers and sailors, “We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting.”¹⁶¹ Leon Litwack has argued that no single visual stimulus proved more infuriating to white Americans than the sight of a black man in uniform. Such individuals, it was feared, would develop an unreasonable sense of pride, authority, and responsibility that would result in their becoming “highfalutin.”¹⁶² Many whites responded negatively to these men, turning to traditional tools of violence and intimidation in attempting to force them to return to their perceived proper place in the nation’s racial hierarchy. Lynchings, race riots, and other, more subtle, forms of violence and intimidation targeted many of these individuals, including at least ten black veterans who were lynched in 1918. Some of these men were murdered while still wearing their military uniforms.¹⁶³

It was within this highly charged climate that the U.S. Navy undertook one of its

¹⁶⁰ In addition to the racial segregation in the Navy, the black men who served in the Army experienced persistent insults and limitations placed upon their movement and promotion. White officers and enlisted men of the United States Army generally sought to export the Jim Crow system of racial controls to Europe. When African American soldiers were lauded by the French for their bravery and military prowess, white Americans reacted by denigrating blacks and belittling them to Europeans, e.g., by repeating the stereotypical view of the black man as possessing bestial lust for white women. See Gerald W. Patton, *War and Race: The Black Officer in the American Military, 1915-1941* (Westport, 1981), 88-92.

¹⁶¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Returning Soldiers,” *Crisis* 19(May 1919), p. 13-14.

¹⁶² Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York, 1999), 331.

¹⁶³ Williams, *Post-War Riots in America*, 2; Foner, *Blacks and the American Military*, 126.

most overtly racist adjustments in its system of enlisted personnel. On 4 August 1919 the service suspended first enlistments of messmen within the physical confines of the United States. As department policy had effectively limited black sailors to the branch, this resulted in the virtual cessation of new black enlistments. This policy remained in place throughout the 1920's and early 1930's.¹⁶⁴ While this "temporary" closure was in force, the U.S. Navy met the fleet's requirements for mess attendants and stewards by leaving first enlistments open in the Philippines.¹⁶⁵

Wartime increases in the naval enlisted force brought the total number of men in uniform to 250,833 in 1919, the most sailors in the navy's history until the Second World War again demanded a substantially enlarged fleet. Black sailors disproportionately benefited from the preparations for war. In 1917 the navy contained a mere 1,285 black sailors (1.27% of the total enlisted force), but by 1919 this figure had risen to a wartime peak of 5,668 (2.25%). In 1920, despite the restrictions placed upon black enlistees, their representation in the enlisted force actually grew to 2.78% (3,037). By 1922 the naval enlisted force had fallen below 90,000 sailors and would remain between 80,000 and 90,000 for the next decade. The number of black sailors and their representation within the enlisted population fell steadily, however, until first enlistments were again authorized in 1932. By 1932 a mere 441 (0.54%) African Americans remained in the navy.¹⁶⁶ Reflecting its previous handling of black sailors, the Navy appears not to have undertaken a systematic effort to compel the remaining black personnel within the

¹⁶⁴ Jones to Nimitz, April 29, 1937, MB(187), Box 517, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, RG 24 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

¹⁶⁵ Frederick S. Harrod, *Manning the New Navy: The Development of a Modern Naval Enlisted Force, 1899-1940* (Westport, 1978), 221, note 57.

¹⁶⁶ Harrod, *Manning the New Navy*, 183.

service, including some who had attained petty officer rank, to leave. The racist actions of some enlisted personnel and commissioned officers certainly contributed to individual sailors' decisions to leave, but encouragement of such an approach does not appear to have become policy, whether formal or informal.

While the cessation of recruitment of messmen within the United States represented a clear articulation of the Navy's desire not to allow first enlistments of African American sailors, the utilization of this mechanism to halt black entrants into the service was not without some problems. As no official policy or recruiting circular had been forwarded to local recruiting officers to indicate that blacks were not to be enlisted, confused heads of recruiting stations were known to occasionally offer entrance to black men.

Ralph Risley, commanding the naval recruiting station in Scranton, Pennsylvania, made just such a mistake when he authorized enlistment of Harry Augustus Johnson and James Royal Dockens as Firemen, third class. Numerous black men had previously sought to enlist and medical personnel charged with administering physical examinations would "reject them physically for some minor [*sic*] defect which we endeavored to find."¹⁶⁷ The postwar turnover in men compelled the navy to increase recruiting efforts and less rigidly screen applicants. The recruiting service dispatched extra recruiters, many of them about to be mustered out of the navy, to help secure new trainees. Between 1920 and 1923 more than half of all would be enlistees were accepted; a higher proportion than usual outside of wartime when two-thirds to three-

¹⁶⁷ Risley to Bureau of Navigation, March 24, 1920, Box 336, File 5525-5002, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

quarters of all aspirants were typically rejected.¹⁶⁸ The fact that the navy was in need of new recruits was of insufficient gravity to warrant allowing black men to enter service. “We have,” Risley noted, “kept the negroes’ goodwill and sent them away from the Recruiting Station happy.”¹⁶⁹ For the two aspiring black sailors who managed to slip through the normally tight racial controls of the Scranton recruiting station, the Jim Crow policies of the navy proscribed only two options. The commanding officer of the U.S. Naval Training Base at Hampton Roads, Virginia, gave the black men a choice. “In the event that these men do not desire to change their rate to the messmen branch,” he observed, the navy should, “discharge these men for inaptitude.”¹⁷⁰ The U.S. Navy was willing to allow black men to enter the service, despite policy to the contrary, assuming that such individuals were willing to accept the highly circumscribed and discriminatory positions offered them within a space increasingly populated by East Asians, especially Filipinos.

The navy’s new policy toward African American sailors was paralleled by changes in the public face of the service concerning the race issue. The brief visit of USS *Fairfax* to Richmond, Virginia, in 1919 and the racial difficulties surrounding its time in the Virginia capital demonstrate the changes lately engendered by the Navy Department, the response of an African American community in a unique position to challenge a direct assault upon the social position of men and women of color, and the long term implications of the visit for both the U.S. Navy and the nation’s black

¹⁶⁸ Harrod, *Manning the New Navy*, 37, 49.

¹⁶⁹ Risley to Bureau of Navigation, March 24, 1920, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

¹⁷⁰ J.B. Gay to Bureau of Navigation, Washington D.C, March 13, 1920, File 5525-5002, Box 336, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

population.

On 11 September 1919, Lieutenant Commander William W. Smith, captain of the *Fairfax*, docked in Richmond. The arrival of the destroyer sparked the interest of the local population, but nothing initially indicated that the stopover would be any different from other postwar public relations tours of naval vessels. On 12 September, the governor of Virginia, mayor of Richmond, and other dignitaries were welcomed on board the ship. Following their inspection, Commander Smith opened his vessel to the public for tours.¹⁷¹ While the trip to Richmond began innocuously enough, the visit of the *Fairfax* to the port soon demonstrated, arguably for the first time, a hardening of the racial attitudes by the U.S. Navy toward the civilian population. Where previously an attempt, though often half-hearted, had been made to create at least the impression of a liberal racial policy on the part of the navy toward the public, developments in Richmond clearly demonstrated that Jim Crow had finally and firmly found a home within the service.

J. Thomas Hewin, an African American attorney in the Richmond area, drafted letters to the Secretary of the Navy and published them in the *Richmond Planet*, the state's leading black newspaper, in which he stated that African Americans had been entirely denied the privilege of going on board the *Fairfax*. Such segregation, he maintained, had not been applied to other minority groups, including Native Americans and East Asians.¹⁷² In making such a claim Hewin likely employed a rhetorical device

¹⁷¹ Smith to Daniels, Oct. 12, 1919, Box 661, General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80, (National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

¹⁷² J. Thomas Hewin, letter to W.S. Benson, Box 661, General Records of the Department of the Navy; "Destroyer Captain Wrong in Barring Colored People," *Richmond Planet*, Oct. 11, 1919, p. 1.

intended not so much to demonstrate that such individuals had been present and gained access, but that members of the African American race had been uniquely excluded from participation. Hewin also reported that previous commitment to the war effort, whether through one's prior military service or community support, was not considered of sufficient merit to counteract the firm hand of Jim Crow.¹⁷³

Hewin's initial letter of complaint, dated 15 September 1919, arrived in Washington at the Navy Department and elicited response almost immediately.¹⁷⁴ By 20 September the Chief of Naval Operation had made known the objection of the African American community to Commander Smith. Smith flatly rejected the charge that black citizens had been denied access. Instead, he noted that following a consultation with "local authorities...and prominent citizens" the decision had been reached to set aside one day during the ship's stopover to satisfy African Americans wishing to visit.¹⁷⁵ The date chosen—approximately four days after Washington apprised Smith of the situation—was 23 September. In the intervening time the Commander was able to produce "a notice that Tuesday, 23 September, would be visiting day for the colored population of Richmond [which] was posted at the gangway."¹⁷⁶ The concession of one visiting day meant that opportunities to view the ship were severely curtailed and that African Americans faced segregation based entirely upon race.

Commander Smith provided a pair of defenses—or excuses—for excluding black

¹⁷³ *Richmond Planet*, Sept. 20, 1919, p. 4.

¹⁷⁴ That the Navy responded immediately clearly demonstrates the seriousness with which the service's administration approached the situation.

¹⁷⁵ Smith to Secretary of the Navy, Sept. 20, 1919, Box 661, General Records of the Department of the Navy.

¹⁷⁶ Smith to Daniels, 15 Oct. 15, 1919, Box 661, General Records of the Department of the Navy.

Virginians from visiting the *Fairfax* as freely as whites were permitted. These defenses provide valuable insights into the mind of a mid-level naval officer and speak to the hardening racial ideas within the service. As one of the principle functions of the *Fairfax*'s mission was to help spark the interest of potential recruits to join the Navy, and given the recent curtailment of first enlistments of African Americans, Smith surmised that there was little reason to welcome blacks on board his ship. Indeed, he noted in a letter that "the local recruiting officer had orders from the Bureau of Navigation not to recruit negroes."¹⁷⁷ Smith persisted in maintaining that the lack of recruiting efforts directed toward blacks made it reasonable to exclude them. Such an argument represents a substantial shifting in the attitudes of the Navy.¹⁷⁸

Commander Smith presented another defense for his actions excluding black residents of Richmond from the *Fairfax* in a subsequent letter to the Secretary of the Navy. He argued that despite the fact that African Americans were allowed only one day

¹⁷⁷ Smith to Bureau of Navigation, Oct. 22, 1919, Bx. 661, General Records of the Department of the Navy.

