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# CHARLES HOUSTON AND BLACK LEADERSHIP OF THE 1930'S AND 1940'S

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The African-Americans who led the movement to eradicate legal segregation, discrimination, and bigotry belonged to the Black Professional Managerial Class (hereinafter "BPMC"). This group, which is more specified than E. Franklin Frazier's Black bourgeoisie or middleclass, developed a network that promoted theory, galvanized political support and created organizations that eventually picked away at segregation. Members of the BPMC were fused by political ideology, economic status, education, associational affiliation, kinship networks, work habits, beliefs, and skin color.<sup>1</sup> These elements promoted the existence of a small but powerful group who dictated the objectives of the Black community throughout the 1930-1954 civil rights era.

In a general outline, it would appear that the BPMC fits the mold of Franklin's Black middleclass. However, under close scrutiny, the BPMC takes on a greater role of emulating the power elite. The BPMC is socially designed and politically supported by powerful economic and political interests to regulate the aspirations of the underclass. Thus, while the lower classes may aspire to a complete restructuring of society, the BPMC may persuade them to accept moderate concessions. In a seemingly contradictory twist, however, the moderate goals that the BPMC pushed as a total Black agenda served as a wedge to crack the legal barriers of segregation, and was seen by the power elite as a radical and revolutionary move.

The civil rights litigation movement that sought to end school segregation has traditionally been considered to be a mass movement for the Black underclass. The activities of advocates such as Thurgood Marshall and Charles Houston have been viewed as efforts to raise the living standards of poor African-Americans in the South to levels equivalent to those of Caucasians below the Mason-Dixon Line. Unfortunately, the litigation offerings of the NAACP's legal committee and the LDEF were for a particular class of people: the Black elite or the BPMC.

This group used its talents, influence, and political power to impress upon white liberals and, most importantly, the African-American underclass that the fight for integration was actually a struggle for the oppressed African-Americans in the South. Although the African-American lower class eventually benefited from the activities of the African-American vanguard, the litigation struggle was specifically designed for the African-American elite segment.

The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed the development of a new type of African-American—one who refused to suffer from the same kinds of oppression that whites had inflicted upon African-Americans during

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1. BETWEEN LABOR AND CAPITAL: THE PROFESSIONAL-MANAGERIAL CLASS 9 (Walker ed. 1979).

an earlier period. These African-Americans held a militant desire to utilize every field of labor to gain self-determination, equality, and freedom. During the early twentieth century, individuals such as A. Langston Taylor, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Walter White, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., and A. Philip Randolph utilized their talents to forge a consciousness of liberation throughout Black America. However, since the song of freedom came basically from the voices of the growing Black elite, the song of freedom took on the tone of liberation for the aristocratic African-American.

In the late 1920's, signs of classism became apparent in the life styles of African-Americans. Many members of the Black intelligentsia had begun to label themselves, as Du Bois had done in 1905, as the "Talented Tenth" or the "Black Vanguard." They saw themselves as the class that would liberate the masses from the clutches of white America. Yet they argued subtly that the freedom of the underclass must come after they, as a separate interest group, received equality with white Americans. Individuals in the upper segment of the Black community viewed themselves as a group with special credentials, unlike the poor Blacks, and consequently believed that they should be treated as white persons were treated in places of public accommodations. They believed that their education, wealth, mannerism and, to a lesser degree, their light skin color provided them with all the tools needed to enter the white man's world. By the end of the 1920's, the Black professional managerial class had formed in the major cities of the United States.

Members of the BPMC utilized a host of symbols and associations such as family names, residential neighborhoods, occupations, education and organizational affiliations to forge a network. Particularly important in forging the network was exclusive training at the secondary and university levels. A number of the educated elite were trained at excellent secondary schools in the upper south and the northeast. Similar to the white elite who sent their children to exclusive academies throughout the northeast, the Black aristocracy developed certain schools for the specific purpose of molding leaders for the Black community. The institutions that were created opened their doors to only the best of the Black community, i.e., the students who came from a wealthy background. Elite secondary schools for the "talented tenth" were established in a number of Black communities during the 1920's and the 1930's. Perhaps the most famous of these institutions was the exclusive "M" Street High School of the District of Columbia.

In many respects, the District of Columbia was the mecca of the Black intelligentsia of the 1920's and 1930's. A city that hosted one of the best African-American universities in the nation, Howard University, along with being the nation's capital, attracted a number of scholars and professionals to the area. With an abundance of educated people in the District, one could always find a lecture, meeting or tavern that housed individuals who debated the state of the Black community.<sup>2</sup> Such surroundings added to the cultural and intellectual advancement of youngsters of the elite class. The atmosphere gave the BPMC a sense that they had a purpose to lead and educate the unfortunate black underclass. Thus, when they entered M Street High School, it was already decided what type of training they would receive.

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2. McNEIL, *GROUNDWORK: CHARLES HAMILTON HOUSTON AND THE STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS* 29 (1983).

Opened in 1892 as an exclusively Black institution, M Street High School was developed with the dual intentions of keeping segregation in education a permanent fixture in the nation's capital and preparing students for study at Howard University. However, with the enrollment of children of the BPMC and the hiring of teachers with masters and doctoral degrees, the institution took on the role of an elite secondary educational facility. The parents, as well as the students, knew the objective of the academy and its importance to the Black community. The role of the school was to prepare Black students for America's best colleges and universities. As an educational institute, M Street vigorously resisted attempts by many Blacks in the District of Columbia to transform the curriculum from one with a college preparatory focus to one that would center on vocational training.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the majority of African-American schools in the nation which trained students to be artisans, M Street educated students to be members of the intelligentsia. The courses that were offered included "English, Latin, French, Spanish, Greek, German, History, Mathematics, the sciences, the arts, music, and physical education."<sup>4</sup> The curriculum was geared toward the entrance examination for colleges and universities in the United States. The Black elite in Washington strongly pressured the administration of M Street to continue its services as a preparatory institute for their children. This explains why the academy had instructors who were more qualified to teach at the college or university level than at the secondary level.

