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Enforcing Conformity: Race in the American Legion, 1940-1960

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Introduction

The history of African American military veterans is a well-developed subfield. Historians have shown the trailblazing role that these men and women have played in civil rights struggles since the Civil War, fighting not only for the right to vote but for an end to racial discrimination more broadly.¹ Thanks to the privileges historically attached to the status of military veteran in the United States—either intangible (such as manhood and social prestige) or more concrete (like pensions or healthcare)—black veterans have often been leaders in their own communities. For the same reasons, they have also been regarded as a threat by white supremacists who feared that they would refuse a return to living under a Jim Crow regime of racial segregation. To a large extent, the history of black veterans in the U.S. is the history of how war has shaped the struggle for civil rights.

But one can also approach the problem of race and military veterans from a different and less well-trodden angle. Instead of focusing on black veterans' role as champions of the larger civil rights movement, this chapter shifts the focus to the groups on the other side of this struggle, and more specifically to the American Legion, the largest and most influential veterans' organization in the twentieth-century United States. With 3.3 million members at its peak in 1946, the Legion counted roughly twice as many members as the second most important veterans' group, the Veterans of Foreign Wars.² Though it always claimed to represent a cross-section of America and to speak for all its veterans, the membership of the group was in fact overwhelmingly white, male, and middle class.³ Not only were African Americans and other minorities a mere fraction of all members, but their concerns were largely ignored by the leadership, which refused to get involved in issues related to civil rights on the grounds that they were not "veterans' issues." To examine the history of black Legionnaires, then, is to explore the role of a small group of men and women with little or no influence in an organization whose politics can be described as conservative and unfriendly to civil rights.

This is not to say, however, that the history of race in the American Legion does not speak to larger themes in African American history. For if this group was never a major actor in the civil rights struggle, it undeniably played a key role in restraining the access of nonwhite veterans to their benefits. Not only was lobbying for veterans' benefits the Legion's core mission, but it was arguably more successful at it than any other organization of former soldiers. To cite only one example, the landmark "G.I. Bill of Rights" of 1944, which provided returning World War II veterans with a wide range of generous benefits such as educational and job training assistance, loan guaranties, and unemployment compensation, was largely the invention of the Legion. This is why the position of the group on issues of race mattered. By refusing to pay attention to the specific concerns of minority veterans, the Legion helped embed racist practices into the very structure of veterans' welfare state. As a result, it made it more difficult, if not impossible for nonwhite veterans everywhere in the U.S. to claim their benefits. In this sense, the internal dynamics of race in the Legion had national repercussions.

¹ See for instance Chad Louis Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Christopher S. Parker, *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle against White Supremacy in the Postwar South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Kimberley L. Phillips, *War! What Is It Good For? Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Christine Knauer, *Let Us Fight as Free Men: Black Soldiers and Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Steven L. Schlossman and Sherie Mershon, *Foxholes & Color Lines: Desegregating the U.S. Armed Forces* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Barbara A. Gannon, *The Won Cause: Black and White Comradship in the Grand Army of the Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

² In October 1946, the membership of the Veterans of Foreign Wars stood at 1.5 million, see Herbert Molloy Mason, Jr., *VFW: Our First Century, 1899-1999* (Lenexa, KS: Addax, 1999), 115.

³ For an internal survey of Legion membership, see American Legion Membership Survey Winter 1954-1955 (Reel No. 96-10), American Legion Archives, Indianapolis, Indiana (ALA hereafter).

The Interwar Period and the Second World War

The Legion was created in February 1919, towards the end of a period that has often been described as the “nadir” of race relations in the U.S.⁴ In this context of heightened animosity toward racial minorities, white veterans of the Great War grappled with the question of whether to admit African Americans in their newly formed group. Some of their leaders insisted that black veterans had served under the same flag and therefore deserved to be treated as equals. In the end, however, southern white Legionnaires managed to ensure the perpetuation of a Jim Crow regime of racial segregation and discrimination by making membership policy a strictly local matter to be decided at the Post level—thereby guaranteeing that no black veterans would be admitted to white Posts in the South. Even in the North, most blacks showed little interest in a group that “had no greater commitment to equality than American society as a whole,” which is to say very little.⁵ In places like the Midwest, the Legion’s membership overlapped substantially with that of openly racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. Because the leadership was afraid of antagonizing its rank and file, the Legion never spoke out forcefully against the Klan throughout the interwar period.⁶