¹⁷⁸ Incidents similar to the events in Richmond in 1919 in which members of the African American public were excluded from events had happened before, but the response by the navy's concerned parties had been perceptibly different. In 1900 Reverend J. Henry Burke, a prominent African American divine, alleged that he had been denied entrance to the Marine Corps Barracks at Washington, D.C. because of his race. He wished to enter the barracks to enjoy a performance of the Marine Corps band stationed in the nation's capital. In response to his written enquiry concerning the event, the Marine Corps maintained that the guards charged with manning the facility's gates operated under orders to keep out riff-raff and other potential trouble makers. As numerous African American youth tended to congregate around the entrance and were considered to be potentially troublesome, guards considered it proper to exclude them. Burke's denied entry had likely resulted, in the estimation of the commanding officer of the Marine barracks, from a sentry's misunderstanding of a verbal order, not from any desire to exclude individuals based upon their race or ethnicity. Proper and upstanding black men, such as Burke, were not to be excluded, only those who posed a potential problem. This despite the fact that in the early twentieth century the U.S. Marine Corps completely resisted the entrance of *any* blacks into *any* rank. An argument justifying exclusion of non-whites based upon their lack of service could easily have been made in 1900, as it would be two decades later in Richmond, but the Navy Department was not yet committed to total exclusion of blacks and less willing and able to openly demonstrate such a position to the public. See J. Henry Burke to John D. Long, Secretary of the Navy, Sept. 18, 1900, Box 508, General Records of the Department of the Navy; Endorsement, letter from J. Henry Burke to John D. Long, Secretary of the Navy, Sept. 18, 1900, Box 508, General Records of the Department of the Navy

on board ship compared to the weeks afforded to whites and that their single visiting day had been reserved exclusively for the black community, no discrimination had occurred. Smith echoed the commonly voiced defense of racists and segregationists based upon the landmark 1896 Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* allowing for separate but equal accommodation. The commander specifically invoked the racially restrictive laws of Virginia which limited or barred black men and women from facilities like movie theaters and streetcars, but were not deemed discriminatory.¹⁷⁹

Participation in political and military activities, including visiting ships like the *Fairfax*, provided the black community with a direct and meaningful connection to the war's victors that posed a challenge to the man in uniform. Beyond segregation or exclusion for the sake of maintaining race relations, actions like those of Commander Smith presented a clear challenge to an interpretation of the First World War that acknowledged the importance of black men and women in helping to achieve victory.

While the exclusion of African American community members from the *Fairfax* represented a meaningful revision of the Navy's former approach to civilians, the naval administration's manipulation of public relations during the incident followed a tried and true pattern. Prior to the inauguration of President Woodrow Wilson and installation of Josephus Daniels as Secretary of the Navy, the service had kept up the charade of offering equality in the ranks and enlistment regardless of race or ethnicity. The Navy had frequently claimed, and with some legitimacy, that no regulation excluded African Americans or other minorities from participation. During the First World War, the

¹⁷⁹ W.W. Smith to Bureau of Navigation, Oct. 22, 1919, Box 508, General Records of the Department of the Navy.

service had become relatively more outspoken in its attitudes toward members of different races. Advertisements had been placed in major newspapers seeking the services of black men, but only in the messman branch. Despite this, much of the public, white and black alike, was still unaware of the institutionalization of discrimination within the service. As late as April 1919 the *Half-Century Magazine*, a publication catering to the nation's middle-class African Americans, noted that, "enlistments in the Navy are open in practically every branch and it would certainly pay any young man to at least investigate and ask [*sic*] to be shown proof of these facts."¹⁸⁰ Young blacks from comparatively affluent homes were told of the opportunities afforded by the navy and of the virtues of the service at a time when only the messman's branch was open to them. Within months even that limited opportunity would be closed. Although a desire to segregate had been both desire and practice previously, the position had not been articulated emphatically or clearly.

In handling the incident at Richmond, Admiral William S. Benson, Acting Secretary of the Navy, initially tried to deflect any responsibility for the occurrences. In response to an inquiry concerning the injustice surrounding Smith's decision to segregate, Benson acknowledged the complaint and "referred [the matter] to the Commanding Officer of the Destroyer...for such comment as he may desire to make."¹⁸¹ Unsatisfied with the response, J. Thomas Hewin pressed the Acting Secretary for a definitive statement concerning Smith's orders and seeking redress for the situation.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ "The Navy as a Career." *Half-Century Magazine*. (April, 1919), p.14.

¹⁸¹ W.S. Benson to J. Thomas Hewin, Sept. 22, 1919, Box 661, General Records of the Department of the Navy.

¹⁸² J. Thomas Hewin to W. S. Benson, Box 661, General Records of the Department of the Navy.

Hewin, accustomed to working on behalf of fellow members of his race and challenging the white power structure of Virginia, was unwilling to allow the navy to so easily discharge responsibility without any substantive remedy.

The navy subsequently modified tactics in passing blame and continued refusing to acknowledge that the service intended discrimination and that it had actually occurred. In response to J. Thomas Hewin's letter to Josephus Daniels describing the exclusion of Richmond blacks, the Secretary of the Navy observed, "I beg to state that the Navy Department has issued no orders denying that privilege [of visiting the destroyer]. If any officer has issued any such orders, the matter will be investigated and corrected."¹⁸³ Daniels stopped short of condemning the actions of the commander of the *Fairfax* and likewise provided no mechanism for the rectification of the problem, no doubt assuming that the situation would soon be forgotten with little or no damage done to the navy.

On 4 October 1919 Hewin traveled to Washington, D.C. attempting to meet with Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels. Hewin was received by Daniels' private secretary and told that the head of the Navy Department was engaged, but would be able to meet with him approximately two hours later. Daniels, however, chose not to meet with the Richmond attorney, instead providing him with a vague and non-committal rebuke of Commander Smith that stopped short of indicating that any official action would be taken against the offending officer or that any meaningful change in Navy Department policies would be so much as considered.¹⁸⁴

For the U.S. Navy, the incident at Richmond seemed a brief unpleasantry which

¹⁸³ Josephus Daniels to J. Thomas Hewin, Oct. 4, 1919, Box 661, General Records of the Department of the Navy.

¹⁸⁴ *Richmond Planet*, Oct. 4, 1919, p. 1.

would soon enough be lost to obscurity with the passage of time. In this basic assumption, the service was largely correct. In carefully controlling the outward flow of information and manipulating the way that this information was constructed, the navy succeeded in pushing the Richmond incident from the public eye in relatively short order. The visit of the *Fairfax* was but a part of the post-war settlement of race issues for the navy.

The conclusion of the First World War compelled the navy to tackle a number of new challenges in its system of enlisted personnel that resulted, in part or in whole, from wartime changes and the cessation of black recruitment. One of the most significant problems related to the white messmen who had been pressed into service. The system of shipboard segregation required that non-white members of the messman branch be unable to transfer (and thus integrate) other branches. As blacks, Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese, and other natives of the Asia Pacific region composed the branch, the service simply denied transfer out of it.¹⁸⁵ As the war concluded, the navy elected to re-solidify the segregation of the branch. To do this the Bureau of Navigation discontinued white recruitment for the branch and requested “that steps be taken to change ratings of those [white messmen] now in service to other ratings for which they may be qualified as rapidly as colored or Phillipino [*sic*] mess attendants can be sent.”¹⁸⁶ Black and Filipino messmen received no such benefit, as the navy rigidly maintained its policy of denying

¹⁸⁵ Department of the Navy, “Promotion of Enlisted Personnel in the U.S. Navy.” Bureau of Navigation booklet. 1929, p.33.

¹⁸⁶ Bureau of Navigation to Commander, U.S. Naval Forces in European Waters, Sept. 12, 1918, Entry 89, Box 318, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

their transfer to other branches.¹⁸⁷

With African Americans no longer entering the navy for service as messmen, numerous alternative sources of recruits were offered for departmental consideration. The commanding officer of the USS *Nevada*, then in Puerto Rico, for instance, suggested that thousands of messmen could be recruited from among the island's population. In sharp contrast to the "Negro mess attendants [who] are seldom satisfactory," Puerto Ricans were considered smart, hardworking, educated, English-speaking, and trained in military life from their experience in American service in the Panama Canal Zone.¹⁸⁸ The Bureau of Navigation rejected the proposal, noting that it did "not consider it advisable to enlist *white* Porto-Ricans [*sic*] in the rating of Mess Attendant."¹⁸⁹ Filipinos would numerically dominate the new enlistments in the messman branch for more than a decade.

The black messmen who remained in service witnessed their position within the fleet eroded as the 1920's progressed. Black messmen and stewards who had previously served on board the nation's warships appear to have been transferred in large numbers for service ashore. These transfers left vacancies that were to be filled by Filipinos. The black messmen thus transferred experienced a simultaneous loss of status. Assigned to shore facilities like submarine bases and naval air stations, these men, who had previously been charged with cooking, cleaning, and serving for white officers found

¹⁸⁷ W.H. Reynolds to Commanding Officer, USS *Sigourney*, June 25, 1920, Entry 89, Box 318, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel; Ellis S. Stone to Commanding Officer, Receiving Ship, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, Oct. 14, 1919, Entry 89, Box 318, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

¹⁸⁸ Commanding Officer to Commander, Battleship Division 7, April 1, 1919, Entry 89, Box 318, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

¹⁸⁹ Bilofgren to Recruiting Officer, San Juan, Puerto Rico, April 22, 1919, Entry 89, Box 318, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel. Emphasis added.

themselves instead assigned to similar duties for white enlisted personnel.¹⁹⁰

During the mid-1920's the second Ku Klux Klan attempted to spread its message to the white personnel of the U.S. Navy, adding another challenge to those black men who remained in uniform. Klan efforts during the time period met with some success; numerous members of the crew of USS *Idaho* self-identified as members of the organization. The organization also claimed to have infiltrated other vessels.¹⁹¹ In 1924 three white petty officers faced charges of attending a Klan rally in Cheshire, Connecticut, while in uniform. Witnesses also indicated that these sailors helped transport civilians interested in attending the rally and offered assistance, including directing traffic, to organizers. The three petty officers' commander denied both claims that he was a Klansman and that he had ordered the three to the rally."¹⁹² Subsequently, the navy and its officers would not feel so compelled to create separation from the Klan. In 1925 Acting Secretary of the Navy T. Douglas Robinson instructed the Marine Corps to provide guards and traffic control for a Klan rally expected to draw 60,000 hooded followers in Washington, D.C.¹⁹³ When U.S. Senator Thomas J. Heflin of Alabama spoke before an audience of Klansmen, denouncing the Catholic power in America, fourteen sailors and marines from the Philadelphia Navy Yard provided an honor

¹⁹⁰ Bureau of Navigation to Commanding Officer, Receiving Ship at New York, Aug. 10, 1920, Entry 89, Box 318, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel; Frank Jack Fletcher to Commanding Officer, Receiving Ship at New York, Sept. 18, 1920, Entry 89, Box 318, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel; Commanding Officer, Naval Air Station at Rockaway Beach, NY to Bureau of Navigation, Feb. 25, 1921, Entry 89, Box 318, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

¹⁹¹ "Conspiracy of Klan to Control Whole Nation Exposed by Rigid Investigation," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov. 3, 1923, p.16.