Due to a system of segregation in the United States, Black individuals who held advanced academic degrees were, more often than not, forced to teach in secondary schools rather than in the colleges and universities for which they had been trained. M Street benefited from the exclusion of Blacks from university faculties. Unlike the majority of Black high schools, M Street was able to attract qualified instructors who were denied employment in the white educational system. Because M Street was an academically elite academy, it offered salaries that were somewhat higher than the "ordinary" African-American high schools of the period.

Although M Street advertised itself as an institution that centered its activities around "all" its students, no matter what economic background, the majority of its students came from the BPMC.<sup>5</sup> The occupations of the parents of the children ranged from skilled federal government employees to physicians, professors and lawyers. One of the school's most famous alumni was Charles H. Houston, Jr., whose father was a well-respected attorney and law professor in the District's Black community.

Similar to other bourgeois Blacks, the Houstons had molded Charles Jr. to be an academically superior student. Thus, when he enrolled at M Street, they knew that the excellent instruction he would receive would guarantee him entrance into the premier colleges and universities of the nation. The administration of M Street made special efforts to maintain ties with most exclusive colleges and universities. Amherst, Bates, Brown, Dartmouth, Oberlin, William and Mary, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Pittsburgh made scholarships available to M Street graduates. Although

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3. *Id.*

4. *See id.*

5. *Id.*

these schools were white, they tolerated exceptionally bright African-Americans.<sup>6</sup>

Charles was the recipient of one such scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh, but his parents discouraged their son from accepting. They maintained that although the University of Pittsburgh was a fine institution, it was not good enough for a student the caliber of their son. Thus, Charles rejected Pittsburgh to enroll at Amherst College. Although Amherst did not offer Houston a scholarship, his parents felt that it was better to pay the tuition at a prestigious school than to receive free boarding at a lesser-ranked institution. Not only did the Houstons pay the tuition, but they rented two dormitory rooms for their son, one for sleeping and the other for studying.<sup>7</sup>

The Houstons represented the type of elitism that surfaced in the Black community in the 1930's and 1940's. Although Charles was a good student at M Street, Amherst College and later at Harvard University Law School, he distanced himself from the underclass African-American community. The commitment to liberation for Houston was individual and not communal. Unfortunately, the atmosphere at Amherst was less than conducive for a Black who thought of himself as an equal to aristocratic whites. White students at the college treated African-Americans as inferior individuals who did not belong in the student body. The blatant racism against the Black collegians stuck out like a sore thumb.

Another Washingtonian who attended M Street High School and then went on to Amherst was William Hastie. Hastie, who became the first Black territorial governor of the United States' Virgin Islands, remembered the racism that Blacks faced at Amherst as tremendously brutal. As a student there in the late 1920's, he witnessed the president of the college inviting all the white seniors to his residence for the annual graduate social but snubbing the graduating Black seniors.<sup>8</sup> The president, Alexander Meiklejohn, was a devout racist, recalled Hastie. Not only did he have the arrogance to bar African-American seniors from university socials, but also threatened to exclude them from extracurricular functions. The Amherst president openly proclaimed that Black students' participation on sporting teams and scholastic clubs degraded the school in the eyes of its financial supporters and community backers. Therefore, African-American students were not allowed to function in activities that would expose them to the public. President Meiklejohn's policy caused Hastie to forfeit his right to join the college's choir.<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes the racism that the Blacks experienced at Amherst was so forceful that they retreated into a submissive state. While many Blacks voiced their hatred toward racism and discrimination in colleges and universities, many more accepted the existence of segregation in elite white academic institutions. For example, when white fraternities held social functions and excluded Black students, seldom did they students express their disapproval. As Hastie stated, it was taken for granted that African-Americans and whites did not mix on a social basis.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, some members of the Black elite

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6. *See id* at 30.

7. *See id* at 31.

8. G. WARE, WILLIAM HASTIE: GRACE UNDER PRESSURE 12 (1984).

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.*

found it necessary to pass themselves off as Caucasians to escape the blatant discrimination to which they were subjected. Former Harlem Congressman, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., pretended to be a white student during his days at Colgate University in upstate New York. It was not until his senior year that his peers found out that Powell was "Negro." During a visit to the school the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. introduced himself to his son's friends and instructors as his Black father to the embarrassment of the younger Powell.<sup>11</sup>

Benjamin Davis, Jr., the Black Harlem attorney and communist leader, argued that his years as a classmate of Mercer Cook, W. Montague Cobb and William Hastie at Amherst were terrible times for race relationships. Davis, the son of a prominent Republican leader in Atlanta, was shielded from the cruelties of racism and bigotry as a lad. Born to a political and fraternal potentate, he encountered his first real taste of prejudice at Amherst College as a football player. He found that his teammates and players of opposing squads would deliberately try to injure him during intra-squad and intra-conference games.<sup>12</sup>

The abuse was overwhelming at times, but the fortitude of the African-American elite showed that they were willing to suffer the agony of oppression inside the white colleges and universities in order to advance themselves socially and economically. The questions that must be asked in light of such harsh treatment are: Why was the elite so willing to suffer oppression at the hands of white people? What were the objectives of the elite in allowing themselves to put up with such bigotry? And lastly, did their move to enter white colleges and universities constitute an attack on the status quo of northern segregation?

