

The American Yawp Reader



A Phillip Randolph and Franklin Roosevelt on Racial Discrimination in the Defense Industry (1941)

As the United States prepared for war, Black labor leader A. Philip Randolph recoiled at rampant employment discrimination in the defense industry. Together with NAACP head Walter White and other leaders, Randolph planned “a mass March on Washington” to push for fair employment practices. President Franklin Roosevelt met with Randolph and White on June 18, and, faced with mobilized discontent and a possible disruption of wartime industries, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 on June 25. The order prohibited racial discrimination in the defense industry. Randolph and other leaders declared victory and called off the march.

A. Philip Randolph on a March on Washington (March 18, 1941)

Dear Walter:

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Just a word of remembrance and good hope that you are feeling fine.

Now I have been thinking about the Negro and national defense and have come to the conclusion that something drastic has got to be done to shake official Washington and the white industrialists and labor forces of America to the realization of the fact that Negroes mean business about getting their rights as American citizens under national defense. To this end I have decided to undertake the organization of a march of ten thousand Negroes or more upon Washington. When I come back East I want to talk with you about it.

I hope it may be convenient for you to join with me and a few other persons in the issuance of a call to the Negro people for such as march.

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If we are able to mobilize Negroes on such a program it is certain to have a favorable effect upon your splendid plan to get the whole question of national defense and the Negro probed by the Senate.

It is my hope that we may be able to plan the march to take place either before or directly after the conference of the NAACP in Houston.

Cordially yours,

A. Philip Randolph

Executive Order 8802 (June 25, 1941)

Whereas it is the policy of the United States to encourage full participation in the national defense program by all citizens of the United States, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, in the firm belief that the democratic way of life within the Nation can be defended successfully only with the help and support of all groups within its borders; and

Whereas there is evidence that available and needed workers have been barred from employment in industries engaged in defense production solely because of considerations of race, creed, color, or national origin, to the detriment of workers' morale and of national unity:

Now, Therefore, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and the statutes, and as a prerequisite to the successful conduct of our national defense production effort, I do hereby reaffirm the policy of the United States that there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin, and I do hereby declare that it is the duty of employers and of labor organizations, in furtherance of said policy and of this order, to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries, without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin.

Source: A. Philip Randolph to Walter White, March 18, 1941. NAACP Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Available online via the Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/naacp/world-war-ii-and-the-post-war-years.html#obj1>); Source: Executive Order 8802 dated June 25, 1941, General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives. Available online via the National Archives (<https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/?dod-date=625>).