¹⁹² "Petty Officers Accused of Aiding Klan Before Naval Board at New London," *New York Times*, Oct. 11, 1924, p.17.

¹⁹³ "Klan, as Members Gather, Discussing Abandoning Mask," *Washington Post*, Aug. 7, 1925, p.1,4.

guard.¹⁹⁴ Given evidence available, it is impossible to determine the popularity of the organization among officers and sailors and the precise implication of Klan activity for black—as well as other non-white, Catholic, and Jewish—sailors.

In the late 1920's white sailors on liberty assaulted black civilians in New York City on multiple occasions. On 21 December 1928 sailors from two ships allegedly beat two black men traveling on a subway train in Brooklyn, New York. New Year's Eve witnessed a massive racial fight in Times Square that required forty police officers to contain and resulted in substantial injuries to a black man and woman.¹⁹⁵ In December 1929 sailors again assaulted black men in a New York subway. With the help of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the navy conducted a thorough investigation promising dismissal from service for those found responsible.¹⁹⁶ In 1929 the *Atlanta Constitution* reported that more than a dozen total incidents of white on black violence perpetrated by naval personnel had been reported to and investigated by the NAACP in the late 1920's.¹⁹⁷ Although the navy promised inquiries, such undertakings did little if anything to change sailors' opinions about blacks or to alter the sanctioned racism present within the service.

Racism, discrimination, and racial violence were rife during the decade following World War I. This climate, combined with the decision to halt black enlistments, led the navy to view and treat the African American public differently than it had previously. Black men in uniform faced challenges the service attempted a return to shipboard

¹⁹⁴ "Electric Klan Cross on Stage with Heflin," *New York Times*, Feb. 12, 1928, p.26.

¹⁹⁵ "Navy to Investigate Sailor-Negro Clashes," *Atlanta Constitution*, Jan. 6, 1929, p.19.

¹⁹⁶ "Investigate War Boats Following Attack," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Dec. 21, 1929, p.5.

¹⁹⁷ "Navy to Investigate Sailot-Negro Clashes," 19.

segregation. Naval officers lobbied to have Asian and Puerto Rican mess attendants placed on board their ships, denying those positions to blacks. Racist sentiments also appear to have risen within the white personnel structure. The Ku Klux Klan claimed to have attracted many sailors to its cause. White sailors on liberty in the late 1920's also regularly assaulted black civilians, at least a dozen incidents having been reported and investigated by the NAACP. In coming years the Great Depression, fears of the Japanese, the potential independence of the Philippines, and pressures from concerned citizens would compel the service to undertake some revision in its policies concerning black people. During the 1920's such a reality was and not foreseeable, however, and thus offered no consolation to black sailors and community members during the low point for naval race relations

CHAPTER VI

A RETURN TO THE RANKS

Rising instability in East Asia in the late 1920's and early 1930's threatened the navy's supply of foreign-born messmen, the only men recruited into the messman branch since 1919. Largely owing to the navy's concerns about a disruption in its supply line for messmen, it reauthorized domestic recruitment of men for the branch in 1932, beginning enrollments the following year. Where previously the U.S. Navy maintained publicly that it did not discriminate against African Americans, after 1932 administrators and commanders made few attempts to hide the official position concerning non-white sailors from the public. For the black community of the United States the enlistment and participation of members of the race in the navy, even in the subservient ranks of the messman branch, became a point of pride that far outweighed the actual economic or military value of the labor.

The opportunity for black men to again enlist in the navy occurred in the midst of the nation's worst prolonged period of economic hardship. While the Great Depression cut a broad swath of pain, suffering, and poverty across America's population, the nation's African Americans, already near or at the bottom socio-economic stratum of society, suffered some of the worst privations resulting from the economic downturn. Many black Americans witnessed the hardening traditional lines of demarcation separating the races. Nonwhite workers also found that the depressed economic conditions meant that employers could turn to more desirable laborers, including white

men and women, where previously such individuals had been unwilling to take certain jobs because of working conditions or wages.

Among the black workers who were able to gain entry into industries that offered competitive wages, skilled jobs rarely were but rarely to be had. Black men and women were more likely to labor in menial capacities in shops and factories than in higher paying skilled areas of employment. As E. Franklin Frazier observed of businesses in New York City during the comparatively good years of the late 1920's, "There are two types of business...: those that employ Negroes in menial positions and those that employ no Negroes."¹⁹⁸ Opportunities and conditions only worsened after the crash. Domestic labor, long a staple among America's black women, likewise experienced a downturn as employing families found it more difficult to afford a servant and increasingly took on more of the burden for domestic labors. The situation was no better for men, adding to the attractiveness of serving in the navy.

The economic recovery programs of Herbert Hoover and the first phase of the New Deal under Franklin Roosevelt afforded little assistance to America's black population. Early actions taken by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) helped landowners, but the reduction in cultivation of crops like cotton meant that many poor tenant farmers and sharecroppers (white and black alike) were evicted when their labor was no longer needed. The terms of the National Recover Act (NRA) empowered employers to pay different wages to different laborers for the same work, while specifically excluding numerous labor categories (including domestic service) that

¹⁹⁸ Eric Foner and Ronald Lewis, *Black Workers: A Documentary History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Philadelphia, 1989), 34.

African Americans dominated.¹⁹⁹

Adding to the difficulties of the Great Depression, especially for southern blacks, was the empowerment of state and local officials to administer and supervise employment and social welfare programs. Despite frequently being equally or more deserving than their white neighbors, fewer benefits typically accrued to African American men and women. Black women were especially hard hit. Supervisors of aid and training programs typically gave preference to males as the rightful and logical heads of households and principle wage-earners. Even within programs specially designed to assist women, African Americans suffered at the hands of white administrators disinclined to favorably consider their cases.²⁰⁰

While issues concerning recovery from the Great Depression dominated the election of 1932, the new administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt faced a difficult geopolitical situation alongside social and economic hardships at home. The decision to allow African Americans to return to the enlisted force of the U.S. Navy was largely prompted by a changing geopolitical climate in the early 1930's that made the policy of exclusively recruiting East Asian messmen appear to be dangerous to the point of making their continued enlistment untenable. For more than two decades, since at least the Russo-Japanese War, Japan had been considered a potential threat to the United States and its colonial holdings in the Pacific. In 1907 this threat prompted Army Chief of Staff J. Franklin Bell to request that the Army War College prepare a series of war

¹⁹⁹ Mary Poole, *The Segregated Origins of Social Security: African Americans and the Welfare State* (Chapel Hill, 2006), 20-21.

²⁰⁰ Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Women of the Depression: Caste and Culture in San Antonio, 1929-1939* (College Station, 1984), 128-129.

plans to be implemented should war occur. The War College study concluded that the American position in East Asia was virtually untenable and that attacks on the Philippines could be undertaken in conjunction with an attack on Hawaii.²⁰¹ Such an attack would seriously impair the ability of the United States to project power across the Pacific and, if the attacks were particularly successful, to wage war in the region.

During the First World War the United States and Japan, fighting alongside the British, French, and Russians to defeat the Central Powers, had maintained a peaceful, if sometimes strained coexistence in the Pacific. As early as 1919, however, the Japanese perceived that the United States was positioning itself to respond to a potential threat in the region by locating half of the fleet in the Pacific—a threat that only Japan could realistically have been considered to pose. Despite these mutual fears, or perhaps partly because of them, the United States and Japan were willing to sign the 1922 Naval Arms Limitation Treaty. The treaty stipulated a 10:10:6 ratio between Britain, the United States, and Japan in capital ships. Such a ratio between the United States and Japan, it was believed, would provide Japan sufficient strength to defend itself and its holdings in the Western Pacific without threat of extending offensive operations eastwardly. The United States, in turn, would have the strength to respond to an attack upon the Philippines with a counterassault, but with insufficient force to dominate the Japanese.²⁰²

In 1930 the Japanese again participated in the treaty process to attempt to control the growth of navies and to forestall naval arms races, but forces within the Japanese

²⁰¹ Brian McAllister Linn, *Guardians of Empire: The U.S. Army and the Pacific, 1902-1940* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 84-85.

²⁰² George W. Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The U.S. Navy, 1890-1990* (Stanford, 1993), 97-101.

state and military apparatus threatened the tenuous balance that existed between the three major naval powers. During the 1920's the Great Powers were willing to accept conciliation, but, during the 1930's, when their leaders came to believe that anarchy was on the rise internationally, they came to believe that peace could be maintained only through strength.²⁰³

After Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931, U.S. Navy leaders feared that continued Japanese aggression in East Asia would ultimately threaten the sole supplier of new messmen—the Philippines. The Director of Enlisted Personnel for the U.S. Navy observed that “In case of war, the source of supply of messmen would depend on keeping open an extremely long line of communications. This would be out of the question during any war involving Pacific Areas.”²⁰⁴ A recommendation was made and adopted that further first enlistments of Filipinos for service as messmen would be discontinued and that new members of the branch would be African Americans.²⁰⁵

The legal status of the Philippines also significantly complicated the issue of recruitment for service in the U.S. Navy and contributed substantially to the decision to resume the admission of black sailors to the ranks. Previous historians, however, have devoted little, if any, attention to this subject, electing to see the revision of recruitment policy purely in terms of strategic concerns arising out of geopolitics.

