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FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT AND RACE RELATIONS, 1933-1945



This new series contains a collection of essential materials for the study of the early development of the Civil Rights Movement—concerned with the issues of Lynching, Segregation, Race riots, and Employment discrimination. FDR assumed the presidency of a nation in which white supremacy was a significant cultural and political force. Many states denied or severely restricted voting rights to African Americans and used their political power to further diminish their status and to deny them the benefits and opportunities of society. There was constant pressure on FDR to support anti-lynching legislation. But civil rights were a stepchild of the New Deal. Bent on economic recovery and reform and having to work through powerful Southern congressmen, whose seniority placed them at the head of key congressional committees, the president hesitated to place civil rights on his agenda. FDR’s record on civil rights has been the subject of much controversy. This new collection from FDR’s Official File provides insight into his political style and presents an instructive example of how he balanced moral preference with political realities.

Date Range: 1933-1945

Content: 15,428 images

Source Library: Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY

Detailed Description:

This collection includes essential materials for the study of the early development of the Civil Rights Movement and is concerned with the issues of:

- Lynching
- Segregation
- Race riots
- Employment discrimination

FDR assumed the presidency of a nation in which white supremacy was a significant cultural and political force. Many states denied or severely restricted voting rights to African Americans and used their political power to further diminish their status and to deny them the benefits and opportunities of society. One consequence of this was to make African Americans potential victims of lynching, a kind of "people's justice," in which mobs of whites seized and murdered, often in gruesome fashion, African Americans suspected of crimes against whites. But civil rights were a stepchild of the New Deal. Bent on economic recovery and reform and having to work through powerful Southern congressmen, whose seniority placed them at the head of key congressional committees, the president hesitated to place civil rights on his agenda.

The Civil rights cause eventually emerged as an issue because of three related events:

- The movement of African Americans to northern states created a constituency that in some key states could hold a balance of power between the major parties.
- Eleanor Roosevelt, the nation's first activist First Lady, championed equal rights and racial justice.
- Many persons and organizations, the most prominent of which was the NAACP, made federal anti-lynching legislation a major priority.

The result was a constant pressure on behalf of anti-lynching legislation.

By 1938, there was pressure from all sides on FDR to pass or ignore anti-lynching legislation. FDR's reluctance to support anti-lynching legislation can be summed up in a conversation he had with Walter White of the NAACP during the filibuster of the Gavagan Bill- "I did not choose the tools with which I must work. Had I been permitted to choose then I would have selected quite different ones. But I've got to get legislation passed by Congress to save America. The Southerners by reason of the seniority rule in Congress are chairmen or occupy strategic places on most of the Senate and House committees. If I come out for the anti-lynching bill now, they will block every bill I ask Congress to pass to keep America from collapsing. I just can't take that risk."

In lieu of supporting anti-lynching legislation, FDR did move African Americans into important advisory roles in the White House, brought them as delegates to the Democratic National Convention for the first time, abolished the two-thirds rule that gave the South veto power over presidential nominations, added a civil rights plank for the first time ever to the 1940 party platform, and included African Americans in the draft with the same rights and pay scales as whites.

In June 1941, FDR issued Executive Order 8802, which created the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). It was the most important federal move in support of the rights of African Americans between Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The President's order stated that the federal government would not hire any person based on their race, color, creed, or national origin. The FEPC enforced the order to ban discriminatory

hiring within the federal government and in corporations that received federal contracts. Millions of African Americans and women achieved better jobs and better pay as a result.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's record on civil rights has been the subject of much controversy. This new collection from FDR's Official File, at the FDR Library in Hyde Park, NY, provides insight into his political style and presents an instructive example of how he balanced moral preference with political realities.