In the interwar period, racial exclusion or segregation was the rule in the Legion across the South (as it was, it should be noted, in most other mass-membership groups during these years).⁷ In Louisiana, Arkansas, South Carolina, Georgia and Mississippi, blacks were not admitted as members. In Alabama, only one black Post existed in the whole state (in Tuskegee). In Upper South and Border States such as Washington, D.C., North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Virginia, the Legion was segregated.⁸ In Florida and Texas, black veterans were accepted into a subsidiary organization called the Colored Veterans of the World War.⁹ In the North, the situation varied widely not only from state to state but within each state. A survey carried out in mid-1944 by Thurgood Marshall of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), for instance, found that while black Legionnaires in Stockton, California, were admitted on an “equal basis,” Posts in San Diego were segregated and African Americans discriminated against.¹⁰ As of May 1944, there were only 311 all-black Legion Posts in total, or 2.6 percent out of a total of 12,004.¹¹ Things changed very little after the outbreak of World War II. Not only did the national leadership of the group continue to ignore the protests of African American members, but it actively hurt their interests when crafting the most important piece of legislation of the war: the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of June 1944, also known as the G. I. Bill. Though officially color-blind, this bill was designed to be administered by local and state institutions in order to ensure that it would not challenge racist practices. Title III of the bill, for instance, allowed the federal government to guarantee up to half of a loan taken by a veteran

⁴ Rayford Whittingham Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954).

⁵ William Pencak, *For God & Country: The American Legion, 1919-1941* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), 68–69.

⁶ Pencak, *For God & Country*, 137–143.

⁷ Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, The Julian J. Rothbaum Distinguished Lecture Series, vol. 8 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 179–82.

⁸ “Remarks of Past Commander, L.T. Kendrick of Lindley DeGarmo Post No.70 on “The Negro Veterans appeal to organize their own Posts within The Department of Florida, American Legion,” Administration & Organization, Organization, Post, ‘Class’ Posts, Black, American Legion Archives, Indianapolis, Indiana. (Black, ALA hereafter)

⁹ On Texas, see Harry E. Rather to Henry H. Dudley, November 3, 1944, Black, ALA. On Florida, see “Constitution and By-Laws of the Department of the Colored Veterans of the World War in Florida”, Black, ALA.

¹⁰ Thurgood Marshall to Messrs. White and Wilkins, “Memorandum on the American Legion,” July 31, 1944, Part II, Box 2, Folder: Chapman v. American Legion, 1942-1943, Records of the NAACP, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (NAACP hereafter).

¹¹ Progress Report, Colored Posts, May 15, 1944, Black, ALA.

for the purchase of a home, business, or farm. Yet veterans had to get the approval of a local bank before the Veterans Administration (VA) could provide the guaranty, and since most southern banks routinely refused to lend to African Americans, the latter were largely unable to take advantage of this provision of the bill. The same discriminatory practices applied to other sections of the bill. Black veterans were largely unable to draw on the job search and unemployment compensation provisions or to fully use their educational or job training benefits.¹²

Far from an oversight, this was exactly what its designers intended. With racist Southern Democrats and conservative Republicans dominating the U.S. Congress during the war, a bill guaranteeing black veterans equal access to their benefits would have been dead on arrival. John E. Rankin of Mississippi, the chairman of the House Committee in charge of veterans' benefits, understood that granting black veterans lavish advantages would threaten the South's Jim Crow system, which relied on the economic and political marginalization of nonwhites.¹³ In this process, the Legion was a willing accomplice: when faced with Rankin's attempts to torpedo the bill out of fear that it would undermine white supremacy, its National Commander William Atherton did not defend black veterans' rights to equal benefits but instead argued that Rankin underestimated the degree to which "states rights" were embedded into the law. "[C]ontrol of many of the features of the bill," he assured, "will still rest with the individual states."¹⁴ In other words, though the law was nominally color-blind, Atherton was confident that states would still be able to determine who would or would not access it.