A key to answering these questions can be found through examining the Black elite residential areas. Although a number of upper-class resided in rural and urban centers in the south, the Black elite districts in the north best illustrated the thinking and social/political destiny of this class. The Black elite districts above the Mason-Dixon line explicitly showed the network that this class forged.

Similar to white corporate leaders of the Gilded Age who believed that they were destined by God to be the saviors of the United States economy and the depressed underclass, the BPMC argued that it too was directed by the supreme force of the universe to lead the lower class to equality. Although they held divine orders, the members of the BPMC had cardinal minds. Really having a dislike for the underclass, they tried to restrict poor Blacks from entrance into their society and especially into their families. Similar to the white racist view that Blacks and Eastern Europeans had inferior blood to that of American Anglos, the Black elite thought of the underclass as being intellectually and socially inferior to the BPMC. Unfortunately, many in the elite community blamed the poor or southern Black masses for segregation policies in the United States. The vulgarities and crudeness of the masses embarrassed the Black aristocracy; this explains their efforts to develop associations in their community to separate themselves from the Black masses.<sup>13</sup>

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11. R. BARDOLPH, *THE NEGRO VANGUARD* 259 (1959).

12. *Id.* at 274-75.

13. *Id.* at 212.

The Black aristocracy diligently struggled to show the white community that they were very similar; this is why the African-American masses were excluded from the activities of the BPMC group. Unfortunately, this group was also very skin conscious. The majority of the students who attended the classical schools in Black America were of light complexion. The leaders of social and political organizations were also frequently mulattos, and those who occupied the residential elite districts were yellow in skin color. The Black aristocracy was deeply concerned about preserving the light skin tones that God had blessed them with. Thus, the network, family ties and social connections solidified the elite African-American community.<sup>14</sup>

The rise of the BPMC can be seen in the economic rise and social and political leadership of certain families throughout the United States. For example, the Bonds of Tennessee, the Herberts and Nabrits of Georgia, the Turners of Pennsylvania, the Clements, Delaneys and Joneses of North Carolina and, lastly, the Churches of Memphis were in class, culture and influence within the Black community the equivalent of the DuPonts, Carnegies, and Tafts for white America.<sup>15</sup> The Black elite's social and economic position influenced them to develop an illusionary political view of themselves. The old Black elite gradually formed political organizations that discriminated against dark-skinned and poor Blacks. It was done in the belief that underclass Blacks were not intelligent and sophisticated enough to accept full citizenship in the American mainstream. The Nabrits and others were members of the first Black aristocracy that emerged during the Reconstruction period; but, like the later elite group, they protected family ties and their light pigmentation from the less fortunate Blacks.<sup>16</sup>

The Black upper class of the 1930's was somewhat different from the elite of the nineteenth century. Instead of using politics or the favors of benign whites who made them elitist through gifts of money and property, the twentieth century group came from a variety of backgrounds. Not only did they represent the academic and political arena, but also areas of entertainment, sports and business. Outstanding personalities such as Lena Horne, Cab Calloway, Angelina Grimke, Roscoe Bruche and Mary M. Bethune were involved in promoting the concept that their class was the vanguard of the Black race. These elite activists developed an organized network that was highly conscious of the influence, occupation and network of every significant Black aristocrat in the United States. For example, they knew of the extended family relationships and locations of Black aristocrats across the country.

Family relationship also had a far-reaching influence on the development of network ties. A listing of the prominent family names of the period showed that the BPMC was dominated by males; for example, R.R. Wright, Sr. and Jr., James M. and William Monroe Trotter, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. and Jr., B. O. Davis, Sr. and Jr., Benjamin J. Davis, Sr. and Jr. and Henry B. and Hubert Delany.<sup>17</sup> Although father/son teams were significant in the network, other blood ties were equally important. For example, the activities of male siblings such as James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, Archibald

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14. *Id.* at 217.

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.* at 216-217.

and Francis J. Grimké, James M. and Samuel M. Nabrit, Archibald and Willard Motley and Paul and Benjamin C. Robeson were quite important to the struggle for full citizenship in the United States.<sup>18</sup>

The families of the BPMC were household names throughout the Black communities of the United States. Just as Black knew Cab Calloway, Walter White and William Du Bois, they equally knew of the Robesons, Nabrits and Motleys. Due to their popularity and their significance in the caste community, the Black aristocracy had a nonverbal accord to marry within their class. As upperclass white families such as the Kennedys, Rockefellers and Roosevelts kept their blood "pure" from the lower class, the Black elite did the same. The focus of the Black elite was purification and an acknowledgment from whites that the Black elite was superior to the Black underclass and close—if not equal to—the White community. The Black aristocracy not only segregated their biological relations from the Black underclass, but also created a cultural and community gap.