In his 1921 farewell address outgoing President Woodrow Wilson held that the Philippines had satisfied a set of terms previously established in anticipation of the

²⁰³ Ibid., 117-118.

²⁰⁴ Director of Enlisted Personnel to Chief of Bureau of Navigation, Oct. 18, 1932, quoted in Randall Jacobs to Captain Nimitz, April 29, 1937, General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, RG 24 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

ultimate granting of independence. Although the Republican presidents of the 1920's had not zealously taken up Wilson's program of devolution for the territory, many policy makers believed that its forthcoming departure from the American fold would mean that natives of the islands would no longer enjoy the ability to enter naval service. Debates in Congress, particularly beginning in 1929, indicated that a definitive statement on Philippine independence would likely be forthcoming.²⁰⁶

By 1933 sufficient support had finally developed to secure passage of an act for Philippine Independence. Congress passed H.R. 7233, "An Act to Enable the People of the Philippine Islands to Adopt a Constitution and Form a Government for the Philippine Islands," but President Herbert Hoover vetoed the bill on 13 January.²⁰⁷ President Franklin Roosevelt promised to do what was within his power to grant the freedom that Hoover had denied. "Our Government for many years has been committed by law to ultimate independence for the people of the Philippine Islands," he observed in a message to Congress, "We believe that the time for such independence is at hand."²⁰⁸ On 24 March 1934 Roosevelt signed into law the Philippine Independence Act (also known as the Tydings-McDuffie Act) providing for Philippine independence after ten years.

Under the terms of the Philippine Independence Act the United States would retain its military installations in the archipelago during the decade of devolution (plus two additional years for naval bases). The act also reclassified natives of the islands who were living in the United States as aliens, canceling the work privileges previously

²⁰⁶ Hyung-Chan Kim, *Asian Americans and Congress: A Documentary History* (Westport, 1996), 283, 284.

²⁰⁷ "Veto Message Relating to Philippine Independence," Jan. 13, 1933. U.S. Serial Set Vol 9682, Session Vol. 14, 72nd Congress, 2nd Session, H.Doc 524.

²⁰⁸ "Philippine Independence," March 15, 1934. U.S. Serial Set Vol. 9769, Session Vol. 1, 73rd Congress, 2nd Session, S.Rpt. 494.

extended to Filipinos. In light of these developments, in July 1935 the Navy Department moved to discontinue first enlistments of Filipinos for service in the Insular Force.²⁰⁹ As the navy turned away from Filipinos in the mid-1930's, gradually fewer could be found in the ratings. In 1934 3,667 were in service; by 1940 precisely fifty percent, 1,834, had departed.²¹⁰ This despite the fact that the navy actively recruited more mess attendants and stewards while increasing the total enlisted force by nearly 60,000, or seventy-four percent during the same time period.²¹¹

In addition to the geopolitical concerns that the navy faced in the late 1920's and early 1930's, a number of well-publicized incidents served to focus attention on the discrimination African Americans faced at the hands of the service. In 1929 Representative Oscar DePriest, the first black man to serve in Congress in nearly three decades, made headlines nationwide by appointing black youths to both the Military Academy at West Point and the Naval Academy at Annapolis. An author of a letter to the editor in the *Dallas Morning News* saw the appointments as the first step down a dangerous slippery slope, offering that:

When these cadets are graduated as officers of the navy and army they will be demanding social recognition at social affairs in the army and navy and there is a heavy emigration of negroes from the South to the

²⁰⁹ Jacobs to Nimitz, April 29, 1937, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

²¹⁰ Harrod, *Manning the New Navy*, 184.

²¹¹ *Ibid.* The enlisted force grew from 80,359 in 1934 to 139,554 six years later. The service of Filipinos in the American navy did not come to an end in the 1940's. When the United States finally granted independence to the Philippines in 1946 the manpower source was closed. Mutual interest in continued service in the U.S. Navy led the two nations to establish terms in 1947, included in the Military Bases Agreement, allowing for the entry of up to 1,000 Filipinos per year. Post-war conditions did not necessitate the recruitment of new messmen, so the first Filipinos to enter under the agreement's terms only did so in 1952. In 1954, amidst a pressing need to expand the navy and its body of mess attendants, the agreement was modified to allow for the enlistment of up to 2,000 men from the newly independent nation per year. See Bureau of Naval Personnel, "Filipinos in the United States Navy," Oct. 1976, typescript, Navy Historical Center (Washington, D.C.).

cities of the North, and the Republican party will encourage them to elect some of their members to Congress and this will add more appointments of negroes to the military and naval academies.²¹²

The imagined nightmare of the letter's author seemed to be coming true in 1930 when Congressman Joseph A. Gavagan, representing Harlem and Washington Heights in New York City, offered up competitive examinations open to black students to fill academy appointments.²¹³ The efforts of these Congressmen and the brave young black men who sought their places in the academies in the face of concerted resistance led to increased calls for equity in the defense services for men regardless of their race.

Nationwide attention was again focused upon the discriminatory practices of the military in 1931 when the mothers of black servicemen slain in World War I endured the pernicious effects of Jim Crow. The War Department announced that African American Gold Star Mothers, as female parents of the fallen were called, were to be segregated during their transportation to France to celebrate and commemorate their sons' sacrifices. Governor Frank G. Allen of Massachusetts earnestly requested that President Hoover direct the War Department to abandon its planned segregation, noting that "the proposed action of the war department in causing an arbitrary separation of the races is ill-advised, unfair and contrary to the ideals of our American government."²¹⁴

Responding to internal and external political pressures, in 1932 the U.S. Navy authorized allowing black Americans to again enlist. As the navy did not immediately need additional messmen, the first new black recruits would have to wait until early 1933 to enter the service. For the first time, however, the navy officially and explicitly

²¹² F.W. Maxwell "Anti-Tammany Cry Won't Be Effective," *Dallas Morning News*, July 30, 1929, p.11.

²¹³ "Gavagan to Name Cadets for Navy," *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 8, 1930, p.11.

²¹⁴ "Governor Allen Asks Hoover to Stop Segregation," *Chicago Defender*, March 8, 1930, p.2.

stated that the sole institutional home for black men would be within the messman branch. Previously African Americans had largely been restricted to service as messmen and stewards (with a smaller number enrolled as coal passers) not by official pronouncement, but by unofficial policy and “gentleman’s agreements” among officials in the Bureau of Navigation and white recruiting officers.

As for their white counterparts, economics provided one of the primary inducements for African Americans to enlist in the U.S. Navy during the Great Depression. The regular paycheck, free room and board, and virtual guarantee of steady employment proved ample inducement for many would-be sailors. The steady pay also provided black sailors with an opportunity to provide critical funds to family members and friends wracked by national economic woes. Jim Stallings, a messman from Starkville, Mississippi viewed the Navy as just such an opportunity. His regular paychecks allowed him to support the grandmother who had raised him. Military service also provided black Americans in the 1930s the rare opportunity to witness and experience the world away from home.²¹⁵ Good wages and steady employment were sufficient inducement to draw far more men to naval recruiting officers than were needed and could be accommodated by the service.

The surplus of well-qualified applicants ensured that a high degree of selectivity was possible in accepting recruits for service. By 1939 the average new white enlistee had attained the third year of high school and scored 75 or better on the Bureau of Navigation’s required examination, intended to test aptitude and intelligence, though the

²¹⁵ Glenn A. Knoblock, *Black Submariners in the United States Navy, 1940-1975* (Jefferson, 2005), 18.

official minimum was a 50.²¹⁶ Black recruits were not bound by the same requirements of education and success on standardized examinations as their perspective white shipmates. As Assistant Navy Secretary Henry Latrobe Roosevelt indicated in a 1934 letter to the resident commissioner of Puerto Rico, aspiring black messmen were to take the examination, but no minimum score was prescribed. At a time when secondary education was essential for the successful white applicant, among messmen, “Natural intelligence is sought rather than education.”²¹⁷ Reading, writing, and other basic skills were helpful, but “prior hotel, restaurant, or domestic service” was more likely to aid in gaining entry to the service.²¹⁸

The African American candidate seeking enlistment in the navy faced not merely the difficulties associated with gaining entry into a service with a surplus of qualified applicants, but also special conditions resulting from the ideas concerning members of the race held by those in positions of authority. In attempting to gauge the competency of these candidates, recruiting officers often looked to prevalent racial stereotypes as a guide. The “‘black boy’ from the South—not well educated, but used to work” was a good prospect for the Navy.²¹⁹ The “High yellow” from the North, however, was thought to be more “uppity” and more likely to grow disaffected by the service position and limited opportunities for advancement afforded to black messmen.²²⁰

²¹⁶ Louis A. Cash, “Lecture on Naval Recruiting With Special Emphasis on Organization, Sub-Stations and Policy by Officer-in-Charge,” ca. 1935, typescript, p.10 (Navy Department Library, Washington, D.C.).

²¹⁷ Henry L. Roosevelt to Santiago Iglesias, Dec. 28, 1934, General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ Cash, “Lectures on Naval Recruiting,” 11.

²²⁰ *Ibid.* Attitudes concerning race and differing aptitude for naval service were not limited to white and black recruits. Native Americans were seen to possess “fundamental characteristics” that made them ill-suited for the Navy. As late as 1939 Native American heritage was considered grounds for rejection.

The ideas concerning different constituent groups within the black race also influenced the localities in which the naval service attempted to draw recruits for the messman branch. In the *Chicago Defender*, a major organ for the black community in the United States, an author decried the paper's readers being limited to servile positions. The author also noted that black recruits were only being enlisted at Macon, Georgia; Raleigh, North Carolina; Richmond, Virginia; Birmingham, Alabama; Little Rock, Arkansas; and Nashville, Tennessee.²²¹ By selecting these cities, the Navy could draw upon a group of southern African Americans who would more closely fit their perceived ideal candidate, avoiding the "uppity" northern blacks.

Community pressures led the navy to expand recruiting activities for black enlistees out of the aforementioned southern areas. The types of individuals sought for service did not change, however. "Youths of excellent character," were sought, "for enlistment in the U.S. Navy as mess attendants." Citizenship, lack of dependants, ability to pass the required physical examination, appropriate age, and lack of a criminal record—the same requirements for southern trainees—were likewise essentials for northern blacks.²²² By nationalizing black recruitment the navy hoped to deflect some of the negative attention that its policies received. By maintaining the same standards (and the prerogative judgments of recruiting officers) undesirable blacks could still be kept from the service.

