THE RIOTOUS HOME FRONT:
CONTESTED RACIAL SPACES IN WORLD WAR II LOS ANGELES, DETROIT, AND HARLEM

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI‘I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN HISTORY MAY 2013

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of three men who helped inspire its conception and shaped its direction but did not live to see its completion.

Two Detroit natives whose divergent experiences during World War II helped spark my interest in the history of the period:

John Robert “Jack” Stoddard (1920-1997)
United States Army, European Theater

Gerald J. “Jerry” Esmacher (1926-2007)
Ford Factory, Home Front

A committee member who encouraged me to approach American history from a global perspective:

Jerry H. Bentley (1949-2012)
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not be possible without the support of a great many people.

The seeds for this dissertation were planted during my final year at Texas A&M University. Many thanks to Albert Broussard, Bob McGlone, and Mimi Henriksen for shepherding the various permutations of the project, and to my dissertation committee members, Suzanna Reiss, David Stannard, and Herbert Ziegler, for providing invaluable encouragement, advice, and instructive critiques on my project.

Many thanks to the hardworking archivists at the following archives: Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA, New York State Archives, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University, La Guardia and Wagner Archives at La Guardia Community College, the National Archives at College Park, and the Municipal Archives of New York. Their assistance proved invaluable and their insights sometimes led to fruitful new avenues of research.

Thanks to Ho Chi Tim, Michael Kane, LeJenna Wilton, and Adam Witten for their academic engagement, enthusiastic exchange of ideas, encouragement during the long process of writing and editing, and the occasional reading of drafts. Many thanks to Susan Carlson, whose institutional support and personal kindness made this process more efficient and bearable. My family, including my parents, Mel and April, and my sisters Emily and Olivia provided unfailing emotional support. Their unending curiosity about this dissertation encouraged me to continue to pursue it during difficult times and provided a glimpse into a non-academic perspective on the project that I found very enlightening. My father’s childhood memory of armored vehicles rolling down the street in his Detroit neighborhood in the aftermath of the 1967 riot raised my awareness of rioting in Detroit and led me to discover the 1943 wave of rioting while I was an undergraduate.

No list of acknowledgements would be complete without mentioning my partner, Josh Hevert. His constant support and willingness to listen to me talk about twentieth century America, despite it being very far from his specialty in medieval European history, sustained me through the long process of research and writing and kept me sane. Mahalo nui loa.
ABSTRACT

During the summer of 1943, a series of race riots exploded across the United States, with the three largest riots taking place in Los Angeles, Detroit, and Harlem. The intent of this dissertation is to explore the meaning of this wave of riots by placing them in multiple contexts – within their specific contested urban spaces of racial discord, within their racially charged and migration-spurred neighborhood borderlands, and within their temporal and spatial placement in the home front of World War II. The examination of prewar conditions in Los Angeles, Detroit, and Harlem that led to the riots serves to illustrate the deep roots of racial discord in the United States. The riots themselves serve as a transition between race riots as vigilante white mob violence in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and race riots as a form of protest by urban minorities against white hegemony in the late twentieth century. The 1943 riots served as catalysts for a discussion of the issue of racism in the United States that painted America’s race problem as one of white racism against minorities instead of the mere existence of minorities, but this discussion became subsumed at the end of the war by both a reconversion to prewar attitudes on race and a shift in American priorities outward toward the burgeoning cold war. This dissertation concludes that the riots served as an important episode not only on the American home front during World War II, but also in the longer history of race, racial violence, and protest in the twentieth century.
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INTRODUCTION
VACANT RACIAL EYES IN WARTIME AMERICA

“As a nation we sat with vacant eyes and waited for Pearl Harbor. For two years we sat and watched the Detroit riot in the making. How many other riots will we wait upon before acting?”

Thomas Sancton wrote these words in the *New Republic* two weeks after the deadly Detroit riot, adding, “In the last three years, Detroit has swollen and festered with our accumulated national poisons.” The same issue of the *New Republic* ran a cartoon from the *New York Post* of maps of Mobile, Alabama, Los Angeles, Detroit, Beaumont, Texas, and El Paso, Texas, all overlain with blood spatters emblazoned with the words “race riots.” The subtitle read “The Shame of the Cities.” The severity of these riots, and their geographic distribution, indicated that the nation confronted serious crisis. “Mr. Roosevelt,” Sancton wrote, “is faced with a race problem as grave as the one which faced Lincoln.” He was perhaps hyperbolic in the short term, as only one more major riot erupted during World War II, the August 1943 Harlem riot. But, in the long term, Sancton proved correct. The United States had a serious race problem in the mid-twentieth century, one both foreshadowed and intensified by the home front conditions of World War II.

The three most serious riots of the 1943 riot wave – Los Angeles, Detroit, and Harlem – spanned the continental United States, severely disrupted war production, and provoked serious discussion of racial problems. Riots in smaller cities were cited in the public discourse as further evidence of racial strife but not given as much prominence in

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2 Sancton, 9.
3 Sancton, 5.
4 Sancton, 11.
discussions of the riots, nor were they as damaging in terms of loss of life, property
damage, and diminished war production as the riots in the larger cities. For that reason,
the focus of this dissertation lies in examining the riots in Los Angeles, Detroit, and
Harlem, which dominated the national discourse and had the most profound effect on the
war effort. This dissertation poses a fundamental question: why did three very different
riots, in three very different cities, happen during the same three-month period during
World War II? Was each riot driven by unique local conditions or were there common
provocations throughout the nation in the summer of 1943 that contributed to the riots?
Or was a volatile mix of local and national factors to blame for the riots?

The three major cities enveloped in rioting in the summer of 1943 shared common
characteristics, most notably the increasing demand on city infrastructure and the
competition over space. Los Angeles, Detroit, and Harlem, in New York City, had
experienced growth directly related to the wartime experience, specifically wartime
industry and military activity. Migration to these cities, particularly from the South, had
been constant since the 1920s, and American involvement in World War II resulted in
renewed and intensive waves of migration. This influx of migrants taxed the cities’
infrastructures, and resulted in disputes over space between various racial and ethnic
groups. Specific migration patterns and residential segregation worsened infrastructural
woes in these urban industrial centers. Population growth due to migration was
proportionately much higher among minorities, who were restricted to certain areas of
these cities due to legal residential segregation. Overcrowding in these minority
neighborhoods reached epic proportions with wartime migration. Space was at a
premium, and residents hotly debated and sometimes violently disputed the location of
war-related building projects such as factories, armories, and housing projects for workers. This fight over space resulted in the blurring of border between the civil and military, the public and private, white and black (and in Los Angeles, Mexican).

Another common factor among the cities was the influence of the federal Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), established in June 1941. Black civil rights activists, led by A. Philip Randolph, pushed for nondiscrimination in employment in federal contracts in war industries, and threatened to stage a massive March on Washington if President Franklin Delano Roosevelt did not do something about discriminatory employment practices. Roosevelt enlisted the aid of New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia to work with black activists to draft an agreement, and the result was Executive Order 8802, which ordered nondiscrimination practices in companies that had government contracts and established the FEPC, a federal agency that had the power to investigate claims of discrimination and enforce policies of nondiscrimination. The agency’s enforcement power was relatively weak until May 1943, when Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9346, which explicitly required nondiscrimination clauses in government contracts and strengthened penalties for violations. It also bolstered the FEPC itself, increasing its budget and establishing regional branches throughout the country, with agents stationed in major industrial centers to handle cases; previously its small staff had been based in Washington, D.C., and had traveled to handle cases.\(^5\) The FEPC helped minorities gain more and better employment opportunities, but the existence of nondiscrimination policies rankled both business interests, who resented government interference in company personnel policies,

and rank-and-file workers, who feared minority workers would be a lingering economic threat after the war. The resulting discord helped fuel tense conditions in industrial centers all over the United States, prompting a wave of work stoppages and “hate strikes” in the spring of 1943.

While the factors exerting pressure on these cities appeared similar, the individual riots proved quite distinct. The riot in Los Angeles in May and June 1943, was dubbed the “Zoot Suit Riot” because the riot’s victims, zoot-suited Mexican-American and black youths, became the targets of violence waged by vigilante white servicemen who saw the zoot suit as a symbol of criminality and rebellion. The Detroit riot in June was in fact two parallel riots, thanks to a successful blockade along Detroit’s main thoroughfare. On one side of the blockade, white mobs attacked blacks on their morning commute; on the other side of the blockade, blacks destroyed white-owned property in their own neighborhood. The Harlem riot in August erupted within the black neighborhood in New York City, and blacks focused their violence on white-owned property as an expression of long-simmering frustrations. As sociologists like Janet Abu-Lughod have argued, spatial issues have helped determine the nature of race riots in the twentieth century. In Los Angeles and Detroit, competing claims over space, coupled with frequent, often violent, interactions between different groups in the borderland zones between different neighborhoods, helped to create a climate that enabled the riots to be carried out as they

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6 Throughout the dissertation, the labels “white” and “black” for Caucasian-Americans and African-Americans are used to provide parallel labeling and because of the popularity of the more informal language in the cultural lexicon. “Mexican-Americans” rather than “Hispanics” is used for four reasons: 1) Mexicans were the primary Hispanic group living in Los Angeles during World War II and were the ones popularly discussed, so “Hispanic” was too broad; 2) “Chicano” was not a term adopted until the post-war period; 3) “Mexican-American” can incorporate both people born in the United States and people who immigrated from Mexico; and 4) Mexican-American was the self-described terminology used by the majority.

were. The much different spatial reality in Harlem, which had fewer zones of interaction with surrounding areas and fewer physical incursions by outside groups, helps to explain the divergent style of the riot that took place there.

These spatial issues and the riots they spawned had serious national consequences. Contemporary observers viewed the riots as inextricably linked to one another, a manifestation of nation-wide problems – foremost of which was a race problem – that demanded a nation-wide solution. The federal government, through wartime executive agencies such as the FEPC and the Committee for Congested Areas, showed a deep concern for the broad social impact that wartime migration and race relations had on cities throughout the United States. The FEPC, while ostensibly limited to issues of non-discrimination in employment, worked with other federal agencies to promote more harmonious community relationships through education and more permanent anti-discrimination reforms. The eventual fate of entities like the FEPC, dismantled and discarded in due haste in late 1945, revealed that as the war ended, so did the impetus for national introspection on race.

A mix of nation-wide and local issues fed into the 1943 riots, with the degree of nation-wide influence varying by city. The city most affected by national factors was Detroit, which was not surprising given its centrality to the war industry. While racial and ethnic tensions predated World War II, most evident in the strong presence of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, Detroit’s existing problems were magnified by the high volume of war migration and the creation of a new regional diaspora of southern migrants that added yet another group to an already volatile mix. In Los Angeles, the influx of the military and war migrants, especially southern blacks, changed the nature of the racial
hierarchy and increased encounters between white soldiers and Mexican-American and black civilians in the borderland areas where new military installations were located. At the same time, a growing group consciousness among diasporic Mexican-Americans in the city was beginning to manifest itself in a more militant way among the American-born youth, one example being the *pachuco* subculture. These young people began more overtly to challenge white hegemony through the rejection of mainstream white culture and Americanization attempts, as well as through violence when they felt that white soldiers were encroaching upon their “turf.” In New York, the war did little to ameliorate existing conditions that had plagued Harlem during the Depression, such as the distressing quality of life, inadequate city services, substandard housing, employment discrimination, and frequent cases of police brutality. Thus, the Harlem riot of 1943 had much the same impetus as the riot of 1935, with national factors playing only a small role. For Harlem, the influence that civil rights leaders located there exerted on a national level, with the establishment of the FEPC, had a much larger impact on cities nationwide than it did at home in Harlem.