Every major city and town in the United States had an influential African-American upper-middle class community. The neighborhoods in which they lived represented the mentality and psyche of the new Black elite in America. These neighborhoods were a small sector of the whole Black community, but they contained the "jewels" of the Black city. In these enclaves one found the status homes and churches, the beautiful parks, the exclusive Negro businesses and the exclusive social organizations. The elite Black neighborhoods were usually located on the border between the Negro ghetto and the white community. Due to the high price and shortage of housing, Black "elite-villes" such as Silk Row, Kansas City kept the underclass from infecting their abodes.<sup>19</sup>

The residents of the elite neighborhoods went to great pains to perpetuate their network. The unwritten law was that, in order to be an elite resident, one had to belong to a certain religious denomination (usually the African Methodist Episcopal Church), certain society organizations (usually the Links and the Elks) and be from an aristocratic Black family. Although the Black upper class traditionally had greater wealth than the underclass, their life style dictated that they spend enormous amounts of money, sometimes far beyond their means. A significant proportion of this group struggled from week to week to meet their obligations and developed strategies to keep up appearances. The Black elite in New York City, for instance, did not invite underclass individuals to dinner. If by chance a visitor dropped in unexpectedly around dinner time, the elite individuals might put the dinner away until the underclass guest had left. The point is that members of the BPMC would do everything in their power to preserve the idea that they were different from the Black masses, even if it meant tightening the belt unnecessarily.<sup>20</sup>

The upper class had to preserve and promulgate the idea of race leaders. The way to keep that image in the eyes of White philanthropists and the Black underclass was to match their living standards with those of the established White community, and to show an above-average degree of ethics. Unfortu-

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18. *Id.* at 217.

19. *See id.*

20. Interview with Helen Edmonds, Visiting Professor of History at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio (July 2, 1985).



nately, the fine homes that they lived in and the beautiful artifacts that surrounded their abodes did not allow them to enter into the White world.<sup>21</sup> The cruel fact of the matter was they were not White, they could not gain membership to elite White golf clubs, they were not allowed to eat in the most prestigious restaurants, and white churches barred them from membership. The major issue for the Black upper class was that segregation made them prisoners in a society that stressed thriftiness and piety. Perhaps believing that Booker T. Washington was right when he argued in 1895 at the Atlanta Exposition that economics would eliminate segregation, the Black elite were bewildered by the exclusion of their class from the fruits of American society. Nonetheless, the elite group continued to strive for integration while, paradoxically, segregating themselves from the Black masses.

The Black elite developed organizations and ideologies to sustain itself. Tom Shelby, a Black graduate of the Ohio State University in 1931, a former president of Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity in Ohio, and currently a barber in Columbus, Ohio (an occupation of some influence within the Black community) argued that the "[B]lack elite was compelled to separate from the riffraff Negro" who "gave respectable colored folk a bad name."<sup>22</sup> The African-Americans who already separated themselves by neighborhood and education further utilized the White European culture to maintain a gap between themselves and the less fortunate group. Social functions that resembled the balls of European royalty were held during holidays such as Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, the Fourth of July, the discovery of America and Lincoln's birthday. These activities were meant to solidify the base of the elite. Shelby reflected on the scene, "We sold tickets to all the colored people, but only [the] educated and well-off could purchase them." In addition, "The affairs that we held required the attire to be ballroom tailored; most of the colored could not afford formal tuxes and gowns."<sup>23</sup> The social activities of the Black elite in Columbus, however, were less extravagant than the events sponsored by their brethren in cities such as Kansas City, Cleveland, and New York.

When the elite in Kansas City realized that they were going to be excluded from white activities, they went all out to show that they could outdo whites at their own game. Society Row, a Black social organization in Kansas City, organized ballroom events that were fit for world statesmen. They planned their events months in advance and invited only the BPMC. If one was not a lawyer, physician, politician, professor or highly successful entrepreneur, one could not expect to receive an invitation from the elite Ivanhoe Club.<sup>24</sup> The pastime of many members of the Black aristocracy in Chicago was organizing and attending elaborate dinner parties. Individuals such as Claude Barnett of the National Negro Press held affairs that attracted Earl B. Dickerson, President of Chicago National Urban League, John Hope Franklin of Howard University and a host of Black politicians in the Chicago area. These affairs often started at 6:00 in the evening and continued well into the early morning. The importance of such social gatherings was that they aided in forging a solidarity on the political and social issue that affected the group.

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21. R. WILKINS, *STANDING FAST: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ROY WILKINS* 77 (1982).

22. Interview with Thomas Shelby, Columbus, Ohio (Feb. 5, 1987).

23. *Id.*

24. WILKINS, *supra* note 21, at 76.

The meticulous and gallant way the African-American elite formed a viable network was honorable, heroic, yet sad. They were so forceful in their quest to enter the white world that they alienated themselves from the greater masses of the African-American community.

The 1930's also witnessed the activities of the BPMC in the federal government. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the New Deal saviour of the United States, attracted a number of African-Americans to his administration. Disenchanted and rejected by past presidents (such as Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Herbert Hoover), African-Americans, especially the "high-class Blacks", rejoiced when the country elected the liberal Democrat, Franklin Delanor Roosevelt.

Eleanor Roosevelt, the president's wife, firmly supported African-American rights. As a progressive, she influenced the President to hire Blacks to serve in key positions in his administration. Eleanor Roosevelt would remind the President that African-Americans had become an important part of the electorate; thus, it would be advantageous for the Democratic Party and his administration to place certain African-Americans in federal jobs. Not only would their appointment African-Americans gain approval from the fifteen million African-American people, but it would also allow the administration to regulate African-American leadership and the organizations they represented.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, however, the move to put "[B]lack faces in high places" came slower than one would expect. Roosevelt's conservatism and paternalism showed when he appointed white Harold Ickes, who was white, as the head of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation.<sup>26</sup> Due to the fact that Ickes had been the President of the Chicago branch of the Urban League (which was really a paper organization during his tenure), Roosevelt did not understand why the Black elite criticized the nomination of Ickes. Unfortunately, however, the Black elite failed to critique Ickes on his credentials. They only viewed him from a color perspective. It appeared that the Black intelligentsia only wanted a Black face in a major cabinet position. Roy Wilkins, the president of the NAACP, warned Roosevelt that the Black masses would find that Ickes' appointment as a "Negro spokesman as being unacceptable."<sup>27</sup>

Roosevelt did not allow Wilkins' sentiments to defeat the appointment of Ickes. After Wilkins and other Black leaders realized that the President was firm on Ickes, his appointment was accepted without incident. Ickes, interestingly, was a blessing to the Black elite. He was a stern believer in racial equality and justice. Thus, as the head of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC), he appointed a number of Black intellectuals to his agency. Ickes, called the "informal secretary of Negro relations," recruited a host of prominent African-Americans to the Roosevelt administration.<sup>28</sup> For example, Will Alexander became the assistant to Ickes; Aubrey Williams was

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25. R. Wolters, *The New Deal and the Negro*, in *THE NEW DEAL: THE NATIONAL LEVEL*, (Braeman, Bremner and Brody ed. 1975).