It was not until the very last months of the war that the Legion leadership began to show the first signs of change on this issue, as illustrated by a memo written in March 1945 by the Legion's chief administrative officer Donald Glascoff on the topic of "Negro Membership after World War II." Anticipating that his group would be placed under "great pressure" to accept nonwhite members after the end of the war, Glascoff outlined the reasons for which he thought the policy would need to be revised. Not only was it likely that "our hand could be forced by lawful action," but he recognized that "our little token of 300 negro posts with a membership of 30,000 to 40,000" would never be enough to welcome the one million or so of black ex-service members who would return from the war. In addition, Glascoff feared that black veterans rejected by the Legion might instead "gravitate toward radical veterans' groups formed especially to exploit them and to use the negro veteran as a weapon in outright attack upon our form of government and mode of democratic life." "Unless there is strong influence among Negro veterans exercised by the Legion and other patriotic groups," he wrote, "Communism, Black Dragonism,¹⁵ and other isms will flourish among this race here. We can do little about controlling and defeating tendencies of this nature, if the negro veteran is kept outside the Legion." In essence, Glascoff was making the conservative case for change, presenting the acceptance of black members (even if still in separate facilities) as the only way to prevent the even greater evil of being engulfed in a major scandal or facilitating the rise of radical groups.¹⁶

Yet as Glascoff himself would surely have known, his own thoughts on this issue mattered little. Ultimately, this was a problem that could be decided only by Southern white Legionnaires themselves. The national leadership could encourage change, but not set it into motion.

¹² David H. Onkst, "First a Negro... Incidentally a Veteran': Black World War Two Veterans and the G. I. Bill of Rights in the Deep South, 1944-1948," *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 3 (April 1998): 517-43.

¹³ Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*, chap. 5.

¹⁴ Quoted in Kathleen Frydl, *The GI Bill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 137.

¹⁵ The Black Dragon Society was a Japanese paramilitary group that sent spies to the U.S. prior to Pearl Harbor, reportedly in an attempt to harness discontent among African Americans in order to undermine the U.S. war effort. In October 1942, over 80 African Americans were arrested by the FBI on charges of sedition, pro-Japanese activities, and draft-dodging. See "Takehashi's Blacks," *Time*, October 5, 1942.

¹⁶ Donald G. Glascoff, "Memo to: Edw. N. Scheiberling—Subject: Negro Membership after World War II," March 20, 1945, Black, ALA.

The Post-Second World War Period

Just as Glascoff had expected, the influx of World War II veterans brought renewed urgency to the calls for racial integration. At the National Convention of the group in November 1945, three resolutions to abolish racial segregation in the group were “deferred or brushed aside, until next year,” according to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the nation’s leading African American newspapers. “A ‘hush-hush’ atmosphere prevailed whenever the racial or religious issue was projected,” the paper reported, “and extreme care was taken to block publicity about committee meetings where racial and religious issues were discussed.” Only about 200 black Legionnaires attended the meeting.¹⁷ At the next National Convention in San Francisco a year later, a group of some thirty black veterans of World War I and II picketed the meeting to ask that “open membership in all American Legion posts, North and South, be made available to one million Negro war veterans on the basis of equality of sacrifice—not race or color.” They were beaten up and dispersed by white Legionnaires, who told them to “Get out of here—we don’t want you.”¹⁸ Joining forces with liberal white allies, black veterans also tried to form a number of racially integrated Posts—such as the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Post in Washington, D.C., or the New York Collegiate Post and the Duncan-Paris Post in New York City—but their efforts were met with the firm opposition of the leadership.¹⁹

The publicity generated by these efforts was exactly what Glascoff had feared, and they certainly played a role in prompting Legion leaders to accept black members. As importantly, though, many Southern Legion officials were also motivated by the more self-interested realization that this move was necessary to “forestall the organizational efforts of the [American Veterans Committee] and other liberal veterans organizations which accept all ex-service men on an equal basis.”²⁰ For all these reasons, southern Departments slowly but surely moved to abandon their exclusionary policies. Between 1945 and 1947, first Texas, then North and South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, and finally Alabama moved to accept black veterans—though always in separate, all-black districts and Posts, with their own commander and delegates.²¹

Partly as a result of this policy change—but also as a reflection of the higher numbers of African American soldiers who had fought in this war—the number of “colored” Legion Posts (as they were often known) more than tripled after the war, from 311 in 1944 to 943 in 1950.²² However, power continued to reside in the hands of white Legionnaires. In most states, the approval of existing white Posts was required before the creation of a black one in the same community.²³ Black Legionnaires tended to wield little power within their own

¹⁷ “Legion Refuses to Lower Color Bar: Vets Denied Membership Resolutions,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, December 1, 1945.