The decision to shift primarily from East Asian messmen back to native-born African Americans engendered widespread displeasure among officers who were again

²²¹ "Navy Enlists Race Only As Servants," *Chicago Defender*, July 6, 1935, p. 4.

²²² "Enlistment in U.S. Navy Open to Chicagoans," *Chicago Defender*, Aug. 3, 1935, p. 4.

compelled to operate on close and intimate terms with men whose very presence on board ship was frequently seen as offensive. R.W. Wuest, executive officer on board the battleship USS *Wyoming*, likely spoke for many of the service's commissioned officers in denouncing African American messmen and championing the Asians they were gradually replacing. Blacks, the Ohio-born Wuest complained, were "entirely void of any ideas relative to personal cleanliness" and on the whole were "lazy, slow thinking, and slow acting."²²³ While improved education and training by the navy might offset some of these inherent problems, issues like "a distorted idea of truthfulness and honest[y]" that resulted in thefts aboard ship and the fact that black men were "easily susceptible to colds, influenza and other respiratory diseases [and] venereal [*sic*] diseases, particularly syphilis" meant that such an individual would "never prove satisfactory as a servant." If this litany of complaints was not enough to dissuade the navy from enlisting black men, Wuest had one final point of contention: black men were simply too large. Such men, he complained, ate too much of the ship's food and were too large and ungainly to move about in the confined spaces of a ship and the officer's mess.²²⁴

Opinions about black deficiencies led many officers to question the decision to return to black sailors and to advocate the enlistment of members of other races as messmen and stewards. If Filipinos could not be had because of geopolitical developments, Puerto Ricans, Hawaiians, Guamanians, and perhaps even "qualified white civilian cooks and stewards" might be called upon to render service to America's

²²³ Wuest to Chief of Bureau of Navigation, May 21, 1935, General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

naval officers.²²⁵ Expediency and the public and political pressures aimed at the Navy Department certainly helped influence the decision to return to black messmen, though the carefully created social stratification made possible by messmen of a different race also influenced the final outcome.

Officers displeased with the service of their black messmen or unhappy with their mere presence on board ship often made their sentiments known. One messman, whose story was relayed in the *Chicago Defender*, noted that officers “are both unkind and unfair to Race members, except in rare instances.” Attempting to convey a sense of the limited opportunities and barbaric actions that white officers inflicted upon black sailors, the black man challenged readers to “Talk about your peonage in the South! Someone ought to make an investigation of how Negroes are (mis)treated in the Navy.”²²⁶

The opening of new opportunities for black men to enter the navy was met with mixed reactions that underline the fundamental difficulty of the proposition offered by the Navy Department to the black public. African American newspapers routinely and proudly reported the successful entry of black men into service, even if they were limited to service as messmen.²²⁷

The limitations of opportunity, however, also served to highlight the continuity of inequality and led to calls for revision of discriminatory policies. When the navy began to enlist blacks as messmen once again the *Pittsburgh Courier* observed that the action

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ “‘Doublecrossed,’ Says Youth Promised Trade and Advancement in U.S. Navy,” *Chicago Defender*, July 30, 1938, p. 2.

²²⁷ “Nine Race Members Join the U.S. Navy,” *Chicago Defender*, May 12, 1934, p. 13; “Michigan Youth Joins Navy As a Mess Attendant,” *Chicago Defender*, July 18, 1936, p. 2; “Three Memphis Youths Enlist in U.S. Navy,” *Chicago Defender*, Apr. 24, 1937, p. 5.

only continued to perpetuate “closed door” policy. To the *Courier*, the administration needed to undertake meaningful reforms that would allow for equality on board ship and in opportunity. “So long as they wait upon the naval officers satisfactorily,” the author noted, “their jobs are secure.”²²⁸ Unless the U.S. military was willing to tear down the barriers of Jim Crowism, an author in another of the nation’s leading black newspapers, the *Chicago Defender*, noted, members of the race should not fight and lay down their lives. In the minds of some American blacks, the idea of a white man’s war and a black man’s fight had already been preemptively rejected in anticipation of the nation’s next conflict.²²⁹

Rejection of the black man’s fight was but a part of a rising tide of interest within the black community for the position of members of their race within the navy. In 1938 one author complained that blacks had allowed the degradation non-whites within the service. He held that it was the result of a lack of interest on the part of the public, but declared “That period of indifference is ended.”²³⁰

Alongside demands that the army and navy allow integration and the unfettered access of black men to the full range of ranks and billets, members of the African American community also forwarded ideas about the creation of separate units for blacks. The justification for such plans could be found in the successes of ships like the USS *Rizal*, which operated for a decade with a largely Filipino crew, and the 9th and 10th U.S. Cavalry Regiments, the famed “buffalo soldiers.” Alfred Williams held that because “negroes have shared their part in the loss of lives and in receiving injury in

²²⁸ “They Are in the Navy Now,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 18, 1933, p. A3.

²²⁹ Frank Dewitt Golden, “The Next War,” *Chicago Defender*, July 15, 1933, p. 14.

²³⁰ “2,000 Mess Attendants,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 12, 1938, p. 10.

behalf of defending their government,” they should be given the opportunity to participate in separate but equal divisions within the military. “A complete army regiment of air service and a complete army regiment of field artillery” should be joined by “one battleship; one cruiser; one airplane carrier; four destroyers and three submarines” manned by members of the race.²³¹

By the late 1930’s attitudes within the black community had begun to harden and the push for greater opportunity within the military services was intensifying. As the nation prepared to fight a second global war to protect freedom and democracy, politicians and concerned citizens stepped up their efforts to demand that a fairer share of outlays and opportunities go into the African American community. This prominently included defense industries and the military. As one author, writing in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, noted in discussing the navy, “We do NOT object to young colored men serving in the kitchens and dining rooms. But we DO object to young colored men serving only in this capacity.”²³² A mere ten years after the reinstatement of black enlistment on the most limited of terms, the goals on individuals like the aforementioned author would begin to be realized as the U.S. Navy started taking major steps that would lay the foundation for the ultimate break down of Jim Crow in the service.

²³¹ “Suggestions for Defense,” *Chicago Defender*, July 20, 1935, p. 16. Although the U.S. Navy was unwilling to undertake a program to create a “separate but equal” fleet manned by black men in 1935, the proposal would be resurrected during the Second World War. During that conflict two test vessels, the destroyer escort USS *Mason* and the subchaser PC 1264, were placed in commission with black crews. For additional information, see Eric Purdon, *Black Company: The Story of Subchaser PC 1264* (Annapolis, 2000) and Mary Pat Kelly, *Proudly We Served: The Men of the USS Mason* (Annapolis, 1995).

²³² “Galley or Guns,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 19, 1938, p. 10.

CHAPTER VII
THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND THE END OF SEGREGATION IN THE
NAVY

In the late 1930's, the territorial and geopolitical ambitions of the Germany, Japan, and Italy began to threaten the peace and security of the United States. American leaders struggled to correct the problems in industry and the economy that had led to and perpetuated the Great Depression while confronting the reality that forthcoming global war might again demand intervention. Amidst this difficulty and uncertainty prominent groups of Americans, including leaders within the black community, demanded substantial revision in the existing social order. The persistent efforts of minority groups within the United States ultimately succeeded in placing critical chinks in the armor of Jim Crow.²³³ As with broader American society, minority activism in concert with the exigencies of the war forced revision of the Navy's racist policies. In 1942, a particularly important year for African Americans, the service agreed to allow black sailors unrestricted access to the full range of enlisted branches and specialties. This did not mean, however, that the navy was quick to bring about real integration. The termination of discriminatory and exclusionary policies was not complete at war's end, though the conflict provided a strong impetus to change and helped a group of dynamic leaders who, in the wake of the conflict, would ultimately succeed in breaking down five decades of tradition and institutional momentum. The U.S. Navy undertook limited

²³³ See Neil A. Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War* (New York, 1976). Wynn argues that the war produced strains on the existing political and economic systems that made the existing system untenable, beginning the breakdown that culminated in the internal revolution of the 1960's.

efforts at desegregation and integration during World War II and would face complete integration (on paper) as a function of President Truman's Executive Order 9981.

On 30 June 1940 the number of black men in the U.S. Navy had risen to 4,007, though these individuals made up only 2.9 percent of 139,554 total enlisted personnel.²³⁴ Newly installed Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox was reluctant to further expand that number and repeatedly attempted to deflect and subvert efforts to reform enlistment policy concerning African Americans in the ranks. The successes of progressive reformers would result more from the actions of concerned citizens and the political pressures that they placed upon the Roosevelt administration than from executive leadership within the department. Eleanor Roosevelt's presence figured prominently among the concerned individuals attempting to influence the president to improve the position of black Americans.²³⁵

From the time of his appointment in 1940, Knox faced questions and entreaties from members of the African American community demanding that the policy of exclusively recruiting men of color for service as mess attendants and stewards be revised. Shortly after assuming office Knox attempted to deflect the issue of black

²³⁴ Frederick S. Harrod, *Manning the New Navy: The Development of a Modern Naval Enlisted Force, 1899-1940* (Westport, 1978) 184. See also Table 1 in Appendix A. In 1939 only 2,807 black sailors served in the American navy. The increase of 1,200 men represented a forty-three percent increase of black men in one year, although as a portion of the total naval enlisted population this represented a far more modest increase from 2.5 percent to 2.9 percent.