26. Roy Wilkins telegram to Harold Ickes, reprinted in *The Pittsburgh Courier* (Sept. 2, 1933); Walter White telegram to Rosenwald (Sept. 6, 1933).

27. *Id.*

28. R. Wolters, *supra* note 24, at 192.

appointed executive director of the National Youth Administration; Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University, was named a member of the advisory committee for the National Youth Association (NYA); and Mary Bethune, president of Bethune-Cookman College and of the National Council of Negro Women, became head of the Division of Negro Affairs or, as stated colloquially, the "Black cabinet." These individuals were the leaders Roosevelt thought of as Black America, and they, too, advised him of the problems that the administration had in relationship to the African-American.<sup>29</sup>

As Howard Zinn has noted, the New Deal benefited middle and upper-class America far more than the under-class. As Zinn states:

[W]hat the New Deal did was to refurbish middle-class America, which had taken a dizzying fall in the depression. . . and to give just enough to the lowest classes. . . to create an aura of good will. . . . [T]he New Dealers moved in an atmosphere thick with suggestions, but they accepted only enough of these to get the traditional social mechanism moving again, plus just enough more to give a taste of what a truly far-reaching reconstruction might be.<sup>30</sup>

In the less academic words of Charles H. Houston, who was also a member of the radical National Lawyers Guild, the New Deal policies had "big enough holes for the majority of Negroes to fall in it."<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, Black leaders and the BPMC labored diligently to see representatives of their class in the Roosevelt Administration.

The Blacks in the high-level jobs became "safe leaders".<sup>32</sup> The safe leaders wanted to reform in reference to the class of which they were members. The individuals argued for a place in America that would align them with White culture, education and economic status. The Black elite stood, not as grass-roots leaders, whom they painted as charlatans, uneducated, with a penchant for radical and violent changed, but offered themselves as an alternative to individuals such as Marcus Garvey of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, Noble Drew Ali of the Moorish Scientist Movement, Father Divine of the Peace Mission, Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad of the Nation of Islam. The choice facing White leaders was to contend with the "extremists" or the logical and educated Black elite.

The United States was in a horrible condition in the 1930's. The Great Depression had transformed an apparently stable and lively economy into a morbid and decaying system. The center of the western economy, Wall Street, wavered as the aging and merchant towns of Italy did under the Spanish and English onslaught. The underclass, both white and Black, had fallen into precarious existences. Poverty, starvation, massive unemployment and despicable housing were the order of the day. Roosevelt was faced with a nation that was on the verge of total collapse. The population was infested with individuals who preached communism, revolution, Black radical nationalism and anarchism. The President was forced to place individuals whom he thought would

29. NEW DEAL THOUGHT xvi-ii (H. Zinn ed., 1966).

30. Editorial, *Norfolk Journal & Guild*, Feb. 9, 1935.

31. 1-2 DRAKE & H. CLAYTON, *BLACK METROPOLIS: A STUDY OF NEGRO LIFE IN A NORTHERN CITY* (rev. ed. 1962).

32. G. MYRDAL, *AN AMERICAN DILEMMA: THE NEGRO PROBLEM AND MODERN DEMOCRACY* (1962).

keep him abreast on issues of race and politics in key positions. Therefore, as the Black elite pushed for “[B]lack faces in high places”, Roosevelt used their zeal for racial reform and class acceptance to keep the masses, as well as the elite, appeased.

The position of African-Americans in the administration and in the lime-light of the African-American struggle encouraged philanthropists to assist various Black organizations. The National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) received an enormous amount of financial assistance from white foundations. White liberals found that they could support individuals who belonged to organizations such as the NAACP; they were not trying to overthrow the system. Due to the NAACP’s legal activism, it gave the impression that it was patient and conservative in its approach to mass integration, but radical and critical on issues that reflected the needs of the Black upperclass community.<sup>33</sup> While social and legal organizations such as the Jewish Legal Committee, National Lawyers Guild, and various religious and civic agencies gave thousands of dollars to the NAACP, and especially to its Legal Defense and Educational Fund, financial support also came from other sources. For additional funds, the NAACP relied upon the benevolence of upper-class elite African-American clubs and the labor of the African-American underclass, especially in the South.

Although the Depression battered whites as well as Blacks, and the wealthy as well as the poor, it was the proletarian African-Americans who suffered most. While the Wall Street crash forced most Americans to take an economic dive, nonetheless the upper class remained culturally, socially, and economically stable. As the white elite remained solid, so did the Black bourgeoisie. Unfortunately, the Black upper class only related to the underclass by the color of their skin and the overall effects of the Depression. The upper class failed to support organizations of the oppressed that urged communist theories, radical nationalist concepts, and capitalist cooperative ideas. A close examination of organizations such as the March on Washington Movement, the Peace Movement, and the Nation of Islam reveal that the leadership and the majority of their members were of a low economic status. In fact, the majority of African-Americans argued that these groups represented the worst of the race and that they needed to be destroyed or controlled so that Whites would not gain the wrong impression of the African-American community.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the African-American intelligentsia argued that the most efficient way to keep under-class organizations from getting too strong was for the Roosevelt Administration to accept the leaders and organizations that represented the upper-class African-Americans.