¹⁸ Fred Atwater, “Legionnaires Beat Negro Vets,” *The Chicago Defender*, October 12, 1946.

¹⁹ Major Robinson, “Legion Denies Charters To Interracial Posts,” *The Chicago Defender*, September 21, 1946.

²⁰ “Florida Legion Sets Up JC Posts: Formerly Lily-White Group Changes Policy,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, September 28, 1946.

²¹ “Negro Legion Posts,” *Greenville (TX) Banner*, September 29, 1945, Black, ALA; “Legion Lifts Ban In South: Rule Covers Georgia, Alabama, Carolinas,” *The Chicago Defender*, April 13, 1946; “Dixie Drops Bar: La., Florida Legions Absorb Negro Posts,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 3, 1946; “Ala. American Legion Approves Race Groups: Vote Is Overwhelming, but Negroes Will Function in Separate District,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 9, 1947. It is unclear exactly when Mississippi dropped its ban, but the state is mentioned as having done so in Henry H. Dudley to A.B. Kapplin, September 4, 1946, Black, ALA.

²² Progress Report, Colored Posts, May 15, 1944, Black, ALA; George N. Craig to Laddell Washington, February 2, 1950, Black Veterans, ALA.

²³ Headquarters Georgia Department, “Bulleting No.1 – Colored Legion Posts,” July 25, 1946, Black, ALA.

states, and were often absent from the major national committees.²⁴ In Virginia, African American members were not allowed to take part in Legion activities such as oratorical contests, junior baseball, or child welfare.²⁵ The absence of a comprehensive list of all black Posts meant that their members were unable to coordinate beyond state lines in any systematic fashion; as one black Legionnaire wrote in October 1945 in a request for help to the NAACP, “There is no way for members of our group to reach other Negro Legionnaires unless we have assistance from the nationally active Negro organizations.”²⁶

In addition, the Legion leadership continued to pay little attention to the specific problems of black veterans, such as lynching. Because they were seen as threats to the status quo by racist white Southerners, several dozen black veterans were lynched upon their return to the U.S.²⁷ There were so many cases of racial violence against black service members or veterans, in fact, that Earl Conrad wrote in the *Chicago Defender* in March 1946 that “as the war ended...the rate of at-home violence involving the Negro arose...The Negro press still reads like war.”²⁸ And yet the Legion never forcefully spoke out on the issue of civil rights and racial violence. Black Legionnaires themselves submitted resolutions on issues such as the Federal Employment Practices Commission—an agency created during the war to eliminate racial discrimination in hiring practices—the poll tax, and lynching, but they never passed the National Convention.²⁹

The standard defense of the Legion leadership when asked to take a position on such issues was as simple as it was incomplete. Their hands were bound, they argued, either by the fact that they lacked an official mandate from the National Convention or by the independence of state chapters in membership matters.³⁰ While this was technically true, it is also remarkable that Legion officials insisted on such a narrow reading of their authority only on issues of race, while being much less hesitant to act of their own initiative on issues more relevant to the majority of their white members, such as the postwar housing crisis. The few actions that the group did take were largely symbolic. The 1948 National Convention, for instance, passed a resolution stating its “belief in the inherent constitutional and equal rights of all Americans, irrespective of race, creed or color,” which also noted somewhat ironically that “great progress has actually been made and is constantly being made in this vital and important field [civil rights]...and also...that the AL has contributed in no small measure to this progress.”³¹ The definition of “progress” held by white Legion officials, however, was decidedly limited: in 1947, newly-elected National Commander James F. O’Neil declared that the policy of segregating chapters in the South “met with his approval.”³²

Not only did the Legion not recognize the relevance of civil rights issues for black veterans, but its tolerance of Jim Crow continued to have consequences for their access to their own benefits. In March 1946, for instance, the results of a survey of 21 cities conducted by the American Council on Race Relations showed “failure of the Federal Government to

²⁴ “Demands Complete Legion Integration,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, October 22, 1955; “Equal Vote Fight Waged in Legion: Vets Denied Weighty Committee Privileges,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, October 12, 1946.

²⁵ L. S. Henry to Donald R. Wilson, December 8, 1951, Black, ALA.

²⁶ Johnny Baker Post No. 291 Americanism Committee Chairman Ben Peery to NAACP National Secretary Walter White, October 22, 1945, Box A362, Folder: American Legion, 1949-1949, NAACP.