On a global scale, World War II was a conflict rife with racism. Japanese expansion into mainland Asia and the Pacific was driven by a belief in Japanese racial superiority. The massacre of the Chinese civilian population in places like Nanjing, along with the forcible prostitution of Chinese, Korean, and Filipina women in the “comfort woman” system, illustrated profound Japanese contempt for other ethnic groups in Asia and the Pacific. In Africa, Italy engaged in a campaign to try to conquer Ethiopia and reclaim the glory of the old Roman Empire, a conflict with racist undertones. Nazi ideology in Germany emphasized notions of Aryan racial purity and sought the
destruction of groups it deemed inferior and a threat to that purity. The Holocaust, the systematic genocide of millions of European Jews, was the most heinous example of extreme racism.

The Allied powers also had significant problems with race at home and abroad. Allied countries France and Great Britain had global empires that were established on the basis of not only a drive for natural resources and new economic markets, but also out of belief in a “White Man’s Burden,” a philosophy that posited that it was the duty of whites, as the naturally superior race, to bring education, enlightenment, and civilization to nonwhite peoples all over the world. Since 1898, the United States had exerted increasing global influence as well, gaining some territory in the Pacific and Caribbean but largely adopting a policy of informal empire through economic and cultural imperialism. By the time World War II began, colonies had long been agitating for independence from colonial control. The Indian independence movement had been protesting British occupation for decades, and the Vietnamese had been pushing for independence from the French. Latin American countries worried about the amount of influence that the United States had in their region, wary of American involvement in their political affairs to preserve optimal economic conditions for American business interests. Because of the global scale of the war, it was crucial for the Allied nations to engage their colonies and their nonwhite allies in the fight against the Axis.

The United States government was particularly sensitive to its image abroad. Believing their form of imperialism to be less invasive and damaging than the forms practiced by France, Great Britain, and other European colonial powers, American policymakers upheld the United States as an exporter of freedom and democracy, not of
colonial control. But the record of American racism that threatened this ideal image received renewed attention during the war, when the need to maintain good relationships with nonwhite nations took on a renewed sense of urgency. Internment of Japanese-Americans and the outbursts of white violence against minorities seen in the 1943 race riots served as vivid reminders of America’s race problem, and sparked fears that the American home front could descend into a full-blown, chaotic “race war” that would cripple the American contribution to the Allied war effort as well as cost the nation crucial nonwhite allies.

The idea that America was fighting a “race war” at home was only slightly more hyperbolic than the reality. Mass hysteria against the Japanese after Pearl Harbor resulted in the wholesale relocation of Japanese-Americans on the West Coast to internment camps in the interior, and in martial law in places like Hawaii where Japanese-Americans were too numerous and crucial to the local economy to detain feasibly on a massive scale. This fear of the “enemy within” extended not only to Japanese-Americans but to America’s other racial minorities as well. The American public seemed perpetually afraid that its black and Mexican-American populations would identify with the Japanese war effort, putting nonwhite pride over patriotism. Given the historically bleak and at times horrific treatment extended to America’s racial minorities by white Americans, the fear was not entirely unrealistic that minorities would secretly cheer as a nonwhite nation continually beat majority-white nations in battle after battle in the Pacific theater of the war. Rebellious minority youth, especially those flaunting conventional fashion and clothing rationing by wearing zoot suits, were especially suspect. The “Double V for Victory” campaign, promoted by the black civil rights
movement to agitate for greater freedoms at home while simultaneously fighting for freedom abroad, also lent credence to the belief that a racial war raged on the home front.

While whites did not fear black and Mexican-American disloyalty on the same scale as Japanese-Americans and therefore did not relocate them to internment camps, they still restricted them in daily life – in the workplace, in the social sphere, and even at home. Literary scholar Lynn Itagaki, in analyzing black author Chester Himes’ wartime novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, draws explicit parallels between the black and Japanese-American wartime experiences. Itagaki sees racially restrictive covenants, which legally prevented minority residential occupation of entire neighborhoods, as a method of control similar to internment:

For Bob [the novel’s protagonist], these unspoken yet legalized boundaries become his metaphoric barbed wire and desert. Instead of military guard towers policing Japanese Americans in remote internment camps, the civilian police monitor and circumscribe the physical and economic mobility of African Americans in neighborhoods constrained by residential ordinances and segregation.⁸

In restricting where minorities could live, where and at what job they could work, and who they could socialize with and where, the Jim Crow system had a psychological component that was both damaging and maddening. This was especially true of the more informal version of the Jim Crow system that existed in the North and West. There, the system was not codified into law, but was still very real and the penalties for transgressing racial boundaries equally strict.

Doubts about minority loyalty and the perpetual discrimination minorities faced in finding housing and employment clashed with the public embrace of racial minorities as

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crucial to the vitality of America and the success of its war effort. Federal, state, and local governments, as well as private organizations, embarked on a public-relations campaign not only to recruit minorities into the war effort, but also to promote greater white tolerance of minority groups. From the enforcement efforts of the FEPC, to the publication of pamphlets emphasizing minority contributions to the war effort, to the implementation of cultural education materials in the classroom, American government and policymakers expended a great amount of energy to combat racism on the home front. The problem of American racism – dubbed by Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal the “American dilemma” in his 1944 study of the same name – was not the existence of racial minorities in the United States, but perpetual white racism against those minorities.9 As long as whites harbored racism against minorities, it would be impossible for the United States to live up to its founding creed of equality and liberty, thus severely hampering its credibility on the global stage. In order to retain nonwhite allies and achieve Allied victory, and in order for American economic and cultural imperialism to succeed in the postwar world, the United States had to address its race problem.

While one task of the dissertation is to analyze the place of the 1943 riots within the context of the World War II era, another task is to place the 1943 riots within the larger tradition of rioting in the twentieth century. Some scholars posit a connection between waves of rioting and wartime – World War I and the 1919 wave of riots, World War II and riots in 1943 (and to a very limited extent, in 1946), and the Vietnam War and riots in the 1960s. These scholars argue that wartime dislocations and social upheavals exacerbated existing social problems and fueled episodes of violent protest. Sandwicched

between the two more sensational riot waves, the 1943 riots reflected a transitional period in rioting, when the definition of “race riot” underwent a change. The term, previously defined by scholars and observers as white vigilante violence against minorities, was increasingly being applied to the relatively new phenomenon of rioting minorities attacking white-owned property in minority neighborhoods as a form of social protest. The 1935 and 1943 Harlem riots, as well as half of the 1943 Detroit riots, provided the first examples of this new form of riot. By the 1960s, “race riot” had come to be applied almost exclusively to this new form of protest. The Los Angeles riot of 1943, and half of the 1943 Detroit riots, constituted some of the last examples of the earlier definition of race riots.

The intent of this dissertation is to explore the meaning of these riots by placing them in multiple contexts – within their specific contested urban spaces of racial discord, within their racially charged and migration-spurred neighborhood borderlands, and within their temporal and spatial placement in the home front of World War II. Simply focusing on the immediate causes and aftermaths of the riots leads to very different conclusions than does examining the riots as manifestations of longer-existing problems and community tensions that were exacerbated and accelerated in wartime. Confining the investigation of riot causes only to the wartime period means that the riots are interpreted as convulsions wrought by wartime dislocation, migration, and integration of previously segregated groups in workplaces and social spaces. As such, the riots hold little historical importance once the war and its resulting social upheaval have ended. Extending the investigation of riot causes back into the Great Depression era reveals existing patterns of discrimination, segregation, and racial conflict in the cities that experienced rioting in
1943, which contradicts the notion that the war was the sole cause of racial tensions that exploded in rioting. This examination of the long-term causes of the race riots not only allows for a more thorough understanding of the 1943 riots, but also enables scholars to understand better other twentieth-century waves of riots as spasmodic symptoms of underlying racial problems that persisted for most of the century, rather than as eruptions tied to home front discontent during and after periods of war.

Because each riot has to date received largely individual scholarly attention that focuses on local factors and the importance of the riots to their individual localities, few historians have delved into the broader context of the riots on a national scale during the war and as part of an evolution of race riots through the twentieth century. Aside from a brief mention in the epilogue of Luis Alvarez’s *The Power of the Zoot* (2008), which examines World War II youth culture, few scholarly works analyze all three of these riots as a group revelatory of larger racial and war tensions in the United States.10 This is especially curious because a look at the historical record shows that these riots were discussed together in the popular discourse and were collectively seen as contemporary evidence of a national race problem. Few observers at the time framed the riots as isolated from one another. A comparative analysis of these riots yields important insights into racial violence in the twentieth-century United States and into a historical understanding of a home front more riotous than previously acknowledged in either the scholarship or the popular memories of World War II.

The scholarship of the 1960s riots has done much to shape the academic understanding of the 1943 riots. The wave of urban riots in the 1960s resulted in a keen

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interest in the causes of riots. Firstly, this scholarship positioned the academic value of
the 1943 riots as comparative foils to the 1960s riots. The earlier riots were largely
treated for the context they gave the 1960s riots, and this can be seen most readily in
studies of the 1964 Harlem riot, the 1965 Watts riot, and the 1967 Detroit riot. Max
Arthur Herman in *Fighting in the Streets* (2005) and Janet Abu-Lughod in *Race, Space
and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles* (2007) are just the most recent scholars
who have measured the value of the 1943 riots in contrast to other riots, primarily the
1960s riots. Herman and Abu-Lughod extend the trend to include both earlier riots, like
those in 1919, and later riots, like the 1992 Rodney King riots in Los Angeles, in an
attempt to detect broader trends in rioting in the twentieth century. While Herman uses
the examination of trends in rioting to attempt to create a reliable model for predicting
future race riots, Abu-Lughod makes the point that continued rioting is emblematic of a
failure adequately to redress racial grievances, and until the underlying conditions are
ameliorated riots will persist well into the future. Abu-Lughod’s emphasis on explaining
*why* and *how* race riots occurred, and the relative effectiveness of government responses
and riot commissions, is of much more utility to the historian than Herman’s methodical
categorizing of riot types and the creation of statistical models. The important points that
Abu-Lughod makes, such as the role of space in the evolution of race riots, are discussed
in detail in this dissertation.

Secondly, the bulk of the scholarship on riots, written in the 1960s and early
1970s, was done in the discipline of sociology, not history. Even today, sociologists

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rather than historians have done most of the research on riots – Herman and Abu-Lughod, for example, are both sociologists. While sociological studies provide rich details and deep investigations into the immediate causes of riots, they often do not provide the broader context that historians value in understanding events, nor do they have the same methodological concerns. The riots of the 1960s did prompt interest in the earlier 1943 riots outside of this comparative sociological framework. A few historians since the 1970s, such as Dominic Capeci, who is discussed below, have written on individual riots, and their work has been deeply influenced by the trends in scholarship that came out of the 1960s riots. Riot studies by historians who lean heavily on sociology still tend to lack the broad context necessary to understand more fully the deeper, nationwide origins of the riots and their lasting legacies beyond the epicenters of the riots.


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12 Abu-Lughod tends more toward historical sociology – which is evident in her other major work, *Before European Hegemony*, which is highly valued by students of world and global history. But she is still primarily a sociologist.


the central point from which to examine the wartime experience of the Mexican-American community, particularly Mexican-American youth. The case, in which a gang of Mexican-American youth was arrested for the death of a young Mexican-born migrant named José Díaz, illustrated the determination of the white community to punish transgressive Mexican-American youth and render the zoot suit as a “badge of hoodlumism.”