The leaders of the mainstream African-American organizations like the National Urban League and the NAACP played a major role in Roosevelt’s New Deal. When Roy Wilkins of the NAACP claimed the F.D.R. was a “friend” of the African-American, he really meant that he was a friend of the African-American intelligentsia and the upper-class African-American. Not only did the upperclass push for federal appointments, but they also stressed

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33. Interview with Barbee Durham, Vanguard League member, in Columbus, Ohio (Feb. 17, 1987).

34. Interview with Roy Wilkins, the Columbia University Oral History Project, pp. 51-52.

the importance of integration in the American community. Roosevelt, however, refused to move toward a positive position on integrating the nation.

The Black elite was shaken by the fact that "Mr. Roosevelt" refused to integrate "them" into the mainstream of American life.<sup>35</sup> The realization by the BPMC that Roosevelt was merely another politician who would use anything and anyone for a political advantage came slowly. Even after learning that F.D.R. was merely a paternalistic racist, a number of Blacks and organizations gave their support to the president and Democratic Party. When Roosevelt's campaign manager organized a "colored" Democratic Division at the President's request in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and Illinois, many of the Black elite overlooked Roosevelt's attitude toward the Black community. Black attorneys such as Julian Rainey of New York City and Arthur Mitchell of Chicago rushed to fill vacant slots for Black leaders in the "new" New Deal Agency.<sup>36</sup> The political, social, and economic "talented tenth" promulgated the "goodness" of Roosevelt quite well. For example, the Bishop's Council of the AME Church were among many Black elite groups who influenced the underclass to support the mythical, egalitarian, F. Delanor Roosevelt.<sup>37</sup> However, a number of Black professionals realized that the Roosevelt revolution was not designed to integrate the United States. They therefore devised another plan that would propel them into the social fabric of American life.

Although the Black upper class wished that Roosevelt devoted more time and energy to ending segregation, they overwhelmingly thought of his administration as being a good one. Nonetheless, the Black elite felt the need to direct much of its energies into the NAACP and LDEF. The development of *Donald Murry v. Maryland* in 1932 and the creation of the legal arms of the NAACP, the Inc. Fund, represented the seriousness of the elite community's desire to merge into mainstream America. Murray, an outstanding high school and undergraduate student, represented the concerns of the BPMC. As an element of the BPMC, he went out to test the laws of segregation, while also galvanizing financial and legal support from the elite group to support his activities. The small Black bourgeois community raised thousands of dollars to support the efforts of two organizations that represented their interests.

Typically, when the 1930's are discussed and African-Americans are the central issue, it is assumed that all African-Americans waded in poverty and degradation. However, the Black elite prospered throughout the 1920's, 1930's, and 1940's. The Black middle class controlled and owned millions of dollars worth of businesses such as grocery stores, tax companies, service stations, theaters, ballrooms, hotels, and banks. According to Glover Woodson, an economist in the city of Washington, by the end of World War I the Black community had over twenty-five millionaires.<sup>38</sup> An irony rests in that the elites that benefited from the separate economy of the Black community were the ones who sought to integrate into white America. The Black upper class raised money for the cause of class integration through the private clubs, orga-

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35. Morsell, *The Political Behavior of Negroes in New York City*, ANNALS OF THE AM. ACAD. OF POL. SCI. AND SOC. SCIENTISTS 53-61 (1965).

36. New York Times, Aug. 1, 1936, at 4, col. 5, *Campaigning for the Negro Vote*, NEWSWEEK, Sept. 12, 1936, at 18, 19;

37. NEW YORK TIMES, June 22, 1936, at 3, col. 2.

38. WOSU, *Blacks and the Constitution*, 18 February 1987.

nizations, and churches they operated. Evidence showed that the institutions that catered to the elite were housed primarily in the upper south, the midwest, and the northeast.<sup>39</sup>

The BPMC network allowed the elite to support and encourage each other in the basic principles of class awareness and race consciousness. Their class awareness dictated their objectives in the eradication of segregation. The BPMC realized that if discrimination continued to flourish, they would never advance in the American political, social, and economic systems. Thus, on the one hand, they instituted plans whereby the general African-American community could solidify its forces against segregation. On the other hand, they subconsciously convinced themselves that the eradication of segregation would overwhelmingly serve their interests. With this in mind, they persuaded the African-American masses as well as certain white liberal politicians that the quick elimination of segregation would benefit all African-Americans. However, they understood that the immediate elimination would benefit the BPMC much sooner than any other African-American group. In addition, it was crucial that the African-American masses be made to believe that they always wanted to be included in mainstream America. Thus, separatist movements such as Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, the Nation of Islam, and other Black nationalist organizations had to be linked with white fascist and segregatory organizations such as the infamous Ku Klux Klan. To persuade the lower class of the goodness of education, the Black press was utilized to broadcast the word about what upper-class groups were doing to destroy "old man Jim Crow" in America.

The Black press played a major role in the legal movement to integrate America. Almost every major African-American community in the United States had a weekly newspaper that told of the state of "Black" America. Topics such as entertainment, sports, local news, national news, social affairs and, most importantly, the work of African-American leaders in their quest to desegregate America were reported. Although there were a host of Black newspapers throughout the United States, *The Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Chicago Defender* were the papers that the majority of the African-American community relied upon. The labor of Claude Barnett's Associated Negro Press lay behind the strength of these two papers.