²⁷ On the lynching of returning World War II veterans, see Equal Justice Initiative, “Lynching in America: Targeting Black Veterans,” 2017, available at: <http://eji.org/reports/online/lynching-in-america-targeting-black-veterans> (accessed on April 11, 2017); Kimberley L. Phillips, *War! What Is It Good for?: Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 86–99.

²⁸ Earl Conrad, “Yesterday And Today: The Negro Press Fights On,” *The Chicago Defender*, March 2, 1946.

²⁹ “FEPC, Poll Tax Petitions Offered at Legion Sessions,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, August 10, 1946.

³⁰ See for instance Paul H. Griffith to Linwood G. Koger, n.d. (ca. May 9, 1947); Donald R. Wilson to L. S. Henry, December 17, 1951, Black, ALA.

³¹ *Proceedings of the 30th National Convention of the American Legion* (Miami, 1948), 74-75.

³² “Legion Commander OKs Jim Crow Posts,” *The Chicago Defender*, October 4, 1947.

implement the GI Bill of Rights, especially with regard to the Negro, Japanese, Mexican-American and other minority veterans.” Many of the benefits provided by the bill, from educational assistance to loan guaranties to unemployment compensation, were out of reach for nonwhite veterans.³³ The Council found “discrimination as usual” to be the norm from federal agencies all the way down and called the phenomenon a “national disgrace.”³⁴ Despite the fact that the Legion proudly claimed to be the sole author of the G.I. Bill, it was conspicuously missing from the list of veterans’ groups that participated in the National Action Conference on Minority Veterans Problems called by the Council later that year, and followed by a petition to the President.³⁵ According to ex-Legion official Justin Gray, the Legion also made no effort to help those southern black veterans who lived in rural, isolated areas apply for their terminal leave pay.³⁶

Likewise, the Legion’s opposition to government intervention in the realm of housing was especially detrimental to black veterans, who relied much more than whites on public housing.³⁷ In the first few years after the war, the conservative World War I leadership of the Legion remained adamantly opposed to the public housing bill supported by Robert Wagner, Robert Taft, and Allen Ellender in the U.S. Senate. As P. L. Prattis wrote in the *Courier*, “[h]ousing is almost the special and peculiar need of Negroes wherever you find them. By opposing liberal housing programs, the Legion places its seal of approval on every Negro slum ghetto in the United States.”³⁸ Some black Legionnaires tried to draw attention to this problem: the Commander of a black Legion Post in Chicago’s South Side, for instance, expressed “keen disappointment at the existing [housing] conditions” in his neighborhood. Black veterans, he argued, “feel discontented because on returning home, they could find no adequate housing,” due to “restrictive covenants and obdurate owners who want to sell at exorbitant prices or who refuse to sell to colored citizens.”³⁹

Just as it failed to heed the material concerns of its black members, the Legion also made little effort to integrate them in its discourse. An outside observer reading Legion publications during the postwar years would have been hard-pressed to know that there were nonwhite veterans in the group. Despite its frequent claims that it was “truly representative of America,” with “no lines of distinction drawn between race, creed or color,” the facts told a different story.⁴⁰ Legion cartoons and magazines depicted a veteran who was almost always a white, heterosexual, and breadwinner man with a stay-at-home and child-rearing wife. The fact that this portrayal was not representative of the experiences of hundreds of thousands of Legionnaires did not go unnoticed. As a veteran from Philadelphia wrote to the *Legion Magazine* in 1946,

³³ Quoted in Gray and Bernstein, *The Inside Story of the Legion*, 201. On the release of the survey, see “American Council Calls Emergency Veterans Conference: More Than 50 Organizations To Join Confab,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, March 30, 1946.

³⁴ American Council on Race Relations, “Veterans Are Finding ‘Discrimination As Usual,’” *New Journal and Guide*, July 20, 1946.

³⁵ Five veterans’ groups participated: the Catholic War Veterans, the Jewish War Veterans, the Veterans League of America, the UNAVA, and the American Veterans Committee. See “Veterans Groups To Protest To Pres. Truman About Bias: President to Get Proposals Of Vet Groups,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, July 27, 1946.

³⁶ Gray and Bernstein, *The Inside Story of the Legion*, 201–3.