²³⁵ Eleanor Roosevelt emerged as a political figure in the 1920's, when she served as Financial Chair of the New York Democratic Party. From that position she worked tirelessly to improve the place of women with the party organization. In 1924 she presented a group of women's platform planks at the National Democratic Convention. Eleanor continued her activities as First Lady of New York and of the United States. In Washington the First Lady routinely communicated with Walter White, Field Secretary of the NAACP, and other leaders of the black community. She also pressed the president on a number of critical race issues, including the Anti-Lynching Law and limitations on the poll tax. See Fran Burke, "Eleanor Roosevelt, October 11, 1884-November 7, 1962—She Made a Difference," *Public Administration Review* 44 (Sept/Oct., 1984), 365, 368-71; Steve Valocchi, "The Emergence of the Integrationist Ideology in the Civil Rights Movement," *Social Problems* 43 (Feb., 1996), 125-6.

participation in the navy by urging aspiring non-white servicemen to enter the extant segregated units within the U.S. Army.²³⁶ Knox believed that blacks were ill-suited to service outside of the messman branch, as the skills demanded by tasks other than cooking, waiting, and serving were outside the capabilities of nonwhites.²³⁷

In September 1940 Congress passed the Selective Training and Service Act, which created the Selective Service system and established the first peace-time military draft in the history of the United States. The original text of the legislation contained no language compelling the military services to admit African Americans, but an amendment sought by black leaders and incorporated into the final version included two key anti-discrimination provisions. The first provision required that “any person, regardless of race or color . . . shall be afforded an opportunity to volunteer for induction,” while the second noted that “In the selection and training of men . . . there shall be no discrimination against any person on account of race or color.”²³⁸ Shortly after the act’s passage President Roosevelt announced that blacks would form approximately ten percent of the enlisted population of the army and navy, a number equal to their proportion within the total American population.²³⁹ Black participation in the army steadily increased after 1940, but, by relying upon an all-volunteer force, Knox was able to delay the admission of large numbers of African Americans into the navy until 1943.²⁴⁰

²³⁶ Gerald Astor, *The Right to Fight: A History of African American in the Military* (Cambridge, 1998), 158-9.

²³⁷ Astor, *The Right to Fight*, 159.

²³⁸ *U.S. Statutes at Large, 1940*, Vol. 54, p. 885, quoted in George Q. Flynn, “Selective Service and American Blacks During World War II,” *Journal of Negro History* 69 (Winter, 1984), 14.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

Among the most outspoken individuals targeting Knox (and President Roosevelt) on the integration issue in the early 1940's was race leader A. Philip Randolph. Randolph, founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, charged that the service's policy "accepts and extends and consolidates the policy of Jim-Crowism in the Navy as well as proclaims it as an accepted, recognized government ideology that the Negro is inferior to the white man."²⁴¹ While Knox doubted the wisdom of integrating the navy—on 2 May 1941 he observed that revision of policy resulting in black entry into branches other than the messman's 'would "provoke discord and demoralization" and would lower the efficiency of the service,' the secretary did undertake important preliminary steps toward integration and desegregation beginning in 1941.²⁴²

The threat of a march on Washington by Randolph and his supporters helped to precipitate steps toward revision of discriminatory policy. In May 1941, some eight months after the passage of the Selective Training and Service Act, the black leader advocated a "thundering march on Washington" that would "shake up white America."²⁴³ Randolph charged that black men and women were compelled to help shoulder the burden of national defense, but were denied access to resulting opportunities for education and employment. Randolph and his supporters decided that their action should take place in July 1941. President Franklin Roosevelt responded quickly to the threat of a Washington march with a memorandum indicating that "available and competent Negro workers" should be employed in the nation's defense industries where

²⁴¹ Quoted in Denmark D. Nelson, *The Integration of the Negro into the U.S. Navy* (New York, 1951), 15.

²⁴² L.D. Reddick, "The Negro in the United States Navy During World War II," *Journal of Negro History* 32 (April 1947), 202.

²⁴³ August Meier, Elliott Rudwick, and Francis L. Broderick, eds., *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, (New York, 1971), 220.

and when possible. Fearful that the chief executive's words would fail to amend policy, planning for the march continued. Roosevelt finally succeeded in dissuading Randolph and his potential through by issuing Executive Order 8802, which established the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) on 25 June 1941. Under terms of the order, racial discrimination was banned in the defense industries. The FEPC and an investigative commission established to ensure compliance made the continuation of overt discrimination within the military services largely untenable.²⁴⁴

As a result of the pressure from Randolph, other public figures, and more private pressure from Democratic Party politicians (including President Roosevelt) the Navy Department was compelled to move on the issue of race in the ranks, though the immediate result of this pressure was merely the creation of a committee charged with investigating the possibility of enlisting blacks for general service.²⁴⁵ In July of 1941 Secretary Knox established the four-member Watson Committee to examine the place of black sailors in the navy. He appointed two naval officers, a Marine Corps colonel, and Addison Walker, Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy to the committee.²⁴⁶

Not unsurprisingly given the sentiments prevalent within the Navy Department, the majority report of the four member committee detailed numerous problems inherent in any plan of desegregation and argued that such a plan would not be wise considering

²⁴⁴ Fred Stanton, ed. *Fighting Racism in World War II* (New York, 1980), 111-116.

²⁴⁵ Astor, *The Right to Fight*, 160.

²⁴⁶ The four members of the committee were Captain Francis Whiting, USN (from New York), Colonel Thomas Watson, USMC [who had seen firsthand the Navy Department's association with non-whites while part of the force that occupied the Dominican Republic], Lt. Commander A.D. Chandler, USN (also from New York), and Addison Walker, Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy. December 24, 1941.

the defensive needs of the nation. The findings included a clear statement that African Americans continue to be allowed only to serve as messmen and stewards. Along with oft repeated arguments about black inefficiency and damage to crew cohesion caused by the presence of non whites on board ship, the committee also found that recruiting and training black sailors was much less efficient than was the case for white sailors. They held that:

Experience has shown that to get 1,000 qualified Negro enlisted men it is necessary to process 40,000, while 1,000 qualified white men can be obtained from processing 4500. The lower intelligence and physical and moral standards are given as reasons for this difference.²⁴⁷

Thus, the authors of the majority report concluded that investment in black sailors both consumed resources that could be more efficiently used to train white recruits and weakened the efficiency of the fleet by leading to racial unrest and tension. Committee members also questioned the timeframe required for bringing about a measure of equity for black sailors. They noted that, "It has taken eight years or more to build up the Negro branch of mess attendants and the present is probably not an opportune time to begin a change in some other branch."²⁴⁸ Equity alone did not present a sufficiently strong justification, in the minds of committee members, to justify weakening the navy for a project that would require prolonged effort and was unlikely to produce meaningful results.

In addition to a litany of traditional and conventional arguments against integration, the majority report offered a deviously philosophical justification for the

²⁴⁷ Watson Committee Proceedings, Aug. 14, 1941, 131d.370, Bx. 1, General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.)

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

continuation of segregation. The authors noted that,

The Navy itself exists because the world of today is something less than perfect—because men and nations cannot get along as we all hope they may some day learn to do. The problem is one of many manifestations of this great defect in humanity, by reason of which navies exist. It is paradoxical to ask an agency which owes its very being to human friction to invite the disruptive effect of human friction within its own organization.²⁴⁹

Clearly, the senior personnel serving on the committee did not believe that the American navy should be—perhaps even could be—an instrument for positive social change.

In the Watson Committee’s minority report Addison Walker argued for a small test program to allow a few blacks to serve outside the messman branch. He suggested that such men should be placed “on some type of patrol or other small vessel assigned to a particular yard or station.”²⁵⁰ Under Walker’s plan, new black sailors would have served on shore or in smaller ships, away from the fleet’s large frontline vessels.²⁵¹ Rather than advocating a conservative racial program during wartime, Walker saw it as an opportunity for “the reconciliation of social friction within our own country.”²⁵² After the committee had substantially completed its work, but before it could publish its majority and minority reports, the United States was violently thrust into the Second World War.

After the Pearl Harbor attack Knox remained disinterested in any integration, but events occurring during the attack and the subsequent intervention of President

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Chief of the Bureau of Navigation to Chairman of the General Board, Jan. 22, 1942, Operational Archives Branch, Naval Historical Center (Washington, D.C.), quoted in Morris J. MacGregor, Jr., *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965* (Washington, D.C., 1985), Chapter 3, note 14.

²⁵¹ Though not officially adopted, the recommendation of the Walker Committee to operate a naval vessel with an all-black crew was subsequently acted upon (see below, page 130).

²⁵² Ibid.

Roosevelt compelled the reluctant cabinet officer to undertake revision. The events of 7 December 1941 had reflected badly upon America's government and military organizations by highlighting their apparent lack of preparation. A handful of heroes—including black messman Doris “Dorie” Miller—did, however, emerge from the carnage of that day. While Miller's vessel, USS *Arizona*, was under heavy attack, he manned a machine gun and shot down two Japanese aircraft. The gallantry ultimately resulted in a Medal of Honor, but more importantly helped provide the ammunition necessary to demonstrate that black men were ready, willing, and able to assume more positions on board ship than mere servants' billets that the navy had been willing to assign them.²⁵³

On 9 January 1942, the President wrote to the navy secretary indicating that the Bureau of Navigation “might invent something that colored enlistees could do in addition to the rating of Messmen.”²⁵⁴ Knox was directed to secure from the General Board a workable plan for the enrollment and distribution of 5,000 new black recruits. The board's pronouncements largely echoed the findings of the earlier Watson Committee majority report. They recommended that “members of the colored race be accepted for enlistment [only] in the messman branch.”²⁵⁵ Reflecting their understanding of the climate of public opinion at the time, the board noted that if, “political pressure is such as to require the enlistment of these people for general service, let it be for that.”²⁵⁶ Wartime politics then, and not the ability, intelligence, or the potential military value of

²⁵³ Louis Lee Woods, II, “Messmen No More: African-American Sailors on the USS *Mason* in World War II” (Ph.D. diss., Howard University, 2006), 64.

²⁵⁴ Quoted in Frederick S. Harrod, “Integration of the Navy (1941-1978),” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* (Oct. 1979), 42.

²⁵⁵ General Board, GB 421, Serial No. 201: 5.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

black men outside the messman's ratings, would be the only conceivable justification for incorporation. The senior uniformed and civilian personnel within the navy remained generally unwilling to support even small concessions to nonwhites.²⁵⁷

After American entry into the war the army also began to exert more pressure on the navy to amend its recruiting policy. At this early juncture in the war the navy was still relying upon voluntary enlistments, as it had prior to the advent of hostilities. The army, however, received draftees. Under the Selective Service system that provided draftees, both black and white men could be and were compelled to provide military service.²⁵⁸ Secretary of War Henry Stimson complained to President Roosevelt that:

The Navy has been able to avoid acceptance of any considerable number of Negroes. As a result, while the Army has absorbed its proper proportion of Negro manpower, it is now faced with the possibility of having to accept an even greater proportion in the future. This it cannot absorb without adverse affect on its combat efficiency.²⁵⁹

Stimson believed that this error could be corrected by compelling the navy to accept draftees, white and black alike, provided by the Selective Service system. Importantly, Stimson wished to see a revision in naval enlistment policy not as a mechanism for improving opportunities for blacks or for any desire for equity, but from the racist belief that more black soldiers would otherwise enter the army and weaken that service.