Claude Barnett, the founder of the Associated Negro Press in 1917 in Chicago, utilized the media as a sounding board for organizations such as the NAACP and NUL. The Black media, as he saw it, served as the voice for Black spokespersons who strove to lead the Black community to total acceptance in America. As Barnett explained, the Black press was "formed for the purpose of serving, publicizing, speaking and fighting for the colored minority."<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, the press represented the elite in the Black caste structure. They were the ones who controlled and highlighted its front pages. The Black press was the major vehicle of the Black elite to spread its views to the lower classes.<sup>41</sup> Thus, power brokers such as Barnett became very important to the whole movement toward integration.

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39. *Id.*

40. Gorham, *The Negro Press, Past, Present and Future*, DIRECTORY OF U.S. NEGRO NEWSPAPERS, MAGAZINES AND PERIODICALS (1966).

41. MYRDAL, *supra* note 33, at 920, 21.

Barnett, a militant yet influential member of Chicago's African-American high society, worked to win the friendship of the owners of the major newspapers in the country and the executive leaders of the civil rights organizations during the 1930's and 1940's. Many of the polemicists and officers of the organizations held part-time employment with the Associated Negro Press (ANP) as contributing journalists and editors. For example, NAACP officers Walter White, Roy Wilkins, and William Pickens worked in both associations for a number of years.<sup>42</sup> Walter White, who became an assistant to Barnett and contributed articles, became a major force in directing the opinions of editorials in the Black press throughout the nation. White and others realized that if they could shape the opinions of Black papers across the nation, they would be able to direct the political ideas of the masses. This is why the papers highlighted the work of such groups as the NAACP and the local efforts of elite group members. Unfortunately, the BPMC ignored the plight of the underclass.

The paradox of the Black press is that it despised the so-called ignorant, poor Blacks, while voicing a deep seated hatred against the policies of racism and discrimination. The elite presented itself quite clearly in the newspapers as wanting integration, while wishing to culturally, politically, and socially separate from the Black underclass. In *An American Dilemma*, Gunnar Myrdal explained:<sup>43</sup>

They [the black elite] react with even more resentment than lower class Negroes against the humiliation of Jim Crow segregation. However, the caste barriers serve partly as a protection to give them special opportunities and status. They need to appeal to racial solidarity to avert lower class hostility against themselves and to perfect their economic and social monopolies.<sup>44</sup>

In the 1930's and 1940's, a number of individuals spoke on the Black elite's exploitation of the underclass. Communist and Socialist leaders such as Conrad Lynn and A. Philip Randolph, along with the Communist International Labor Defense League (ILD), attempted to educate the under-class. For example, the ILDL elaborated on the conservative nature of the NAACP in its refusal to handle the 1932 *Scottsboro* case and asked why the Black press did not force the NAACP to whole-heartedly support the ILDL defense efforts. The ILDL maintained that NAACP executive secretary Walter White's sentiment that the NAACP would not protect "scabs," as he called the *Scottsboro* boys, explicitly revealed the class division of the African-American community.<sup>45</sup>

Throughout the pre-*Brown* era, the Black press nonetheless gave the impression that they were radical fighters for the liberation of the Black community. Between the advertisements that featured items such as skin bleaching cream and hair straightener, *The Chicago Defender* and *The Pittsburgh Courier* told of the efforts of African nations to achieve liberation from imperialist powers and of the activities of the American Black elite in civil rights activities. Associating the nations in Africa with the activities of the Black elite

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42. L. HOGAN, A BLACK NATIONAL NEWS SERVICE: THE ASSOCIATED NEGRO PRESS AND CLAUDE BARNETT, 1919-1945, at 102 (1984).

43. MYRDAL, *supra* note 33, at 921.

44. *Id.* at 921.

45. *See, e.g.*, CONRAD LYNN, THERE IS A FOUNTAIN 39 (1979).

produced a Pan-Africanist perspective that encouraged the masses to revere the upper-class community. This admiration for the upper class caused the lower class to ignore the manipulation that the BPMC perpetrated toward them. One reason may have been that the lower class held a middle-class perspective of the mobility of their class: that is, that by hard work, thrift, and piety they could gain upper-class status; or perhaps under-class admiration rested on acknowledgment of the BPMC accomplishments in the areas of education, economics and European culture; or that they enjoyed reading about the movement of the elite because of racial pride.

The under-class African-American community is much like the white poverty class. In issues that center on race the African-American lower class is radical and militant, but on economic issues, it is conservative. This group aspires to be more affluent and hopes, prays, and works for capital growth and economic stability. Encouraged to accept the white Protestant work ethic, the African-American lower class maintained a high degree of reliance on the American capitalist system. Thus, when they read in the Black press of the "good" things that the upper class had done, they became impressed and inspired.