³⁷ James L. Hicks, “Veterans Whirl,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, December 12, 1947; P. L. Prattis, “The Horizon: Instead of Waiting to Be Kicked Out by Legion, Negro Posts Should Seek New Home,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 13, 1947; “Raise in Rent Ceilings Looms In Washington: Low Cost Housing Program under Fire From Legion,” *The Chicago Defender*, November 16, 1946.

³⁸ P. L. Prattis, “The Horizon: Instead of Waiting to Be Kicked Out by Legion, Negro Posts Should Seek New Home,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 13, 1947.

³⁹ Alonzo Mead, “Legion Post To Get Action,” *The Chicago Defender*, February 15, 1947.

⁴⁰ The American Legion, *The Crusades of '50: A Plan of Action!*, 1949, 21, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, Madison, Wisconsin.

[i]t looks to me and many other negro servicemen that the National Headquarters of the American Legion thinks the war was fought and won by only the white man in khaki. We would like to see more of ourselves in your paper.⁴¹

The situation remained the same almost ten years later, when that same *Magazine* published a short letter from Sidney Sasson of New York in which he wrote that he “would like to see a cover piece depicting the American Negro in any of the typical American scenes such as watching a parade, celebrating the Fourth of July, taking part in a college rally etc. No treatment with condescension.”⁴² Clearly, the Legion was not paying equal attention to the concerns of all of its members.

Race, Anti-communism, and Civil Rights

The late 1940s also witnessed the growing involvement of the American Legion in the Second Red Scare, the period of intense anticommunist fever that gripped the United States until the early 1950s. As it became increasingly involved in the anticommunist movement both at home and overseas, the Legion aligned itself with groups whose politics ran counter to those of most of its nonwhite members. For instance, it maintained close ties with J. Edgar Hoover’s Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and staunchly supported all congressional committees in charge of investigating communism, especially the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).⁴³ Both the FBI and HUAC relentlessly harassed civil rights activists throughout the 1940s and 1950s, for instance by holding hearings or conducting investigations on alleged communist influences. The same was true for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), a left-leaning organization focused on the defense of freedom of speech. In 1952, the Legion officially called for a federal investigation of the ACLU to “ascertain whether...[it] may be properly classified as a Communist or Communist-front organization.”⁴⁴ It was hardly a surprise, then, that when the Legion invited several organizations to an “All-American Conference to Combat Communism” in January 1950 in New York City, the NAACP turned down the offer on the grounds that the other groups on the guest list—among which were the American Heritage Foundation, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the Daughters of the American Revolution—were pro-segregation. Its board declared that they “will not collaborate with those who would maintain the inequalities of the color bar.”⁴⁵

The Legion’s anticommunist discourse typically portrayed African Americans as easy targets of Communist persuasion. For instance, the Legion-sponsored radio broadcast *Decision Now*, which aired from 1947 to 1949, described blacks as a gullible group whom Communists could easily manipulate by whipping up their resentment of racial discrimination.⁴⁶ As one speaker mentioned during a Legion seminar on anticommunism in 1947, “Negro groups...are especially subject to Communist poison...” “We might as well face

⁴¹ Willie Cheny to National Commander Office, January 25, 1946, Black Veterans, ALA.

⁴² “Sound Off: Blind Spot,” *American Legion Magazine* [ALM hereafter], December 1955, p. 4.

⁴³ For an example of a resolution of support for the FBI, see *Proceedings of the 32nd National Convention of the American Legion* (Los Angeles, 1950), 28. On the FBI’s Legion Contact Program, see Matthew Cecil, *Branding Hoover’s FBI: How the Boss’s PR Men Sold the Bureau to America* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 73–94; Athan Theoharis, “The FBI and the American Legion Contact Program, 1940–1966,” *Political Science Quarterly* 100, no. 2 (July 1985): 271–86; Joanne M. Hepp, “Administrative Insubordination and Bureaucratic Principles: The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s American Legion Contact Program” (M.A., Marquette University, 1985). For an example of the resolutions of support for HUAC, see *Proceedings of the 31st National Convention of the American Legion* (Philadelphia, 1949), 75; Eugene Lyons, “The Men the Commies Hate Most,” *ALM*, October 1950.

⁴⁴ *Proceedings of the 34th National Convention of the American Legion*, 29.

⁴⁵ James L. Hicks, “NAACP Board Rejects 2 Branch Protests on Wilkins; Passes ‘Confidence’ Vote,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, February 25, 1950.