Nearly all of the recent historical work on the Detroit and Harlem riots has been done by Dominic Capeci. Capeci has authored many books on wartime Detroit, including *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit* (1984) and *Detroit and the “Good War”* (1996), and he is responsible for the only book published on the Harlem riot, *The Harlem Riot of 1943* (1977). His Detroit riot-focused work, *Layered Violence* (1991), is a collaborative work with Martha Wilkerson that borrows heavily from sociology and studies the rioters themselves and their motivations. Other than Capeci’s works, the only book-length project on the Detroit riot is the 1943 book *Race Riot*, written by Wayne State University sociologists and riot eyewitnesses Alfred McClung Lee and Norman Daymond Humphrey.

This dissertation relies less on sociology and more on the history of labor, migration and diaspora, and the civil rights movement. When discussing the context of the 1943 riots, these subfields of history are inextricably intertwined. Activism in 1930s

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Harlem, the epicenter of the national black civil rights movement, focused on the centrality of equal opportunity in employment to achieving better socioeconomic status for minorities. This activism eventually pressured President Roosevelt to insert nondiscrimination language into government contracts during the war and establish, through executive order, a committee to investigate complaints of employment discrimination. Nondiscrimination in employment was championed not only by the black civil rights movement, but also by the unions, who sought the support of minority workers to strengthen their causes, and by other minorities such as Mexican-Americans who increasingly moved toward an activism similar to blacks as the younger generation formed an identity distinct from their immigrant parents.

The demand for labor meant massive internal migrations from rural areas to industrial centers, which changed the racial and ethnic dynamic in areas with the largest population influx. Coupled with the increase in interactions between different racial and ethnic groups in the residential and social spheres, the demand for manpower and the new policy of nondiscrimination resulted in increasing interactions in the workplace and brought further social conflict. The disorder of war made clearer the disorder of the home front. Attempts to remedy race relations in the wake of the riots were often collaborative efforts between national, state, and local governments; national and local activist groups; unions; religious leaders; and academics. This coalition also sought to preserve the employment gains so deeply tied by activists with the socioeconomic wellbeing of their minority communities by supporting permanent state and federal nondiscrimination legislation. Civil rights activists saw the failure of most of those efforts at the war’s end as a major setback. As the urgency of addressing America’s race
problem faded with the end of the war, so too did the memory of the 1943 riots, which became remembered not as symptoms of a large, endemic problem but as brief abnormalities in the history of a peaceful, unified home front during the war.

“The Riotous Home Front” speaks not only to the race riots dotting the American landscape in 1943, but to a larger pattern of discord and dissent on the American home front during World War II. The image of a fractious and dysfunctional home front is one more readily associated with the tumultuous Vietnam War era. While the home front during World War II was not quite as disarrayed as domestic life during the Vietnam War era, many issues plagued the home front and, by extension, the war effort: racial problems including race riots, labor strikes, fears of internal disloyalty, the role of women, clashing regional views on myriad issues that sometimes threatened funding to war-related agencies, and many other localized problems. Historian David Kennedy in his book *The American People in World War II* titled his chapter devoted to domestic America “The Cauldron of the Home Front,” an apt description of the turmoil in wartime American society.\(^{19}\) An analysis of contemporary sources revealed a public in perpetual fear of an unruly home front, which ran counter to official government policies – and propaganda – that emphasized the importance of a united home front to achieve an Allied victory.

Rather than a “riotous home front,” the public memory of the home front during World War II remains one of unity and harmony. World War II and the generation that participated in the war have come to be referenced by such popular nicknames as “the good war” and “the greatest generation.” Museum exhibitions, such as the one at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., emphasize wartime unity

\(^{19}\) Kennedy, 321.
by focusing on scrap drives and rationing as ways that Americans on the home front all worked together to achieve victory; in effect, these exhibits recognize the unity propaganda, but perpetuate the propaganda’s message by presenting it uncritically. A slew of popular books and films released around the fiftieth anniversary of the war similarly glorified American achievements, depicting the American people as willing to put aside their differences and sacrifice a great deal in the name of the war effort. Time seems to have burnished the image of the happy home front in Americans’ collective memory. Attempts to scrutinize the home front or America’s actions in the war, such as the discussion over how to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, were largely seen as attempts to tarnish America’s image and the reputation of the “greatest generation.”

The determined clinging to the image of the “happy home front” and a “greatest generation” beyond reproach is an outgrowth of “victory culture.” Since its founding, the United States has positioned itself as a nation set apart. Its interactions with the rest of the world, especially since the late nineteenth century, have been heavily colored by the belief in America’s inherent cultural, intellectual, and moral superiority. It has not been sufficient for America to serve as a shining example of democracy that the rest of the world can emulate; throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the United States has actively sought to impose its belief and governmental systems on other nations through informal imperialism and alliances. World War II had clearly sketched villains to serve as a foil to make the United States seem even more virtuous by comparison: Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. Both nations were so clearly despotic, territorially aggressive, and callous toward human life, as evidenced by the Holocaust and the Rape
of Nanjing, that decisive American victory was the only desirable and possible outcome if the American way of life was truly superior. Victory culture and its accompanying claims of American righteousness served as a way to legitimize American actions.

By the time of the fiftieth anniversary of World War II, the culture of victory that espoused American triumph, moral superiority, and invincibility had lost much of its credibility. Even the most ardent believer in American superiority could not deny that involvement in wars in Korea and Vietnam had disproved, or at the very least dented, American invincibility. The moral ambiguity of the use of the atomic bomb at the end of World War II had long plagued Americans, particularly the academic community, and the fiftieth anniversary renewed the debate and brought the discussion into popular discourse through the battle over the Smithsonian’s handling of an exhibit on the atomic bomb. In response to this questioning of the legacy of World War II, Stephen Ambrose’s *Citizen Soldiers*, Tom Brokaw’s *The Greatest Generation*, and Steven Spielberg’s film *Saving Private Ryan* resurrected victory culture to cope with the failures and moral ambiguities of the Cold War.  

Much like the elder Ryan in *Saving Private Ryan*, the United States wanted reassurance that it had “led a good life” after the war – that it had upheld its moral standards and done justice to the memories of the fallen. By elevating the World War II generation as the “greatest generation,” the United States declared itself as morally triumphant, even if the Cold War had not proven to be militarily triumphant.

One of the flaws in victory culture is its absence of nuance, and its summary dismissal of events that did not fit into the “good war” narrative – hence the suppression

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21 *Saving Private Ryan*, DVD, directed by Steven Spielberg.
of the “riotous home front.” In describing the “citizen soldiers” of the United States military, Ambrose broadly defines them against the ruthless, highly militarized German military; he does not consider the fact that not all Americans fit the role of citizen-soldier uninterested in violence, killing, and military glory.22 Brokaw spends a brief time addressing racial inequality in the United States during World War II, but presents it as an unfortunate and irregular blip in the general goodness of the war.23 Studs Terkel in his earlier collection of oral histories, “The Good War,” did a far better job illuminating the less pleasant aspects of the war, but it is the positive accounts that draw the most attention.24 By presenting the binary of “America during World War II was pure good” and “Germany and Japan during World War II were pure evil,” victory culture encourages a dangerous cultural amnesia about the war and America’s involvement in it.

Examinations of the American home front significantly weaken the victory culture’s interpretation of a people united in the patriotic wartime cause. The home front was plagued by labor strikes in multiple industries, often over labor conditions, pay, and hiring practices. When the war is examined in light of race relations, the United States falls far short of victory. While gains were made in war industry employment, disputes over labor and space in urban areas resulted in riots across the nation. Segregation in the military, and the restriction of minorities to certain jobs within the military, was commonplace. Black servicemen also faced persistent discrimination, even in uniform, and many incidents of hostile run-ins between black servicemen and white citizens and police forces around southern military bases were recorded by civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

22 Ambrose, Citizen Soldiers.
23 Brokaw, The Greatest Generation.
internment of Japanese-Americans constituted another violation of American democratic principles. While the myth of a happy home front where all Americans put aside their differences and worked for the common good was promoted through the Office of War Information (OWI) and its propaganda, many news outlets took a much more realistic and pessimistic view. Even popular mass-market magazines like *Life* ran stories on home front tensions, including a 1942 profile on Detroit that concluded that conditions in the “arsenal of democracy” were so bad that “Detroit can blow up Hitler, or it can blow up the U.S.” The wave of race riots in 1943 proved that home front conditions had rapidly deteriorated.

To understand better the contexts of each individual riot and the wave of riots as a whole, this dissertation is organized into three main chapters that provide case studies of Los Angeles, Detroit, and Harlem, and a final main chapter that examines the national discourse on race that the riots prompted. The division of the chapters by geography allows for a closer inspection of long-standing local factors that led to rioting and the differing degree of impact that the war had on the cities and their minority populations. Additionally, reserving the discussion of the national impact of the riots into its own discrete chapter reflects the way the riots were discussed in the contemporary discourse – together and not individually, and as symptoms of a larger national problem – and, because of the many commonalities in the ways the cities responded to riots, eliminates what would otherwise be redundancies at the end of each geographic chapter. The main chapters are book-ended by a prologue and an epilogue designed to give context to the main chapters and to serve as important points of comparison in the discussion of the changing nature of race riots in the twentieth century.

The prologue centers on the 1919 riots and their lasting impact on the black civil rights movement. These riots represented a shift from earlier race riots in the greater level of agency evident among the black communities that were attacked. These riots also provided further evidence to black political and civil rights organizations that a change in strategy was needed for them to achieve greater civil rights. The 1919 riots proved the futility of the “racial uplift” ideology, and prompted national organizations such as the NAACP to embark on a campaign of court challenges to dismantle discrimination, a long-term strategy that bore fruit in the late 1940s and 1950s.

Each of the city chapters has roughly the same framework, beginning with discussions of the city during the interwar period, then addressing the effect of entry into World War II and the mobilization of the defense industry, and finally analyzing the 1943 riots and their immediate aftermath. Chapter 1, “Los Angeles and a ‘Zoot Suit Epidemic,’” discusses Los Angeles. In many ways, Los Angeles is the most unique case. Unlike the Detroit and Harlem riots, the “zoot suit” riot’s main victims were not black but Mexican-American; the rioters were servicemen who considered themselves vigilantes exerting justice on a specific (and criminal) part of the population; and the Los Angeles riot had direct foreign relations relevance beyond the broader fear of Axis appropriation of the riots for propaganda, as the American government feared that the fallout from the zoot suit riot would put its alliance with Mexico and Latin America in jeopardy. Most contemporary observers did not mention Los Angeles in their broader discussion of 1943 race riots, and this can be partially explained by the historic definition of “the race problem” in America as being a problem restricted to blacks. Most Americans at this time (outside of the West and Southwest) saw race as a black/white binary, and thus had
trouble fitting Asian and Hispanic Americans into discussions of race. These groups were considered permanently “foreign” and, at times, a threat, as evidenced by mass deportations of Mexicans during the Great Depression and the internment of Japanese-Americans during the war. The Los Angeles riot and its aftermath prompted some to consider a broadening of the American “race problem” to include Mexican-Americans, but that idea initially found little traction outside of California and academia. Despite the uniqueness of the Los Angeles riots, enough similarities to the other riots exist to warrant its inclusion in this comparative study, such as the competition over space, diasporic identity issues, the profound impact of war migration, and labor issues.