To further boost the image of the upper class, the Associated Negro Press devoted an enormous amount of space to the social life of the elite. In the majority of the cities served by a Black newspaper, every elite family, at one time or another, had a space in the local Black paper. These families were observed at teas, church socials, political activities, and school functions. Focusing on Black families such as the Motens or the Powells gave the caste a sense of institutional security in a segregated society. Since the "talented tenth" did not make the society page of *The Chicago Tribune* or *The New York Daily News*, it provided a feeling of belonging in the American society by the caste group. As Myrdal stated in 1944, the Black press "defin[ed] the Negro community as institutionalized society to the individual Negro, who is excluded so much from white society, and it gives him a feeling of security and belongingness."<sup>46</sup>

The Associated Negro Press presented sensational stories of the race, not only for the African-Americans but also for sympathetic white individuals. Whites in the north as well as the south enjoyed reading about the progress of the BPMC and the problems that concerned them. The astounding accomplishments of African-Americans such as Etta Moten Barnett and Earl B. Dickerson somehow proved, according to the Black press, that Blacks were ready to enter the world of the whites. The African-Americans whom the press focused on achieved great advancement in a segregated society. As Claude Barnett so eloquently stated:

. . . the missionary zeal and our enthusiasm was unbridled . . . We [class leaders and editors] were determined that the years ahead should open new avenues of opportunity to serve not only the Negro press and the Negro people, but America too.<sup>47</sup>

Black newspapers continuously reminded their readers that the Black press represented a network of organizations that centered its activities on the fight for civil rights. The purpose of the press, as *The Chicago Defender* re-

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46. *Id.*

47. MYRDAL, *supra* note 32, at 920.



ported, was to "serve, publicize, speak and fight for the colored minority."<sup>48</sup> To do this, however, the press presented articles that encouraged the upper class but, more importantly, the underclass, to aid financially in the eradication of discrimination. The press led the African-American community in an aggressive campaign for economic assistance to the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (hereafter "LDEF") and, to a lesser degree, the National Urban League.

The elite group of African-Americans made up a minority of the twenty million African-Americans in the United States during the period between 1930 and 1954, but they represented millions of dollars. In order to promulgate their views in the Black papers, they supported the printed media by purchasing advertisements. The papers carried advertisements from private organizations such as religious and fraternal groups as well as African-American stores. The importance of financial assistance that the elite earned for the press gave the power brokers in the African-American upper class the opportunity to express their views to the African-American public. The money became a major tool for the conquest of the underclass to support the civil rights organizations. Myrdal, in *American Dilemma*, explained the function of the press when he stated:

The Negro press is . . . controlled by the *active members* of the upper and middle classes of the Negro community. . . . The people who publish and write the Negro newspapers belong to the upper class. It is the doings and sayings of people in the upper and middle classes that are recorded in the Negro press. . . . the Negro newspapers are one of the chief agencies for the Negro upper class to spread its opinions among the lower classes of the Negro community.<sup>49</sup>

The Black press became a valuable tool of the BPMC to recruit individuals and agencies to their way of thinking. Since the Black newspapers were the voices of the wealthy, the civil rights organizations logically sought the alliance of the Associated Negro Press. Papers such as *The Pittsburgh Courier* exemplified two significant positions: (1) to encourage the BPMC to continue supporting the Black media along with civil rights activism, and (2) to issue propaganda to the underclass that the upperclass was working toward their benefit in the concept of civil rights.

Not only did the BPMC use the press for advancing civil rights activities, but it also utilized the private Black elite clubs. Organizations such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church held services that centered on the financial needs of the NAACP and the LDEF. However, the bulk of the money that kept the civil rights organizations afloat came from the African-American underclass.

The NAACP and its legal arm encouraged the local branches throughout the nation to develop programs that would raise money for NAACP activities. When the national officers in New York City wished to cultivate a test case in a certain community, they contacted the local leaders to initiate the action. In cities such as Fresno, California where the local university, Fresno State, discriminated against African-American students, the local chapter under the

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48. Interview with Etta Barnett, Chicago, Illinois (August 1984).

49. MYRDAL, *supra* note 33, at 920-21.

auspices of the NAACP picketed the school until the policies were repealed.<sup>50</sup> At times the local chapters would encourage students and residents to serve as plaintiffs for a test case that would eventually be argued before the state's Supreme Court. The various actions not only served the legal function of the civil rights group, but it also served as an impetus for financial assistance for the organizations.

Civic and religious organizations such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Elks, the Prince Hall Masons, and the Links held dinners, teas, dances, and general functions to earn money for the civil rights groups. At times, however, the underclass rejected the leadership of the national body. In Texas, for instance, the Inc. Fund had a difficult time influencing the local membership to support its program to desegregate the universities in that state. Thurgood Marshall, who undertook the role of leader in civil rights litigation, vehemently asked, "Why are the people not behind us . . . ?" In addition, he questioned the support of the local leaders who held positions in the Association by attacking their local ideas. Marshall stated, "If the people aren't behind us we must have a meeting with the state NAACP to see what's going on."<sup>51</sup> Occasionally, a leader of the local Association would publicly repudiate the national office's concept of desegregation. In Columbus, Ohio, the local executive secretary, Alvin Fullove, argued in a radio program that the desegregation movement caused greater harm to race relationships than the policies of Jim Crow. In Fullove's words, "Desegregation was a trip—the local branch do [sic] not support the efforts of the national offices."<sup>52</sup>

Nonetheless, the objections from the underclass toward desegregation and the policies of the upper class were minimal. The lower-class African-Americans looked up to the BPMC organizations that strove for civil rights. They valued the ideas and the power that the elite had in the political, economic, and social arenas of the nation. Thus, even though they were exploited at times by their more fortunate kin, they nonetheless valued and supported their efforts. African-American proletariats honored the elite because they, too, wanted to be wealthy and influential. The thought of overthrowing or turning their backs on the elite did not excite many of the poor. Thus, they were like most in America, hoping and praying for the opportunity to become wealthy capitalists.

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50. Gordon Stafford to Edward Dudley (June 13, 1948).

51. Thurgood Marshall to Hinton, Boulware, and the Reverend Beard, Memorandum (Sept. 30, 1947).

52. Interview with Barbee Durham, Vanguard League member, Columbus, Ohio, (March 3, 1987).