⁴⁶ See the scripts of episodes 74 and 77 of the show (respectively June 27 and July 18, 1948) in Radio Scripts, ALA.

it,” he added, “the Negro is discriminated against, he is not given a fair shake in many respects. The wonder to me is that more of them don’t swallow the Commie line.”⁴⁷ It is worth stressing that this view of African Americans as easy and passive targets for left-wing activists was not unique to the Legion: during this period, it was common for white supremacists across the United States to argue that blacks’ complaints of mistreatment were the product not of actual racial discrimination but of the manipulations of left-wing “outside agitators” who set one race against another for purely political gain. As historians have shown, anticommunism offered a powerful political repertoire to defenders of Jim Crow who sought to undermine the legitimacy of the civil rights movement: the frequency of red-baiting attacks rose and fell “largely in rhythm with southern efforts to counter the struggle for black equality.”⁴⁸

The relationship between African Americans and the Legion only further deteriorated with the rise of the civil rights movement. The “massive resistance” of Southern whites to the Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to ban racial segregation in schools left as deep a mark on the Legion as it did on the country as a whole. Until then, the group had been able to avoid directly addressing the issue of race. Starting in the mid-1950s, however, it became increasingly entangled in this debate at both the national and local levels. During these years, the Supreme Court emerged as a favorite target for Legionnaires who opposed its efforts either to rein in the anticommunist crusade or to undermine white supremacy (or both).

After the civil rights movement’s next major victory, the 1955-1956 Montgomery bus boycott, the Legion began to criticize these groups more openly. Building on its longstanding amalgamation of civil rights activism and communist subversion, the group called for an investigation of the NAACP “to ascertain the truth or falsity of the charges that this organization is influenced by communists or their fellow travelers.”⁴⁹ It also voted a resolution deploring “the continued usurption [sic] of States Rights by the federal government, specifically in those matters so clearly spelled out by our founding fathers and in the Bill of Rights and the Constitution,” which it believed “will eventually result in a socialistic or dictatorial form of government.”⁵⁰ In 1958, the National Convention of the Legion adopted a lengthy resolution “vigorously” opposing “all legislation” encouraging the federal government to infringe upon what they saw as the rightful control of educational affairs by states and local communities.⁵¹ At the same convention, National Commander W. C. “Dan” Daniel (a Virginian) directly challenged the legitimacy of the highest court of the land in a speech where he decried “the increasing danger of centralized oppressive government...of judicial attacks upon the sovereignty of our respective states...of arbitrary decrees which challenge the purpose and heretofore sacred guarantees of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence.” The speech directly referred to some of the recent decisions of the Court regarding communism, but it was clearly an attack on *Brown* as well.⁵²

To be sure, the Legion leadership steadfastly denied that these resolutions had anything to do with racial segregation, and always pointed to the fact that they never mentioned race. However, any defense of states’ rights had unavoidable racial undertones in the political context of the mid- to late-1950s. In addition, a series of embarrassing public statements made it clear where the real sympathies of top Legion officials lay. In early 1955, National Commander Seaborn Collins reportedly commented that he did not “regard

⁴⁷ National Americanism Commission, *The American Legion, Addresses: Counter-Subversion Seminar*, 1948, 229. Emphasis original.

⁴⁸ Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 5; George Lewis, *The White South and the Red Menace: Segregationists, Anticommunism, and Massive Resistance, 1945-1965* (Gainesville, Fl.: University Press of Florida, 2004).

⁴⁹ Resolution no. 421 in *Proceedings of the 38th National Convention* (Los Angeles, 1956), 49.

⁵⁰ Resolution no. 75 in *Proceedings of the 38th National Convention of the American Legion* (Los Angeles, California, 1956), 51.

⁵¹ *Proceedings of the 40th National Convention of the American Legion* (Chicago, 1958), 61-62.

⁵² *Proceedings of the 40th National Convention of the American Legion* (Chicago, 1958), 5-6.