Chapter 2, “‘Detroit is Dynamite’: Explosions in the ‘Arsenal of Democracy,’” focuses on Detroit, the biggest industrial power base in the United States during World War II and a mecca for war migrants. The experiences of Detroit – the booming war industry, the masses of migrant war workers, and the over-taxed city infrastructure – were representative of many other industrial areas. The wartime migration disproportionately affected the city’s black community. The Detroit chapter relies most heavily on labor and industrial history because of the centrality of labor and industry in the city’s wartime experience, and the wealth of material related to Detroit industry provides a case study for the impact that the FEPC had nationally on minority employment. The Detroit chapter also focuses more closely than the other chapters on the issues of residential segregation, because Detroit’s segregation was much more rigid than that of Los Angeles or New York, where the boundaries of minority neighborhoods proved more fluid.
Chapter 3, “‘Harlem Needed Something to Smash’: Urban Discontent and Protest,” discusses Harlem, which was the political and cultural capital of the black community in America. New York City was less important an industrial center than Los Angeles or Detroit, and in fact the New York metropolitan area was one of the American cities that experienced a population loss during the war. The importance of Harlem lay more in the political clout of blacks in Harlem, which was home to many national civil rights movement leaders and was a hotbed of grassroots activism in the 1930s that focused on socioeconomic causes like nondiscrimination in employment. Harlem was also important as the site of the first “urban rebellion” race riot, in 1935 (and again in 1943), and this type of riot-as-social-protest came to dominate the landscape of the 1960s. As such, the Harlem chapter focuses more fully than the others on political activism, because the influence of civil rights leaders based in Harlem extended nationwide, the most notable example being the establishment of the FEPC, and because the grassroots activism of Harlem had long-lasting repercussions for the trajectory of the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

The final main chapter, Chapter 4, “‘Our Accumulated National Poisons’: The Impact of War on Home Front Discontent,” adopts a national and comparative focus. This chapter examines the way in which the Los Angeles, Detroit, and Harlem riots – and minor riots in Beaumont, Texas, and Mobile, Alabama – were discussed together as symptoms of a collective national race problem. A national problem demanded a national solution, and one task of this chapter is to evaluate the proposed national solutions and their successes and failures. The chapter thus picks up after the immediate aftermath of the riots and discusses the long-term impact of the riots and the proposed
solutions to the national race problem, carrying the dissertation through the close of World War II and the demobilization of American soldiers and workers. The chapter also discusses the ways in which the very definition of “race riot” was contested, from political elites and activists to riot witnesses and participants. The public discourse over race riots - and whether specific riots fit the “race riot” definition – reveals much about underlying social, cultural, and political attitudes and motivations. Denying that a riot was a race riot saved face for city government officials and community leaders alike, as doing so preserved their power to control the dialogue on race and denied agency to the rioters they could not directly control. To admit to a race riot was to admit a failure of leadership and a shift of power from an elite few to the unpredictable masses, as well as giving credence to the notion that America’s race problem was very serious indeed.

The epilogue explores the broader legacy of the 1943 race riots by discussing the riots of the 1960s. The 1960s riots occurred as civil rights groups had gained greater success in achieving voting rights, equality in public areas such as education and recreational facilities, laws prohibiting discrimination in the workplace, and strengthening penalties for hate crimes. While these laws promoted civic equality, they could not legislate social and economic equality. As civil rights leaders debated how best to address these issues, the 1960s riots erupted as violent protests against the lingering socioeconomic inequalities in black communities. These riots also proved that not much had changed in the ways that federal and local governments responded to riots; the findings and recommendations of the Kerner Commission in the 1960s eerily echoed the findings and recommendations of individual city committees investigating the 1943 riots.
In 1943, the riots in Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York, opened America’s “vacant eyes” that Thomas Sancton referenced in *The New Republic* to the reality that a deep racial divide existed in the country that was not only the result of wartime discord, but of “accumulated national poisons” with origins extending well into America’s history. These riots were seen not as the explosive actions of a small number of citizens, but as the logical result of chronic, systemic racism. They were reminders, ill-timed as they were, that the United States had a race problem that was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore at home and to downplay to foreign allies.

For a brief period of time, the riots prompted Americans to examine how well the nation lived up to its creed of equality and democracy for all. The end of the war brought that period of introspection to a close, when the urgency of war gave way to the complacency of peace. Public discourse over America’s race problem would not reach a similar peak until nearly a decade later with the 1954 Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. As the focus on racial issues turned to the civil rights movement of the 1950s, the role of the 1943 riots in provoking national discussion of race faded over time. The legacy of the riots was further distorted and obscured with the twin developments of the 1960s riots, which cast the 1943 riots as similar urban rebellions, and the “victory culture” mythologizing of World War II as the “good war” fought by the “greatest generation,” which saw the riots as aberrations in an otherwise peaceful home front. It is my hope that this dissertation will restore much-needed analysis and context to the 1943 riots and successfully demonstrate that these riots were not violent aberrations but part of a much larger story of racial violence and civil rights in twentieth-century America.

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26 Sancton, 9.
“Race riots have been so long studied that those who do not know their cause are those who don’t want to know.”\textsuperscript{27}

The United States has a long history of racially-fueled riots. Until the early twentieth century, the term “race riot” was incontestably used to describe a riot in which white mobs enacted vigilante violence on minority, often black, communities.\textsuperscript{28} These rampages targeted the minority communities as a whole for punishment, for various reasons: the group was seen as too ambitious and acting out of “their place”; a serious crime (real or perceived) had been committed against a white person, especially a white woman, by a minority member; or as a form of protest and dissatisfaction by poor whites who felt economically threatened by the minority community. Race riots were close cousins to lynching, a form of racial violence also prevalent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But while lynching was racial mob violence that singled out a specific target and followed an “orderly” pattern of actions – leading to lynchings being described as “ritualistic” by many scholars of lynching – race riots were acts of mob violence that had no specific targets and were inherently unpredictable and chaotic. Both lynching and race riots enforced existing, white-dominated racial hierarchies through terroristic acts, with race riots inflicting broad physical and psychological destruction on minority communities.

The twentieth century saw a shift in race-based riots. Confusion ensued as many new and different types of race-based rioting were labeled as “race riots” by the popular

\begin{footnotes}
\item[27] J.A. Rodgers, quoted in \textit{Amsterdam News}, 30 March 1935.
\item[28] Given the shifting definition of “race” and “white,” some riots between ethnic groups that today would be classified as white (like Hungarians and Poles) were reported as “race riots” in the nineteenth century.
\end{footnotes}
press. These new riots fit the broadest definition of the term – riots involving race – but the 1935 and 1943 Harlem riots and the 1960s riots upended the nineteenth-century definition of race riot by having the main actors in riot violence be minorities, the targets of the violence primarily being property owned by whites, and the goal of the riots being to challenge the white-dominated power structure. The label “race riot” became muddied and contested. While civic leaders and scholars downplayed or tried to give different names – urban uprisings, ghetto revolts or rebellions, commodity riots - to these new kinds of riots, they all continued to be labeled “race riots” in the popular lexicon. The very definition of race riot mutated, shaped not only by media, government, and scholars, but also by community members and riot participants themselves, as will be discussed in later chapters. These were the groups that sought to claim or discard the label of “race riot” for their own political gains, and who fought over the definition of the term in public forums. Chapter 4 discusses this public discourse on the changing definition of “race riot” in the 1940s in greater detail.

Although the definitive sea change in the definition of “race riot” can be identified with the 1935 and 1943 Harlem riots, a smaller seismic shift occurred in 1919. That year saw an unprecedented wave of riots, earning the nickname “Red Summer” for the bloodshed nationwide, as well as for the purported communist influences. Though the 1919 riots fit the traditional, pre-twentieth-century definition of “race riot,” there was a noted change in the tenor of the riots. As the Chicago Commission on Race Relations noted in its report after the largest and bloodiest of the 1919 riots:

The Negro masses demonstrated very clearly that they would meet violence with violence. This determination of the Negro masses to fight back when one of their race was injured or threatened with injury was the expression of a spirit of revolt that accompanied the migrations, the smoldering embers of which were fanned
into a militant race consciousness by the writings of the younger Negro intellectuals.29

This newfound resistance led later scholars to posit that the 1919 riots warranted a new designation other than “race riot.” Scholars Gunnar Myrdal and Steven Gross termed the riots before 1919 “pogroms” rather than “race riots,” because the white attacks were made “without reprisal and punishment.” Compared to the racial pogroms, Gross argued, the 1919 riots represented a “true riot” because each side fought against the other.30

The Chicago commission correctly identified that a shift had taken place in the spatial and intellectual geography of black America by 1919. Since 1910, blacks had migrated out of the South in increasing numbers, both to widen their economic opportunities and to escape the oppression of the Jim Crow laws, which enforced segregation of blacks and whites in public spaces (such as schools, recreational facilities, and businesses), transit, and social settings. Between 1910 and 1920, at least 329,000 southern-born blacks relocated outside the South, most of them settling in northern industrial centers.31 The migration rates had skyrocketed with the United States entry into World War I, as the traditional flow of European migrant factory workers was cut off during wartime and the draft siphoned young American men away from industrial work. Black workers were drawn to industrial centers to take advantage of the labor shortage. Northern centers of industry such as Chicago and Detroit hired blacks due to the wartime demand for labor, but blacks often remained segregated on the job and were given the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs. And, because black workers were hired in largely

unskilled positions and had less time to accrue seniority, they often lacked job security or union support. The end of the war brought a rude awakening. Black workers were laid off as the pool of white labor grew larger; moreover, those white workers perceived black laborers as an increasing threat given their newfound industrial experience. Black workers also were a threat to unions, as companies traditionally employed blacks as strikebreakers. The economic climate immediately following World War I was fraught with tensions among the various groups of the working class.

1919 found the United States suffused with fear. Involvement in World War I had left many citizens wary of the wisdom of foreign entanglements, and popular sentiment supported greater isolationism. By the end of the year, the United States Congress rejected the Treaty of Versailles over President Woodrow Wilson’s protests, mainly because of the provision in the treaty for the League of Nations. Nativist sentiment grew stronger, and many lobbied Congress to continue the wartime restrictions on immigration by imposing strict quotas. By 1924, the Johnson-Reed Act imposed strict quotas based on immigrants present in 1890, in an effort to reduce the number of southern and eastern European immigrants and to eliminate immigration from Asia and the Middle East. Minorities already in the United States were not exempt from nativist wrath and paranoia; the 1920s saw the Ku Klux Klan rise from the ashes like the proverbial phoenix and enjoy immense popularity, especially in northern cities.


33 One example of the Klan’s popularity and power was the 1924 mayoral election in Detroit, in which the publicly Klan-backed candidate Charles Bowles narrowly lost the election. B.J. Widick, *Detroit: City of Race and Class Violence* (rev. ed., Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 3-4.
Fears over foreign and racial “others” merged with fears of radical ideologies. The successful Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917 established the first nation-state devoted – at least in principle – to the ideology of communism. The prospect of a nation ruled by communists terrified capitalist countries like the United States, which feared that their large labor forces could be swayed to overthrow the capitalist system. The United States provided support to the White Russians, the anti-communist forces who fought the “Red” communists in the Russian Civil War between 1917 and 1923. While the United States provided aid to anti-communist forces abroad, it remained on high alert for any communist or radical activity at home. The government feared that minorities would be susceptible to communism’s message of racial tolerance and equality.