²⁵⁷ The Coast Guard, however, was more willing to move on the issue of integration. On February 2, 1942, the day before the General Board released its findings, Rear Admiral R.R. Waesche, Commandant of the Coast Guard, offered a plan for bringing approximately 500 black men into the service. The proposal called for African Americans to serve in integrated crews on board cutters and in Captain of the Port duties. Waesche noted that blacks would initially be limited to lower ratings, but could achieve petty officer status after a period of competent service. See memorandum from Waesche to Admiral Sexton, Feb. 3, 1942, General Records of the Department of the Navy.

²⁵⁸ Richard M. Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts, 1939-1953* (Columbia, 1975), 53-4.

²⁵⁹ Memorandum, Stimson to the President, 16 February 1942, OF 18, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, quoted in Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces*, 54.

President Roosevelt initially sided with Secretary Knox and declined to order that the navy draw its sailors from Selective Services. The former Assistant Secretary of the Navy acknowledged that life and conditions on board ship would make the incorporation of black men more difficult than what the army faced with its non-white personnel.²⁶⁰ Despite this temporary success for Knox and other advocates of the continuation of the policy of racial segregation within the navy, it was already clear to many in January 1942 that some change would be necessary, if only to maintain a positive public image for the service.

Despite its displeasure with the prospect of black sailors in general service, the members of the General Board realized that politics might ultimately compel revision in the navy's racial policies. Shortly after the aforementioned pronouncements of 3 February 1942, Secretary of the Navy Knox received word from President Roosevelt that the chief executive was displeased with the statements. While stopping short of embracing Stimson's plan, Secretary Knox reported the president did believe that "some special assignments can be worked out for negro enlisted men which would not inject into the whole personnel of the Navy the race question."²⁶¹ The directive from the White House combined with outside pressures to lead the General Board to reconsider its previous position on black service.

The board immediately began preparation of another document outlining possible mechanisms for the reduction and ultimate removal of segregation. This document's author, W. R. Sexton, noted that a workable integration plan would likely

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 54.

²⁶¹ Knox to Sexton, Feb. 16, 1942, General Records of the Department of the Navy.

require a minimum of 3,500 black enlistees, though up to ten percent of the entire naval enlisted population could conceivably be composed of African Americans, thus addressing a critical concern voiced by Secretary Stimson. To make the assimilation plan workable, “a small number [of black sailors] in possibly some special locations” would form an advanced guard for successive efforts.²⁶² Rather than placing these men in general service, Sexton and the General Board believed that positions as laborers could be created that would not undermine the war-fighting abilities of the nation’s ships and fleets, but would meet the demands that black men be afforded more opportunities, both in area of service and numerically, to serve.

Although the navy’s program offered a path forward, it did not provide an ideological break with the service’s past policies concerning racial segregation and exclusion. The plan called for the placement of black enlistees in segregated units, clearly speaking to an institutional and cultural heritage of segregation. Such a plan likely represented, however, the best compromise to the issue of integration then conceivable. Describing the scheme as “progressive in its nature,” the navy, arguably for the first time in five decades, was willing to embrace African Americans as potential contributors to the nation’s success in war. One of the most telling statements included in Sexton’s document was its concluding assertion that “it is unnecessary and inadvisable to repeat or further emphasize the undesirability of . . . men of the colored race.”²⁶³ Sexton, writing for the General Board, proposed that the Navy Department recast both its rhetoric and its policy concerning black participation. The

²⁶² W.R. Sexton to Chief of Bureau of Navigation, Feb. 18, 1942, General Records of the Department of the Navy.

²⁶³ Ibid.

recommendations did not immediately gain departmental sanction and were not immediately implemented.

Displeased at the appearance of continued navy intransigence concerning any real change in its policy toward African Americans, political and social leaders became progressively more vocal in their demands. The second year of America's participation in the Second World War witnessed the launching of the famous "Double V" campaign, whose purpose was victory abroad over the forces of fascism and victory at home over racism and discrimination. James Thompson of Wichita, Kansas presented the declaration that gave rise to this vital campaign in the pages of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. He challenged those struggling with him:

If this V sign means that to those now engaged in this great conflict, then let we colored Americans adopt the double VV for a double victory. The first V for victory over our enemies without, the second V for victory over our enemies from within. For surely those who perpetuate these ugly prejudices here are seeking to destroy our democratic form of government just as surely as the Axis force.²⁶⁴

His words helped to inspire a generation of American soldiers, sailors, airmen, and civilians to demand equity in service and within their nation more generally.

The Double V campaign became the rallying cry for many of the nation's black newspapers. Their dissemination of information about the plight of black Americans and recommendation of steps to be taken to resist continued injustice led to a dramatic increase in African-American participation in organizations like the NAACP. Harvard Sitkoff has argued that the number of black participants in that organization increased by

²⁶⁴ James G. Thompson, "Should I Sacrifice to Live 'Half American'?", *Pittsburgh Courier*, Jan. 31, 1942, p. 3.

ten times, while the number of chapters nationwide increased threefold.²⁶⁵ Although the navy had allowed for increased minority participation, the success of efforts like the Double V campaign helped to influence the service to undertake more ambitious programs to break down the walls of segregation.

The immediate impact of the “Double V” campaign extended beyond the nation’s black community. Wendell Willkie, one of the nation’s most prominent Republicans and the party’s unsuccessful presidential candidate in 1940, adopted the substance of the rhetoric in a 1942 speech. The politician called the navy’s continuation of overtly discriminatory policy a “mockery.” Acknowledging the irony of fighting another war for the protection and expansion of liberty while repressing racial and ethnic minorities he asked, “are we always as alert to practice [democracy] here at home as we are to proclaim it abroad?”²⁶⁶ The efforts of black leaders and allies in the fight like Willkie continued to place pressure on the Navy Department to incorporate meaningful changes in recruiting and duty assignment policies.

A mere two months after Sexton penned the General Board’s program for the integration of black men into the naval service, Secretary Knox grudgingly announced on 7 April 1942 that the navy would amend its policies and allow black sailors entry into general service. Service outside the messman’s branch did mean equal opportunity for black men. Black men in general service still faced limitations in their assignments and segregated working conditions. Because of the lack of existing black petty officers, these first African Americans designated for general service would also receive their

²⁶⁵ Woods, “Messmen No More,” 93-94.

²⁶⁶ Quoted in *Blacks in the Marine Corps*, 1.

training from white petty officers.²⁶⁷ While the new opportunities represented a clear step forward, members of the nation's African American community did not collectively rally around the navy and its secretary for the decision to introduce some limited opportunities for additional black participation. An author writing in the *Pittsburgh Courier* actually held that the decision would prove a detriment to black men for "it strengthens the vicious institution of segregation, the root cause of all the ills the Negro suffers in this country."²⁶⁸ The *Courier's* author's comments notwithstanding, Knox's decision did represent a move in the correct direction. At its core, the decision represented a substantial break from the navy's previous policy concerning assignments open to blacks. The decision to expand opportunities for black participation outside of the messman branch also presented a markedly different response to the pressures of war than the service had demonstrated during the First World War. Though a qualified success, it pointed forward to at least the opportunity for further revision of racist policy with added opportunities for black men in the uniform of the U.S. Navy.

Walter Baldwin became the first African American sworn in for general service under the new scheme on 1 June 1942. He was a member of a group of roughly 275, all of whom were rated apprentice seamen. Their training commenced at the navy's facility at Great Lakes in Illinois. In August 1942 the portion of the camp dedicated to training black recruits was dubbed Camp Robert Smalls in honor of the black hero of the Civil War U.S. Navy.²⁶⁹

Frank Knox's 7 April announcement indicated not merely the admission of black

²⁶⁷ William R. Mueller, "The Negro in the Navy," *Social Forces* 24 (Oct, 1945), 113.

²⁶⁸ "The Navy: Where Do We Stand?," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 18, 1942, p. 6.

²⁶⁹ Mueller, "Negro in the Navy," 113.

men into the U.S. Navy, but also that the Coast Guard, which had come under navy administration following entry into the war, would begin to accept non-whites for service and that the Marine Corps would, during June and July 1942, establish a black battalion of 900 men. For the Coast Guard, the prospect of allowing the entry of African Americans seems to have been more easily accepted and did not engender the resistance to change demonstrated by the marines. Rear Admiral R.R. Waesche, commandant of the Coast Guard, provided a workable plan for the entry of 500 black men into service containing relatively mild provisions for limitations to be placed upon the new sailors. According to Waesche's report, the greatest potential problem was the lack of black petty officers and the high numbers of petty officers required to operate many of the service's vessels. Under the scheme offered, "No provision is made in the plan to use colored men for petty officers, but eventually some of these men [black] men would have to be rated up."²⁷⁰ The author of an internal Coast Guard memo did note, however, that the service should "keep them away from the small towns except for Gloucester [*sic*], Woods Hole and Newberry, where it is believed they can be assimilated."²⁷¹

While the 1942 decision to allow added opportunities for black participation in the navy represents an important revision of earlier policies and a critical step toward the ultimate integration of the service, the decision to establish an African American battalion within the Marine Corps was an equally important, if arguably more revolutionary, revision. Because of the historical reliance upon marines to maintain

²⁷⁰ R.R. Waesche to Admiral Sexton, Feb. 2, 1942, Bx 118, General Records of the Department of the Navy.

²⁷¹ Memorandum for the Commandant, Jan. 31, 1942, Bx. 118, General Records of the Department of the Navy.

order on board naval vessels, black men were far less likely to be enlisted in the corps than as sailors.²⁷² Exclusion of African Americans from the service was so complete that there exists no record clearly indicating the participation of a black marine in *any* of America's wars in the nineteenth century.²⁷³

Initially Marine Corps officials contemplated creating a special service designation for blacks analogous to the navy's messman branch, but logistical difficulties and the lack of an existing designation of the type discouraged this course of action. Instead, a composite defense battalion containing infantry, armor, antiaircraft artillery, and seacoast artillery and charged with protection of one or more bases was established to house the new recruits. On 20 May an official announcement was made indicating that black recruits could enlist in the corps beginning on 1 June 1942.²⁷⁴ Men like Edgar R. Huff volunteered for this service, expected to pass the same rigorous examinations and live up to the same demanding standards as white marines. Huff observed that, "I wanted to be a Marine because I had always heard that the Marine Corps was the toughest outfit going, and so I wanted to be a member of the best organization."²⁷⁵ Although black marines faced Jim Crow-type restrictions by their assignment to segregated battalions, their presence within the corps signified a remarkable change.