Negroes as his equal,” though he claimed to have been misquoted; this comment led several black Posts to ask for his resignation.⁵³ The following year, one of the Legion’s (white) National Vice-Commanders said during a speech in Mississippi that he had decided not to attend the Democratic National Convention in protest against the fact that his state delegation also included what he called three “super-sunburned delegates,” including an NAACP attorney.⁵⁴ Responding to outraged letters, the National Commander argued that his subordinate’s comments had been misunderstood, and dismissed it as merely an “unfortunate incident.”⁵⁵ Finally, in January 1957 Daniel himself told a cheering Georgia House of Representatives that he would be “glad to fight to uphold the traditions of the great state of Georgia,” adding that “the Legion, too, believes in states’ rights.”⁵⁶ “Arrogation of power by a central government was fast reducing the states to municipal dependencies,” he claimed, and “[a]n all-powerful central government is the vehicle that the Kremlin hopes to ride in conquering our free land, as was the case in so many of the countries in East and Central Europe.”⁵⁷ Once again, the comment provoked a series of denunciations, to which the Legion merely replied that Daniel’s speech had never mentioned “the matter of segregation,” which had been “inserted” into his remarks “by a zealous reporter.”⁵⁸

Beyond these declarations by the national leadership, white Legionnaires all across the South actively fought civil rights at the local or state level. In 1956, the Commander of the Georgia Legion publicly endorsed the Gray Amendment to the Virginia state Constitution, which sought to enforce school segregation despite the *Brown* decision.⁵⁹ In Coushatta, Louisiana, the Red River Post censured both Congress and the Supreme Court for their role in promoting “socialism” and “destroying basic constitutional principles.”⁶⁰ After denouncing two white Legion Posts in Mississippi for co-sponsoring a meeting with a White Citizens’ Council (the respectable, middle-class equivalent of the Ku Klux Klan) in the spring of 1957, the black William Walker Post 214 in Jackson saw its charter cancelled. The Department Commander threatened to expel black Mississippi Legionnaires if they did not rid their posts of “racial agitators” and stopped “dabbling in partisan politics.” The fact that the William Walker Post had ties to the civil rights movement—its Service Officer was none other than NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers—and that it tried to register black voters to vote was certainly not a coincidence. Post members appealed the decision, but without success.⁶¹ Finally, when President Eisenhower later used the National Guard to force the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in the early fall of 1957, his move was met with the intense opposition of many Legion Posts across the South, who decried what they saw as an overt assault on states’ rights. In New Orleans, for instance, white Legionnaires invited the anti-integration Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus to speak at their Veterans’ Day ceremony that year. In January 1958, the Arkansas Legion presented him with its Americanism Award, in the presence of a slew of top Legion officials (including former National Commander Erle Cocke) from the South.⁶²

Conclusion

⁵³ “Legion Head on Spot: Resignation Asked by Harlemites,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, April 30, 1955; “Negro Legionnaires in 5 States Protest Commander Race Slur,” n.d., Black Veterans, ALA.

⁵⁴ “Biloxi, Miss., July 10 (AP)...,” Americanism, Tolerance, Segregation, ALA (Segregation, ALA hereafter).

⁵⁵ J. Addington Wagner to Honorable Charles C. Diggs, Jr., July 18, 1956; J. Addington Wagner to Frank P. Lynch, Jr., July 18, 1956, Segregation, ALA.

⁵⁶ “Legion Head Lauds Stand of Georgia,” *The Washington Post*, January 26, 1957.

⁵⁷ Charles W. Geile to David C. Leach, n.d. (ca. February 1957), Segregation, ALA.

⁵⁸ Robert E. Lyngh to George H. Simmons, February 19, 1957, Segregation, ALA.

⁵⁹ Irving Breakstone to Robert Maynard Hutchins, March 16, 1956, Box 16, folder 5, Fund for the Republic Papers, Mudd Library, Princeton University.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Lewis, *The White South and the Red Menace*, 53.

⁶¹ Peter D. Hoefler, “A David against Goliath: The American Veteran Committee’s Challenge to the American Legion in the 1950s” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, 2010), 180–91.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 196–211.

The presentation of this award captured the attitude of the American Legion on matters of race throughout this period: generally insensitive to the concerns of its nonwhite members, the group acted in their favor only when legal pressure and the risk of more radical change made its leaders feel that they had no other choice. Even then, change remained very limited and slow, with consequences felt far and wide. By characterizing the complaints of its nonwhite members as falling outside the purview of “veterans’ issues,” the Legion actively contributed to their marginalization. Racial discrimination had certainly been a longstanding feature of veterans’ benefits, but Legion leaders helped embed it even further into the structure of the law. Instead of helping make veterans’ benefits accessible to all former soldiers, they played a key role in enforcing conformity to their own model of who counted as a veteran.