This climate of paranoia – of xenophobia, nativism, and anticommunism – was the backdrop for the bloodiest and most widespread wave of race riots in the United States in the summer of 1919. The *Encyclopedia of American Race Riots* documented seven major race riots in 1919, with the greatest concentration taking place in July.34 Scholarly consensus puts the total number of riots at at least twenty-five that summer.35 The seven major riots had no critical geographic mass as they spread over the nation. Charleston, South Carolina; Longview, Texas; Chicago, Illinois; Washington, D.C.; Knoxville, Tennessee; Omaha, Nebraska; and Elaine, Arkansas, were the major sites of rioting between May and October 1919. As scholar Jan Voogd discusses in *Race Riots & Resistance: The Red Summer of 1919*, however, depending on the exact definition of

“race riot” used and the sources examined, the number of riots could dramatically increase to as many as fifty-six.\(^{36}\)

As mentioned, many scholars have posited a connection between rioting and wartime, most notably Arthur Waskow in his influential comparative work *From Race Riot to Sit-in, 1919 and the 1960s: A Study in the Connections Between Conflict and Violence*.\(^{37}\) There are certainly correlations in the instances of race riots and war – the Civil War and the draft riots in New York in 1863 that devolved into race riots; World War I and the 1919 wave of rioting; World War II and the spate of riots in 1943; and the Vietnam War and the riots of the 1960s. War causes great societal upheaval and exacerbates existing social tensions at the same time that it relaxes the collective moral code to make the idea of inflicting violence more acceptable and palatable to those normally peaceful citizens who must go to war. Thus, citizens are further emboldened to engage in what Waskow deems “private violence,” or acts of violence carried out by private individuals without the sanction of the state, such as riots and lynching.\(^{38}\) The 1919 riots forced American government, on federal, state, and local levels, to explicitly condemn this private violence, which had in many places previously been tacitly approved, because the magnitude of violence was untenable. The tendency in the modern warfare of the twentieth century to cast war in racial terms – to villainize the enemy in propaganda as a hateful, uncivilized “Other” – can provide a degree of social sanction to

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36 Voogd, 5. The reason that the number of riots is traditionally accepted to be on the lower end of the spectrum is that scholars have only counted riots that appear in at least two sources. Differing sources – newspaper accounts, NAACP reports, Tuskegee Institute reports, and the report accompanying the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in 1920 – all have slightly differing lists of riot locations. Underreporting and suppression also have potentially had an impact on the more conservative number of 1919 riots commonly cited.


38 Waskow, 3-4.
racist beliefs. These factors were undoubtedly at play in 1919. But the 1919 riots were unprecedented in their scope and severity in comparison to any wave of riots before or after. In addition to the typical wartime social changes and woes, 1919 saw political and social revolutions afoot both abroad and at home, and at a time when America’s place in the global political power structure was in flux.

This perfect storm spawned an atmosphere in which a kind of “hysterical racism” – “a pathological reaction to the illusion of a gendered threat based on race” – could manifest itself.\(^3^9\) While in reality the presence of minorities did not pose a significant economic or social threat to white communities, fear clouded the judgment of whites in cities and towns large and small across the United States. Imagination rendered the threat of economic competition, loss of white hegemony, and miscegenation much more ominous and urgent than the reality warranted, especially in northern urban areas where the war had brought an unprecedented migration of blacks from the South. Given a war where an emotional public renamed German food and place names to more American, patriotic names, and discrimination against German-Americans ran rampant, a peacetime where paranoia over race and radical ideology reigned supreme was not entirely unexpected. Wartime hysteria and anxiety over an uncertain peace combined with increased paranoia over newly enlarged black populations in the North and the threat of a potential newly militant black population in the South. In this atmosphere of heightened emotion and fear, any minor racial incident could spark a major conflagration.

The most severe and consequently best-studied riot of 1919 took place in Chicago. The Chicago riot was the longest-lasting riot, with the riot raging for five straight days. The state militia required an additional nine days to restore full order to the

\(^3^9\) Voogd, 14.
city. It was also the deadliest riot, with a total of thirty-eight people killed, fifteen white and twenty-three black.\textsuperscript{40} The Chicago riot illustrated the racial problems common to other urban areas that experienced riots in 1919, namely economic competition and disputes over residential and recreational space. The riot also had a profound impact on the public psyche for decades afterward, which is why it merits specific discussion here.

The continuing specter of the 1919 riot was enough to ensure that Chicago did not experience a riot in 1943 despite suffering from many of the same problems as Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York. The riot also set the precedent of publicly investigating not only the events of a riot, but also its longstanding causes and the issuing of recommendations to rectify conditions that led to race rioting. The aftermath of the Chicago riot also cemented practices like residential segregation through racially restrictive covenants, which were an attempt to shrink “borderland” areas and thus reduce the odds of future race riots, since the Chicago riot grew out of conflict between neighboring racial and ethnic groups. Residential segregation would be a major issue in industrial centers in World War II and one of the precipitating factors in the 1943 riots.

As with most riots, the exact circumstances that triggered the 1919 Chicago riot are often disputed. Racial tension was certainly high in the months leading up to the riot. Between July 1917 and July 1919, there were twenty-four instances of racially motivated bombings, with over half of those bombings taking place in 1919.\textsuperscript{41} Most of those bombings were of black residences in white neighborhoods, an attempt to use vigilante violence to enforce residential segregation.\textsuperscript{42} As for the more immediate circumstances that sparked the riot, most scholars agree that the drowning death of a black youth named

\ \begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{40}] Abu-Lughod, 63, 59.
\item[\textsuperscript{41}] Abu-Lughod, 58.
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Eugene Williams on 27 July served as a major catalyst. Chicago was heavily segregated residentially and socially, and its recreational spaces were similarly segregated. The line separating the recreational space on the lakeshore sat at 29th Street: north of the line, whites patronized the shore, and blacks patronized beaches south of the line. But boundary lines were difficult to discern when in the water, as Williams and his friends discovered when their raft drifted into the white section of the lakeshore. White beachgoers began pelting them with rocks to try to drive them out. Williams was struck in the head with a rock as he swam beside the raft, knocking him unconscious and underwater. He subsequently drowned.\footnote{William M. Tuttle, Jr., \textit{Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 6-7.}

Here the stories about the riot’s origins diverged. His friends sought help from a black police officer to arrest the man who had thrown the object at Williams, but a white police officer at the scene refused to arrest the man or to allow the black police officer to do so. One story alleges that Williams’ friends fled and spread the news of what happened as they did so. Another story alleges that the riot originated before Williams’ death, when black and white beachgoers fought along the border of the 29th Street beach – making Williams’ death a result of this fight. Either way, the death of Williams and the police response (or lack thereof) did spur rumors about the beach battles between those residing in black and white neighborhoods.\footnote{Abu-Lughod, 59-60.}

Geography dictated which areas of the city would suffer most from the riots, and predictably the “borderlands” saw the most violence. By 1919, most black residents of Chicago lived in the “Black Belt” area of the city, bounded by major railroad lines and white ethnic neighborhoods that resisted the expansion of the black neighborhood in
every direction. Since 1900, this area of the South Side had become increasingly “black” as new migrants came to town and settled in the black neighborhoods located there, combining to create the concentrated center of the black population known as the Black Belt. Smaller pockets of blacks were sprinkled throughout the city in areas where blacks worked as domestic servants and needed to remain close to their employers’ residences (if they did not serve as live-in servants). World War I had brought explosive growth to Chicago’s black population and overcrowding in the Black Belt area. The United States census showed an increase of Chicago’s black population from 44,103 in 1910 to 109,458 in 1920 – a growth rate just shy of 150 percent. Of that number, an estimated 50,000 blacks had migrated to Chicago between 1917 and 1919. The war also dramatically increased the number of black workers in Chicago’s industries. In the meatpacking industry, black workers increased from 1,100 workers in 1915 to over 10,000 workers by 1919. The inevitable recession in the immediate postwar period as war manufacturing contracted – right at the point in time when returning veterans sought to regain their old factory jobs – meant that in an increasingly shrinking job market, these black workers were seen as a major threat to the economic security of working-class whites. The industrial history of using black workers as strikebreakers, dating to the end of the nineteenth century in Chicago, did nothing to ameliorate the relationship between working class whites and blacks.

The scene of the worst rioting was along the Black Belt’s western border on Wentworth Avenue. The Irish-American and Irish immigrant community occupied the

47 McWhirter, 116-117, 120.
white working-class neighborhood on the western border of the avenue, and the neighborhood sat between the Black Belt and the stockyards that were the biggest industrial employers of black workers. In addition to being directly in competition for industrial employment, these two neighborhood populations also had opposing political points of view, which proved especially deadly in the machine era of Chicago politics. While the blacks were generally Republican, the Irish supported the Democratic machine, and the most notorious gang of the neighborhood, Ragen’s Colts, were supported by Democratic politician Frank Ragen. Ragen’s Colts and the Wentworth Avenue borderline became the deadliest actors and site in the riots. Passing through the area controlled by Ragen’s Colts was the only way for blacks to get to work at the stockyards. Many black victims were beaten and killed as they tried to make their way through the neighborhood to work, whether by streetcar or on foot. When transit workers struck after the first day of the riot, black workers stayed at home and barricaded themselves in the Black Belt.

As would later be noted in the Chicago Riot Commission’s report, the Chicago riot was not a pogrom with passive victims. While they did not tend to be initiators in riot violence – the riot commission’s report cites only two instances in which blacks were “aggressively rioting” outside of the Black Belt – black Chicagoans did fight to defend themselves. The difference in riot injuries supports this vision of black violence committed in self-defense. Sixty-nine percent of white rioters injured were shot or stabbed, which strongly indicated that blacks tended to act individually and in self-

defense. Conversely, sixty-five percent of black injuries were due to beatings, an indication of white mob violence that favored weapons like baseball bats, iron bars, fists, and bricks. White rioters driving cars into the Black Belt to cause trouble found themselves victim to sniping from blacks barricaded inside their homes. The unprecedented scale of black self-defense and pushback against white violence prompted white observers to ascribe to black Chicago a rebellious and militant mentality.

The riot raged through the city largely unchecked for five days. Chicago Mayor “Big” Bill Thompson tried to stop the rioting by posting police at the borders of the Black Belt area to prevent prolonged white attacks in that vicinity, but that left other areas of the city vulnerable as the majority of the police force was stationed in the Black Belt. The state militia finally had to be called to restore order, and it was not until 8 August that everything was under control and the militia could be recalled. Fourteen days of rioting left deep physical and psychological scars on the city and its inhabitants. Thirty-eight people were dead, with a reported 537 people injured. The black community bore the brunt of the violence: twenty-three of the dead were black, as were 342 of the injured. Blacks were also arrested at twice the rate of whites, and represented all seven of the police-inflicted deaths, despite the fact that the riot perpetrators were overwhelmingly white and the victims of riot violence overwhelmingly black.