In December 1942 President Roosevelt ordered the military services to cease accepting volunteers. Henceforth Selective Service would provide all of the nation's soldiers and sailors. For the army, which had previously been accepting men from

²⁷² *Blacks in the Marine Corps*, ix.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, x.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-3.

²⁷⁵ Interview with Edgar R. Huff, quoted in *Blacks in the Marine Corps*, 3.

Selective Service, this did not substantially alter their method of enlisting new soldiers. For the navy, however, this compelled a departure from the all-volunteer service that had existed through the war's first year. Along with Roosevelt's pronouncement came the requirement that African Americans be accepted into each service in proportion to their presence in the national population. Thereafter ten percent of all sailors would be black.²⁷⁶

The year 1942 marked a critical juncture in the history of minority participation in the American navy. During that year the navy conceded to black sailors the right to participate in component parts of service other than the messman's branch. President Roosevelt also promulgated an order that, starting early in 1943, would compel the navy to accept its sailors through the Selective Service system. Henceforth both black men and white men would enter service in proportion to their part in the national population. These were critical victories in themselves, but they were not the end of the story. Instead, they had merely opened the door to black participation. Black sailors and their supporters would, in coming years, demand and achieve further revisions in the navy's racial code. Before the decade was out the critical steps taken in the first years of the 1940's would ultimately lead to the cessation of five decades of naval policy of racism and discrimination.

²⁷⁶L.D. Reddick, "The Negro in the United States Navy During World War II," *Journal of Negro History* 32 (April 1947), 210.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

On 1 June 1942 the U.S. Navy began taking meaningful steps to bring to an end a five decades long program of racial exclusion and discrimination, when it opened its ranks to black recruits. Progress was slow; eight months later, in February 1943, the 7,000 blacks serving in the navy constituted only two percent of its personnel and remained largely segregated. By 1945, despite wartime advances, forty percent of the black men who served in the navy's uniform discharged messman and steward's duties. Most of the remainder served in other menial capacities—as laborers, stevedores, munitions handlers, and maintenance workers.²⁷⁷ A few however, like the all black crews of USS *Mason* and subchaser PC 1264, demonstrated to the satisfaction of all but the most diehard detractors that black men could satisfactorily undertake the full range of tasks necessary to operate a modern warship.

In the wake of the Second World War the pressures that had pushed the navy (and army) to revise racist and discriminatory policies finally led to the abandonment of Jim Crow enlisted personnel policy. President Harry S. Truman, who had succeeded Franklin Roosevelt and overseen the nation's victory, officially ended the bifurcated racial system in the military with Executive Order 9981. The 26 July 1948 order guaranteed “equality of treatment and opportunity . . . without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin” for those serving in the uniform of the United States. While

²⁷⁷ Gerald Astor, *The Right to Fight: A History of African Americans in the Military* (Cambridge, 1998), 215.

the order did not specify a mechanism by which integration would be achieved, the wartime demands that conflicts in Korea and Vietnam would place upon the nation would provide both the opportunity and a compelling justification to reverse past discrimination not simply in theory but in practice as well.

The decisions of 1942 and subsequent changes in naval enlistment and personnel policy continuing through 1948 broke down a carefully created program of racism and discrimination that had developed over a period of decades. Beginning with the seemingly innocuous creation of the messman and steward ratings in 1893, the navy gradually and systematically moved to restrict opportunities for African Americans. Along with a small number of black men enlisted as coal heavers/coal passers/firemen, the billets in the messman's branch soon became the exclusive home for black sailors.

Despite a clearly demonstrated preference for black sailors to serve exclusively within the racially restrictive ranks of the messman's branch, the navy was unwilling to systematically dismiss black sailors serving in other areas from service. Instead, a rising tide of racist and discriminatory sentiment built within the commissioned and enlisted ranks. White sailors in the late 1890's and early 1900's gradually placed more pressure on their black shipmates to leave the service. While some white officers proved responsive to the complaints of black sailors of their treatment at the hands of whites, many refused to acknowledge that African Americans were being wronged.

By the early 1900's the navy's displeasure with black sailors outside the messman branch began to be more overtly manifested. In one of the most prominent examples of the desire to rid the service of black petty officers—and thus the stigma of

black men giving orders to whites—the African American petty officers who had served in the Great White Fleet’s glorious circumnavigation of the globe were dumped from their billets and assigned to other duties on shore. White officers also began to exercise their power to refuse the requests of black sailors wishing to extend their tours of service and reenlist after their period of enlistment had ended.

Expansion of the navy during World War I increased opportunities for blacks to serve, but in the immediate post war period, the service turned its back on black sailors and became even more restrictive than prior to the war and effectively banned all new black enlistments. This policy continued through 1932 when rising fears of Japan and of the independence of the Philippines forced revision in recruiting policy, lest the navy be left without a steady supply of mess attendants.

In 1932 the navy discontinued its practice of excluding black men from enlistment, but for the first time in history made clear, explicit, and public its policy of limiting blacks to serving as messmen. This represented a substantial departure from earlier time periods when the navy publicly maintained that it did not discriminate against or restrict opportunities for black sailors, this despite clearly discriminatory and exclusionary policies. The 1932 policy of rigid racial segregation on board ship remained in place until the exigencies of the Second World War demanded revision.

Like the First World War, the Second World War compelled the United States to substantially increase the size of its navy. The longer duration of the later conflict along with persistent pressures from prominent Americans, including of leaders of the African American community, and the Double V campaign compelled the service to break down

barriers to access for black men. The Selective Service Act of 1940 banned racial discrimination, but the navy did not implement its provisions for over a year. Instead of drawing recruits from the national manpower draft, the navy relied upon voluntary enlistments, which allowed it to exercise greater control over its enlistment policies—including racial policies.

1942 proved to be the pivotal year in the evolution of racial policy in the navy. As the armed forces rapidly expanded to meet wartime exigencies, the navy had to confront the reality that the current system of recruitment could not fill the ranks. The service would ultimately have to turn to the draft and with it the provisions concerning black participation. Despite his personal reluctance to alter the racial division present within the navy—and to simultaneously upset the balance between whites and blacks—Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox ultimately bowed to pressures within the government and in black society. On 1 June 1942 Walter Baldwin became the first black sailors to be sworn in for general service under the navy's new scheme for limited integration.

Advancements for African Americans were incremental, highlighted by the operations of the USS *Mason* and Submarine Chaser PC 1264 by all-black crews beginning in 1944. The success of these experiments combined with societal forces to lead to the issuance of Executive Order 9981 in 1948, an action which marked the opening of a new chapter in the African American struggle for racial equality.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1: American Sailors by Race, 1906-1940.

Year	Total Sailors	White	%White	Black	%Black	Asian	%Asian	Black: Asian
1906	32165	29511	91.7488	1456	4.5267	1161	3.6095	1.2540913
1907	33027	30221	91.5039	1484	4.4933	1274	3.8574	1.16483516
1908	39018	35971	92.1908	1867	4.785	1131	2.8987	1.65075155
1909	44129	40675	92.1729	1768	4.0064	1630	3.6937	1.08466258
1910	45076	41765	92.6546	1535	3.4054	1726	3.8291	0.88933951
1911	47612	44280	93.0018	1529	3.2114	1749	3.6734	0.87421384
1912	47515	44261	93.1516	1438	3.0264	1766	3.7167	0.81426954
1913	48068	44739	93.0744	1491	3.1019	1792	3.7281	0.83203125
1914	52667	49052	93.1361	1431	2.7171	2120	4.0253	0.675
1915	52561	48908	93.05	1265	2.4067	2330	4.4329	0.54291845
1916	54234	50496	93.1076	1262	2.327	2415	4.4529	0.52256729
1917	100539	96571	96.0533	1285	1.2781	2608	2.594	0.49271472
1918	435398	425323	97.686	5328	1.224	4707	1.081	1.1319311
1919	250833	238037	94.8986	5668	2.2596	7072	2.819	0.8014706
1920	108950	99212	91.062	3047	2.7875	6511	5.9761	0.46644141
1921	119205	110024	92.2981	2385	2.0008	6513	5.4637	0.3661907
1922	88580	80888	91.3163	1867	2.1077	5618	6.3423	0.33232467
1923	82355	75899	92.1608	1322	1.6052	4989	6.0579	0.26498296
1924	87327	81083	92.8499	1112	1.2734	5016	5.7439	0.22169059
1925	84289	77524	91.974	925	1.0974	4723	5.6033	0.1958501
1926	82161	76562	93.1853	775	0.9433	4726	5.7521	0.16398646
1927	83566	78375	93.7881	681	0.8149	4427	5.2976	0.15382878
1928	84355	79137	93.8142	607	0.7196	4538	5.3796	0.13375937
1929	85321	79996	93.7589	533	0.6247	4713	5.5238	0.11309145
1930	84938	79570	93.6801	462	0.5439	4829	5.6853	0.09567198
1931	80910	75638	93.4841	465	0.5747	4733	5.8497	0.09824636
1932	81120	76018	93.7106	441	0.5436	4589	5.6571	0.09609937
1933	79243	74296	93.7572	505	0.6373	4373	5.5185	0.11548136
1934	80359	75515	93.9721	708	0.881	4066	5.0598	0.17412691
1935	82839	78009	94.1694	1152	1.3906	3617	4.3663	0.31849599

1936	93077	88137	94.6926	1936	2.08	2950	3.1694	0.65627119
1937	100180	95294	95.1228	2104	2.1002	2737	2.7321	0.76872488
1938	104888	99903	95.2473	2384	2.2729	2559	2.4397	0.93161391
1939	110196	104756	95.0633	2807	2.5473	2600	2.3594	1.07961538
1940	139554	132889	95.2241	4007	2.8713	2626	1.8817	1.5258949

Figures represent totals for the U.S. Navy, reserve, and National Naval Volunteers, where applicable.

Source: Frederick S. Harrod, *Manning the New Navy: The Development of a Modern Naval Enlisted Force, 1899-1940* (Westport, 1978) 176-77; *Annual Reports of the Secretary of the Navy* (Washington, D.C., 1906-1940).

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