After the riot, Illinois Governor Frank Lowden established the Chicago Commission on Race Relations to investigate the underlying causes of the riot. This was the first major race riot investigation, and the Chicago Commission and its report, which

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51 The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, 21.
52 The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, 18.
54 Tuttle, 64.
was published in book form as *The Negro in Chicago* in 1922, set a valuable precedent for future riots. The pattern of a top political figure establishing an interracial committee to investigate race riots and their underlying causes with the end result of publishing a formal report became the norm for all subsequent race riots. The process became so normalized that it was quite unusual and slightly scandalous not to have a race riot generate an investigatory commission and a report, as New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia found out after he failed to establish a riot commission in the aftermath of the 1943 Harlem riot.55

The findings of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations also set the tone for future riot commissions, as the assessments of racial conditions by riot commissions from 1919, 1943, and the 1960s are eerily similar in their conclusions of what caused race riots. “Our Negro problem… is not of the Negro’s making,” the authors of the Chicago report wrote.56 The report reminded readers that the status of blacks in society and continuing racial tensions were the fault of whites – from the initial involuntary migration of African slaves to the perpetuation of an unequal society following emancipation. Sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, writing in the early 1940s, referred to this problem of an unequal society created by the white hegemonic power structure as “an American dilemma,” and titled his massive study of the status of black America as such. While the Chicago riot report pointed out the true source of the “Negro problem,” it also acknowledged that the popular solutions proposed by whites did not embrace the report’s definition of the problem. Solutions as wild and varied as the mass deportation of blacks to Africa, the creation of a caste system and complete segregation of races, the

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55 See Chapter 3 for further discussion.
56 The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, xxiii.
establishment of a state especially for blacks, and the “hope for a solution through the
dying out of the Negro race” were all espoused during the aftermath of the Chicago riot.\textsuperscript{57}

The popular response to the Chicago riots was intensified segregation through
sharpening of residential borderlines. In the immediate aftermath of the riot, one city
alderman went so far as to suggest legislating permanently segregated residential areas.\textsuperscript{58}
While the city declined to pass city ordinances enshrining residential segregation,
property owners and neighborhood leaders effectively did so by engaging in the practice
of racially restrictive covenants. Such covenants were designed legally to prohibit black
homeownership or black rental occupancy in areas with strong white resistance to black
expansion. These covenants had originated in St. Louis in 1910, and were later
enthusiastically adopted by northern cities such as Chicago and Detroit as a way to inhibit
the growth of black residential areas.\textsuperscript{59} Chicago used these covenants to eliminate
scattered black populations and to increase the concentration of populations in existing
black areas like the Black Belt. But, while whites remained satisfied that they had
defended their neighborhood from black incursions, such racially restrictive covenants
doomed black urban residential areas to rapid decline due to overcrowding. The end of
World War I did not mark the end of black migration to the urban North, and racially
restrictive covenants ensured that population density in black neighborhoods increased as
the availability and quality of housing sharply decreased. In Chicago, the black
population more than doubled between 1920 and 1930, at a time when racially restrictive
covenants confined black residency largely to the Black Belt.\textsuperscript{60} As is discussed in

\textsuperscript{57} The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, xxiii.
\textsuperscript{58} Tuttle, 63.
\textsuperscript{59} Abu-Lughod, 65.
\textsuperscript{60} Abu-Lughod, 52.
Chapter 3, racially restrictive covenants were not adopted universally. New York City was an example of one city where the absence of such covenants allowed for the gradual expansion of black neighborhoods, and New York avoided the same kind of acute overcrowding problems experienced in places like Chicago and Detroit during World War II.

While Chicago’s riot in 1919 was the most severe and protracted of the 1919 riots, the riots of 1919 proved most horrific in their scope and spread. Chicago demonstrated that urban, northern areas could be just as prone to racial violence as rural southern areas like Elaine, Arkansas, and Longview, Texas, which also saw riots in 1919. The explosion of riots and racial violence across the country made very public the long-simmering race problem that America had. There were myriad local causes for the riots. In Chicago and Baltimore, disputes over space were the catalysts; in Elaine, Arkansas, and Longview, Texas, the perceived economic threat of blacks to white workers was the motivation for rioting; and in Wilmington, Delaware, and Harlem the riots were sparked by perceived breaches of social conduct by blacks against whites. 61 Gary, Indiana, saw labor conflicts spawn riots, while the Washington, D.C., and Charleston, South Carolina riots stemmed from military men forming vigilante mobs. 62 The powerful intersection of race and local politics ignited riots in Omaha, Nebraska, and Knoxville, Tennessee. 63 Despite the unique local circumstances behind each riot, at the heart of all of these riots lay a common theme: a perceived threat to the white power structure and a desirous willingness to extinguish that threat through violence.

61 Voogd, Chapter 3.
62 Voogd, Chapters 4-5.
63 Voogd, Chapter 6.
The orgy of racial violence in the summer of 1919 was seen as too much – as a gross overreaction – and the immediate aftermath prompted a brief period of introspection on race relations in America. Visceral reactions to the riots included the formation of riot investigation committees, as in Chicago, and renewed efforts to pass anti-lynching legislation. Leonidas Dyer, a Congressional representative from Saint Louis, had introduced the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in 1918, as a result of the 1917 race riot that had occurred in East St. Louis and as a result of Dyer’s general concern about the high rate of lynching in the South. The bill did not receive much support. The wave of riots in 1919 led to renewed interest in his proposed legislation and its reintroduction in May 1920. While the Dyer bill passed in the House of Representatives, it ultimately died in the Senate in 1922. Anti-lynching legislation continued to be brought forward at regular intervals but never passed, proving that the horrified reaction in the wake of the 1919 riots had not concerned the appalling state of race relations but the level of violence that had been inflicted to enforce the racial status quo. The presumed absence of the kind of widespread, hysterical racial violence seen in 1919 in subsequent years allowed white Americans generally to ignore lynching and race riots as real and regular occurrences worthy of discussion or legislation.

The 1919 riots, along with a later 1921 riot in Tulsa, Oklahoma, galvanized civil rights activists. The riots violently illustrated that the “racial uplift” ideology advocated by such figures as Booker T. Washington in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was not working. Racial uplift argued for a strategy of adopting white middle-class values, working hard, and placing high value on education and self-improvement to attain social equality and diminish white racism. As the 1919 riots demonstrated, most

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64 Voogd, 145.
whites were all too eager to identify all blacks as antagonistic “others.” And, in many cases in the riots, the very fruits of racial uplift – a rising black middle and professional class, and economic prosperity – provoked whites because they provided evidence of the social equality of blacks, and thus served as threats to white power and hegemony. In the face of the reality that the racial uplift ideology had failed to reduce racism or improve black civil rights, activists abandoned the ideology in the 1920s and took two different tracks to achieving greater civil rights.

More conservative groups, led by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), adopted a legalistic approach to winning equality and more civil rights. If blacks could not appeal to similar social values and common decency to attain equality, they could try systematically to dismantle the legal barriers to equality in housing, education, politics, employment, and public accommodations. The chief architect of this long-term legal strategy was a young lawyer and World War I veteran, Charles Hamilton Houston. Houston and other lawyers, including one of his students, future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, meticulously pursued cases they saw as best able to survive the long road of appeals from local courts to the Supreme Court and expertly argued them through the many necessary appeals. Houston himself would not live to see the results of some of the cases he helped litigate in the early stages, because this long-term strategy took decades to bear fruit, with major Supreme Court victories elusive until the late 1940s and early 1950s (Houston died in 1950).65 Because of the slow progress of these court cases, the NAACP was often criticized for not moving fast

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enough and for not promoting more of the activism that would give more immediate relief and results for the black population.\textsuperscript{66}

Many of the more radical groups that criticized the NAACP’s slow, “top-down” approach to civil rights were drawn to the Communist party and its campaigns for equality, and these organizations engaged in grassroots activism in communities throughout the nation to demand social equality.\textsuperscript{67} These community activists focused their protests on improving job opportunities for blacks by lobbying for non-discriminatory hiring practices and the acceptance of black workers into integrated unions. These grassroots activists also advocated boycotting white-owned stores in black communities that refused to hire black workers in visible positions. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, Harlem was a nucleus for both conservative and radical elements of the civil rights movement, and Harlem’s leaders, including the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., got their start in community leadership through grassroots activism.

The black civil rights movement gained critical mass and became truly national in scope thanks to the increased migration of blacks out of the rural South and into the urban North and West. The expansion of black populations into these areas exacerbated racial tensions, as evident in the 1919 Chicago riot, and shattered the dream of black migrants that the North was a “sweet land of liberty” free of the kind of systemic prejudice and violence they had fled from in the South. Migrants discovered that an informal Jim Crow system was alive and well in the North. But because Jim Crow was enshrined in social institutions and not in the legal code, blacks in the North had more opportunity and


freedom to protest and agitate for greater equality, and cities like New York became the center of a national black civil rights movement.

While blacks had already begun migrating northward prior to World War I, the majority of black migration out of the South – dubbed the “Great Migration” – took place after World War I. The Great Migration was one in a long line of internal migrations in American history. One of the defining characteristics of the United States is the movement of its people. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the existence of a western frontier drove most of this population movement. The “closing” of the frontier in the 1890s – acknowledged by contemporary scholars like Frederick Jackson Turner – marked the reduction of the westward flow of people in the United States and the beginning of alternate directions of internal migration. The first half of the twentieth century saw different patterns of migration, driven by a number of factors.

The dominant pattern in migration in the early twentieth century was from the South to other areas, usually to the north and west. Most of the migration from the South involved rural migrants moving to urban areas in the north and west that were centers of industry. The rise of the automotive industry and its accompanying boost to steel and other industries that produced materials used in the manufacture of cars meant an increasing demand for workers in industrial boom towns like Detroit and Chicago. World War I and the conversion of peacetime industry to wartime manufacture also led to an increasing demand for workers as the traditional labor pool shrunk because of the draft. Many of these World War I migrants chose to stay in their new cities rather than return home to the South. These transplanted Southerners often encouraged their friends and relatives to join them. The Great Depression also had an impact on internal
migration. Many Americans hoped that work would be easier to find in industrial cities
than in their rural hometowns, so the flow of migrants from rural to urban areas
continued. Environmental factors also influenced migration, the most infamous example
being the Dust Bowl and subsequent migration from affected states like Oklahoma to
West Coast states like California.

One group left the South for reasons other than pure economics. For southern
blacks, the North represented a dream for a life without the severe restrictions of the
South’s Jim Crow laws. Industrial centers in the north and west also meant a greater
opportunity for economic advancement, rather than being locked into the sharecropping
system as many rural southern blacks were. While northern factories hired blacks in
limited numbers and only in the most menial and dangerous jobs, they still hired them.

Blacks had been migrating from the South to the North and West since the Civil
War, but the years between 1910 and 1930 saw the highest rates of migration. In 1910,
only five percent of the total southern-born black population of 9,258,000 resided outside
the South; by 1930 that percentage had grown to thirteen percent of a total black
southern-born population of 10,859,000. These figures, drawn from the United States
census, likely obscure a much higher volume of migration, because they fail to take into
account deaths and returns to the South. Also, because of the unreliability of the 1920
United States census, which had considerable problems with under-representation, it is
extremely difficult to determine whether there was a marked difference between 1910
and 1920 and 1920 and 1930.68 It is possible that the decade between 1910 and 1920
might have had a more rapid increase in migration due to work in war industry. It was

Research Memoranda Collection, 1935-1948. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture – General
Research, New York Public Library.
not a coincidence that New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Detroit, all industrial centers, saw the largest gains in black populations between 1910 and 1930. These figures also fail to illustrate the much larger and long-term impact these migrants had on their new communities, since they cannot fully account for children born to these migrants.

The move northward marked a period of adjustment and reflection for migrants, best reflected in literary works from the period. Harlem became the cultural capital of black America, home of the largest population of blacks in the nation and virtually a mini-metropolis in and of itself. Harlem was dazzling for migrants, many of whom were unused to such a large concentration of blacks. Poet Langston Hughes described his 1921 arrival in his poem “Aesthete in Harlem” (1931):

Strange,
That in this nigger place,
I should meet Life face to face
When for years, I had been seeking
Life in places gentler speaking
Until I came to this near street
And found Life – stepping on my feet!

Because Harlem was so large, it afforded black migrants a great deal of freedom – they could spend most of their time interacting with other blacks and not constantly navigating a world dictated by whites. In this sense, Harlem represented, in popular literature, a sort of black utopia, full of promise and unfettered by white hegemony. Thus, the cultural movement in the 1920s and 1930s known as the Harlem Renaissance was not necessarily

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physically located in Harlem, as its writers and thinkers were geographically spread. Rather, Harlem served as a symbolic center for this movement, a place identified with hope and previously unimagined possibilities.

But Harlem was not a utopia in reality. As Hughes wrote in his autobiography, “All of us know that the gay and sparkling life of the so-called Negro Renaissance of the ‘20s was not so gay and sparkling beneath the surface as it looked.” 72 The grittier side of Harlem was captured by Claude McKay in Home to Harlem (1928). 73 McKay, through the exploits and reactions of his two central characters, Jake and Ray, documented Harlem’s nightlife, including drugs, alcohol, and prostitution, and the divergent response to it within the Harlem community. Jake, a World War I veteran and working man, feels invigorated by the edginess of the Harlem fringe, while Ray, a college-educated migrant from Haiti, condemns the moral decadence of the Harlem club scene and ends up fleeing for Europe, where he feels his intellectual needs will be better served. The negative response to Home to Harlem on the part of black intellectuals like W.E.B. DuBois illustrated the uneasiness with the seedy side of Harlem, the flip side of the artistically and intellectually lofty image that many Harlem elite strived to convey to the outside world. 74

The promise of Harlem was dimmed by the Great Depression in the 1930s. Migrants, so hopeful that the area would provide them economic opportunities in abundance, found that many big Harlem businesses, though patronized by blacks, were owned and staffed by whites. Many of these businesses refused to hire blacks in any

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74 Rodgers, 79.
capacity, which prompted community-wide anger and protest that is discussed in Chapter 3. Migrants to Harlem increasingly found themselves on the economic fringe, with their access to jobs largely limited to low-paying service and unskilled positions, and during the depression they faced increasing competition from whites for these positions. Many recent migrants were disqualified from municipal welfare because they had not fulfilled the city’s residency requirements to receive aid. In the face of the harsh reality, the initial promise of Harlem became “a dream deferred.” Langston Hughes summed up the feeling of frustration that the people of Harlem felt in the 1930s in his 1951 poem “Harlem,” sometimes referred to as “A Dream Deferred”:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over –
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load

Or does it explode?  

Other writers, like Richard Wright in his 1940 novel Native Son, illustrated the dislocation and turmoil felt by black migrants. Wright was deeply influenced by University of Chicago sociologists, and their work on black America permeates Native Son. The novel’s protagonist, Bigger Thomas, was a migrant to Chicago, by way of Mississippi. While Bigger was twisted by the overt racism of his upbringing, he found

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75 Hughes, The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes.
77 Gregory, 75.
no salvation in his move northward, only more confusion and temptation. Living in extreme poverty and on the margins of society, Bigger murdered two women, one accidentally and one purposefully, and was swiftly caught and sentenced to death. Wright used Bigger and his plight to argue that black migrants were perpetually rootless, buffeted by racism and helpless against a white hegemony that circumscribed their opportunities. While Bigger’s actions were his own, Wright argued that the environment created by white hegemony almost certainly doomed Bigger, and others like him, to a life of hardship. The North only gave the illusion of freedom, but in reality was every bit as restrictive as the South, and just as harsh in punishing blacks who violated acceptable racial behavioral codes. For Bigger, who transgressed racial boundaries by murdering a white woman, destruction in the form of capital punishment was the only possible end.

Black migrants to the West Coast were also not immune from disenchantment with their new home. Chester Himes, black noir author, wrote two novels about black experiences in wartime Los Angeles, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) and *The Lonely Crusade* (1947). Himes moved to Los Angeles in the early 1940s seeking economic opportunity. He was profoundly disturbed by the city, writing in his autobiography:

> Up to the age of thirty-one I had been hurt emotionally, spiritually, and physically as much as thirty-one years can bear. I had lived in the South, I had fallen down an elevator shaft, I had been kicked out of college, I had served seven and one half years in prison, I had survived the humiliating last five years of Depression in Cleveland; and still I was entire, complete, functional; my mind was sharp, my reflexes were good, and I was not bitter. But under the mental corrosion of race prejudice in Los Angeles I became bitter and saturated with hate.  

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Himes declared that Los Angeles hurt him racially “much more than any city I remember from the South.” His first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, was written in 1943 while Himes was living in Los Angeles, and is semi-autobiographical. Its protagonist, Bob Jones, migrated to Los Angeles for war work and took a semiskilled job in a shipyard. Bob had to remain constantly on guard for fear of crossing invisible racial boundaries; his biggest challenge rested with his white female coworker, Madge, who constantly tried to provoke him. Bob chafed at the restrictions placed on him not only by whites, but by upwardly mobile blacks like his girlfriend Alice’s family, who advised him to simply swallow his anger and accept the inequality while they themselves “passed” for white to climb the social and economic ladder. Bob eventually snapped, calling Madge a “cracker bitch,” and was summarily demoted; he eventually lost his job altogether when he rejected Madge’s sexual advances and she accused him of rape. Like Wright’s Bigger Thomas, the whites surrounding Bob Jones circumscribed his fate; but unlike Bigger, Bob had a greater degree of agency, and he was allowed to choose his final fate, signing up for military service as an alternative to being incarcerated.

White southern migrants, while they did not have to navigate an informal and unwritten Jim Crow system like their black counterparts, still faced feelings of maladjustment and dislocation in the North. Many residents of the northern industrial centers where southern migrants clustered, such as Detroit, perceived the typical southern migrant as a racist, uneducated hick. White Southerners were convenient scapegoats on which incidents of racial violence could be blamed, as discussed in Chapter 2. Industrial cities provided a stark contrast to the rural towns that most southern migrants had left behind, and many struggled with the adjustment. Harriette Arnow’s 1954 novel *The

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Dollmaker portrayed the malaise of a rural Kentucky family that relocated to World War II-era Detroit through the eyes of its main character, matriarch Gertie Nevels. While her husband quickly adapted to life in the industrial North, Gertie longed to return to her southern home and clung to her rural traditions, such as woodcarving, as she struggled to adjust to her new life in the city. The death of her youngest daughter, killed by a train car, served as the catalyst for a stricken Gertie to demand the return of the family to Kentucky, away from the modernity and industry that caused the family tragedy.\textsuperscript{81}

At the same time that migrants streamed steadily out of the South and adapted to an uncertain future in the North, foreign migration to the United States during the period between 1910 and 1940 was continuous but uneven in volume. The 1924 Johnson-Reed Act placed quotas on immigration based on the 1890 census, with the strictest quotas on Asian migrants, who also faced the distinction of being unable legally to become American citizens. The 1924 legislation virtually shut off Asian immigration and severely constricted immigration from everywhere else. Restricting immigration did not change the need among some industries for cheap labor. Immigration – legal and illegal – from Mexico was fueled by demand in the West and Southwest for cheap labor in agriculture and mining. The length of the Mexico-United States border, and the impossibility of effectively patrolling and monitoring all of it, meant that migrant workers could continue to flow from Mexico to the United States. During the Great Depression, these same Mexican migrants, previously embraced because they provided cheap labor, were in the 1930s perceived as taking jobs away from unemployed American citizens. The flow of Mexican migration slowed as Mexicans faced increasing

\textsuperscript{81} Harriette Arnow, The Dollmaker (New York: Scribner Reissue, 2009).
hostility and a widespread deportation campaign that dragged many American citizens of Mexican descent to Mexico along with Mexican migrants.\textsuperscript{82}

Migration, both internally and from Mexico, intensified once the United States officially entered World War II. Between the bombing of Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, and the taking of a special census in 1944, fifteen million civilians moved, some permanently, to new areas, with the prime destinations being the industrial North and the West Coast. When civilian movement is coupled with movement required by the over fifteen million who served in the military, historian David Kennedy estimates that one in every five Americans migrated as a result of the war.\textsuperscript{83} The rate of migration was particularly swift due to the increased demand for workers in war industries, as the United States embraced a total war economy and converted domestic production to military production. The demand for workers outstripped the municipal infrastructure’s ability to handle the influx in some areas, resulting in shortages of housing and consumer goods, overly burdened transit systems, and scant recreational space. This led not only to the unhappiness of recent migrants who were sometimes forced into temporary and overcrowded housing, but also to resentment on the part of the existing urban population as newcomers competed with them for scant resources.

Industry was initially reluctant to convert completely to war production, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. Converting from producing consumer goods like automobiles to military essentials such as bombers and tanks took a great deal of capital and required not only the reworking of existing factories, but also the construction of new factories, such as Ford’s Willow Run plant that was built solely for the purpose of

\textsuperscript{82} See Chapter 1 for more discussion on Mexican migration and deportation.  
\textsuperscript{83} Kennedy, 322.
producing bombers. Companies were hesitant about devoting so many resources to what was essentially a finite demand, as the end of the war would mean another costly conversion back to domestic goods. While government had begun trying to convert industry to military production following the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939, it would not be until American involvement as a combatant in late 1941 that industry finally began complying and converting to war materials production.

One of the other fears of industry during the war was a rapidly changing labor force. The mandatory draft took many young men from the factories to the battlefield, and the war also meant a complete moratorium on immigration from Europe, drying up another traditional source of factory labor. At the same time that the traditional labor pool was shrinking, the conversion to total war economy meant an expectation for increased output, with many factories staying open around the clock to meet production demands. Industry was faced with a tremendous need for more workers, and was forced to recruit workers they had previously marginalized: women and minorities. Because these groups had been largely confined to narrow roles previously, such as secretaries and janitors, they had to undergo job training if they hoped to transition into skilled positions. The great need for labor meant the integration of different racial groups in jobs previously held only by whites, and management feared workplace conflict and stalled production as white workers resisted minority workers being promoted and white workers being required to work alongside minority workers. The FEPC and unions took great pains to educate management on the best strategies for smoothly integrating minority workers into the factories. The unions saw the influx of new workers as a boon for them, an opportunity to extend their power base and be better able to lobby for worker
rights in the postwar period. As such, while some union locals resisted the change to a nontraditional workforce, union organizations on the state and national levels pushed for full inclusion for women and minority workers in their ranks.

The war opened up more opportunities for women, bringing gender issues temporarily into sharper focus. Propaganda focused on the potential women had to contribute to the war effort, from joining one of the women’s military auxiliaries, to taking up a rivet gun like Rosie the Riveter and working in war industry, to frugally rationing food and materials and planting Victory gardens. The idea behind the propaganda, however, was that the relocation of women out of the home to military outfits and the factory floor was only a temporary wartime necessity. While Rosie the Riveter has come to represent a symbol of female empowerment, during the war her slogan “We can do it!” referred not to the ability of a woman to do a “man’s job,” but to the ability of women to help the war effort. As evidenced by the War Manpower Commission jingle that gave Rosie her name, Rosie took up riveting as a way to contribute to Allied victory while her boyfriend, Charlie, served in the Marines.84 Thus, Rosie was not learning a new job skill that would serve her well in the postwar economy, but rather riveting was a way swiftly to bring Charlie home and return to a life of idealized domesticity.

With women increasingly entering the industrial workforce, juvenile delinquency became a major concern. Millions of men served in the military, including many fathers, essentially creating one-parent households headed by women. The fear was that more mothers entering the workforce, out of necessity for both the war effort and their economic survival, meant an increasing number of latchkey children. Teenagers were

84 Kennedy, 351.
considered most susceptible to devolving into a wayward life of petty crime with a lack of parental supervision. Concerns about juvenile delinquency were especially high for minority groups, as discussed in Chapter 1, where fears of juvenile delinquency intersected with fears of minority disloyalty and lack of patriotism.

Worries over racial issues and their potentially disruptive impact on home front unity and war materials production are a central discussion point for this dissertation. Wartime circumstances gave a nascent national black civil rights movement, based in the North, leverage to get the federal government to act on employment discrimination, a key focus of northern civil rights organizers during the 1930s. The creation of the FEPC helped to bring national attention to chronic employment discrimination, and brought unions into greater dialogue with the federal government in drives to improve industry’s record on inclusion and nondiscrimination. The success of the FEPC helped to drive the “Double V for Victory” campaign, which agitated for greater equality and freedom at home while fighting for freedom abroad. The FEPC also brought the Mexican-American community into greater dialogue with the black civil rights movement, and helped inspire the younger generation to realize that a change in tactics was necessary; racial uplift had very clearly not worked by World War II, and in the postwar era an emerging Chicano movement would adopt the strategies of the black civil rights movement.

The war also brought the issue of segregation and racism in the military to the forefront. The relocation of all Japanese-Americans due to the dubious claim of “military necessity” created a thorny situation for the American legal system and was a blatant violation of the American creed that the United States was fighting hard to spread overseas. The confinement of blacks to either the most menial or most dangerous non-
combat jobs, or to entirely segregated combat units that were only reluctantly deployed in battle, seemed a gross waste of manpower in a global conflict which required maximum efficiency to win the war speedily. Segregation in the military created social frictions between black and white troops, leading to riots on overseas bases and attempted lynchings in military locations in the American South.

Racial conflict both on the home front and in the American armed forces created a foreign relations image problem for the United States. Not only did racial misconduct threaten to weaken the bonds with nonwhite allies – crucially important in a war with as global a scale as World War II – it also threatened to weaken the American brand of democracy in the postwar world. As the war progressed, it became increasingly apparent that the postwar world would appear much different than that of 1919. The process of decolonization created newly independent nations of nonwhite peoples in Africa and Asia at precisely the time that the United States maneuvered for global dominance against the other remaining superpower, the Soviet Union. The competition for the hearts and minds of people across the globe hinged on the integrity of the nations’ creeds. The United States during World War II, with its Jim Crow system firmly in place on the home front and in its military, the wartime internment of Japanese-Americans, and the race riots involving blacks and Mexican-Americans that swept the country during 1943, had a poor record of living up to its creed of liberty and equality. It was a record American policymakers were desperate to change, or at least “spin” by using propaganda, to remain competitive in the postwar period. Creating an atmosphere similar to that of 1919, where “hysterical racism” flourished and waves of racial violence convulsed the country immediately after the war, was not an option if the United States wanted to counter its
reputation of hypocrisy. To that end, the American government and the American public were much more receptive during the war to candidly discussing the “American dilemma” – the racism that prevented the United States from fully living up to its creed. As the tumultuous home front proved, the success of that discourse varied, and its long-term effects proved to be less than certain.
CHAPTER 1
LOS ANGELES AND A “ZOOT SUIT EPIDEMIC”

“Those who desire to become American citizens should drain their blood, dye their hair blond and change the color of their eyes... A Mexican will always be a Mexican.”

In September 1942, the War Production Board (WPB) declared war on the zoot suit. The extremely long coat and the voluminous legs of the zoot suit ran afoul not only of conventional fashion sense, but also of wartime clothing rations. In a Life profile on zoot suits following the WPB announcement, zoot suits were referred to as “solid arguments for lowering the Army draft age to include 18 year olds.” The Life profile featured the zoot suit community in Washington, D.C., where the typical wearer of the zoot suit was a jitterbug enthusiast or hepcat, and all the wearers in the Life photographs appeared to be white. The zoot suit was depicted as a frivolous teenaged fad, and the wearers were scorned for their materialism and vanity.

A month earlier in Los Angeles, a young man named José Díaz was murdered at a local swimming hole called Sleepy Lagoon. A group of Mexican-American youths dubbed the “38th Street Gang” were arrested and charged with his death. The 38th Street Gang was one of many neighborhood groups of Mexican-American youths in the city, and like many who embraced the pachuco subculture as a means to rebel against both their Mexican-born parents and mainstream white society, they wore zoot suits. In Los Angeles, the zoot suit was not merely a frivolous teenaged fad, but a “badge of

86 “Zoot Suits,” Life, 21 September 1942, 45.
hoodlumism.” When worn by whites, the zoot suit was seen as an annoying teenaged fashion, but when worn by Mexican-American or black teenagers, the zoot suit became associated with criminality. Part of this association came from the fact that some zoot-suiters did indeed commit crimes, but their numbers were greatly exaggerated by both the police department and the press. The press especially cemented this image of the zoot suit as a badge of hoodlumism in the public imagination by blaring headlines about crime-waves ostensibly committed by zoot-suit clad youths, a “zoot suit epidemic” that spiked first with the Sleepy Lagoon murder case in August 1942, and again in the spring of 1943.

The “zoot suit epidemic” reached a crescendo in June 1943, when white soldiers and sailors, fed up with the inability of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) to curb the zoot-suited hoodlums, took matters into their own hands. Over a span of several days, vigilante white sailors prowled the city searching for young Mexican-American and black men dressed in zoot suits. The servicemen stripped these young men of their clothes and beat them to a bloody pulp before moving on to search for new victims. The violence was eventually quelled by the military declaring Los Angeles closed to off-duty servicemen, but the shock of this “riot” reverberated across the country.

While the zoot suit riot gained national attention, discourse at the national level about racial problems during 1943 typically failed to count Los Angeles as a site of race rioting, as discussed further in Chapter 4. Even in scholarly treatments, the Los Angeles race riot is not often discussed in conjunction with the other 1943 riots. There are two reasons for this. First, the “race” involved in the Los Angeles riot was overwhelmingly Hispanic, not black. For most of the nation in the 1940s, race was bilateral – white or
black – and, historically, the victims of race rioting were black. This was not the case in the West, in which the bilateral notion of race was “white” and “nonwhite,” allowing for the presence in significant numbers of Hispanics and Asians. The West also was historically the site of race riots targeting these groups, such as the anti-Chinese riots of the late nineteenth century. Because it was the Northeast, Midwest, and South that dominated the national discourse, those geographically specific views on race and race riots dictated how the discourse evolved, and thus the Los Angeles riots did not fit so neatly.

Secondly, there were more explicit international implications for the Los Angeles riot than with the other 1943 riots. The Hispanic population in Los Angeles was at the time predominantly Mexican, and many of the victims of the riot were the first-generation born in the United States to immigrant parents. The involvement of a Mexican borderland/diasporic community in the Los Angeles riot raised the specter of a potential foreign relations fallout with Mexico, as the nation maintained close ties with the Mexican-American community through the Los Angeles consulate. As discussed in further detail later in this chapter, the United States State Department actively worked to dismiss the label “race riot” in describing the Los Angeles riot, pressuring both American and Mexican media to downplay the racial overtones of the riot and to focus instead on the perceived criminality of the beaten zoot-suiters in an attempt to avoid a diplomatic rift with a crucial ally. This official labeling of the riot as random vigilantism and not a race riot made it more difficult for commentators to include Los Angeles in later national discussions of 1943 riots.
The “zoot suit riot” exposed existing tensions within the racial hierarchy in Los Angeles. The status and role of Mexicans had been – and continues to be – in flux in the ever-changing racial hierarchy of Los Angeles. Through World War II, Mexicans occupied the next-lowest spot in the nonwhite racial hierarchy, with Asians at the bottom following restrictions on Asian immigration in the early twentieth century. Mexicans were alternately the targets of Americanization attempts, repatriation, work programs, social and governmental scrutiny and bias, and violence. Because understanding the status of the Mexican-American community is crucial in understanding the origins of the riot, the riot’s place in the national discourse, and how the riot fits in the context of the riots in Detroit and Harlem, this chapter focuses on gender, community, and identity issues more than the other chapters. The Mexican-American community represented, alternately, a diaspora and a borderland group. Robin Cohen in *Global Diasporas* argues that they constituted a “borderland” group, reasoning that the inability of the United States to maintain its border with Mexico facilitated “two-way flows of people, goods, ideas, music, and lifestyles” that “erode the sacred spaces carved up by the nation-state.”

This close connection and cultural influence between countries did not seem to fit into the conception of a diaspora that was distinctly “apart” from its host community. Cohen thus sees the American Southwest as a borderland where a hybrid culture dominates.

Cohen’s vision of the American Southwest may be accurate fifty years in the future. It is problematic for both the present and the past. In the present, Mexican and mainstream American cultures remain largely separate and at odds, with whites in the

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Southwest selectively appropriating aspects of Mexican culture they deem acceptable. There are still very vocal calls in the white community to restrict Mexican immigration, enforce English as the lingua franca, and to repress certain aspects of Mexican culture with which they are uncomfortable. It is likely that the demographic shift poised to make Hispanics the majority in some southwestern states in the near future will eventually result in a more successful blending of cultures and the creation of a true borderland. In some ways, then, the current Mexican community fits much better into the category of diaspora.

The diaspora label fit even better when applied to the Mexican community in the Southwest in the early twentieth century. While the territorial boundary between the United States and Mexico was porous, rigid boundary lines in the form of strict residential segregation existed within Los Angeles and other American cities with large Mexican-American communities. In Los Angeles, such segregation was informal; in Texas cities like San Antonio, Mexican-Americans were subject to the same Jim Crow laws as their black counterparts. But internal borderlands existed. Mexican-American neighborhoods in Los Angeles abutted both white-dominated downtown and military installations staffed primarily by white servicemen, creating daily social interactions between different groups. Mexican-American youths in the 1940s, often the first generation born and raised in the United States, created a hybrid identity for themselves that melded Mexican influences (slang, pride in Mexican identity) with American cultural aspects (zoot suits, jitterbug dancing, cultural mores). This youth culture readily embraced youths from other races and ethnicities, creating bonds based on common affinities and youthful rebellion. But aside from the hybrid youth culture, the interactions
facilitated by neighborhood borderlands seemed to reinforce racial and cultural differences. Continued connections to Mexico in the form of diplomatic ties to the consulate made the Mexican-American community seem perpetually foreign; the existence of a large percentage of Mexican-born migrants, whose first language was Spanish, reinforced a greater degree of difference from whites than Los Angeles’ black community, who were native-born and English-speaking.

An analysis of shifting white attitudes toward the Mexican-American community in Los Angeles helps to explain why the group has at times exhibited both traits of a diaspora and a borderland group. Historian Natalia Molina argues that Mexicans did not attract significant government attention until around 1900. There are multiple reasons for this belated attention to Mexicans. Prior to 1900, Mexicans had been viewed as a “transient” population that would eventually return to Mexico. The population of Mexicans remained steady, however, and between 1900 and 1910 the foreign-born Mexican population skyrocketed, increasing by 631 percent in the county and 589 percent in the city of Los Angeles. 89 The census numbers did not include native-born citizens of Mexican descent, who fell under the category of “white” until the 1930 census. 90 The spike in Mexican migration coincided with the decline of Chinese migration in the same time period. As the United States passed more laws restricting Asian immigration, including the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1907-8 Gentleman’s Agreement restricting Japanese immigration, white Californians turned to Mexicans as a new source of cheap labor. Thus, the restriction of one diasporic community directly led to the expansion of another.

90 Molina, 7
Once white Californians realized that the Mexican population had become permanent, they began to situate them in the racial hierarchy. In most American cities, the racial dynamic was bilateral, white and black. Los Angeles did not resemble most American cities. The presence of Asians and Mexicans, who fit into neither existing category, problematized the racial order. Instead, the category of “nonwhite” occupied the position below whites in Los Angeles. Where each individual nonwhite group placed in the hierarchy in relation to one another, however, constantly shifted over the course of the twentieth century.

As their numbers increased, Mexicans attracted the interest of social agencies, including those in the fast-growing field of public health. The rapid population increase in cities such as Los Angeles fed the growth of public health departments, which consistently focused on using their powers to regulate minority populations in the name of the greater good. These professionals considered the poor living conditions and sanitation among Los Angeles’s minorities to be a result of their inherent biological inferiority, rather than a product of a structurally racist system that limited opportunities for social advancement and material improvement. These governmental agents also considered many of these minority groups to be permanently “alien,” lumping migrants and native populations together and declaring groups like the Chinese and Japanese incapable of improvement and assimilation into mainstream American society.

Unlike their Asian counterparts, Mexicans were considered “assimilable.” The status of Mexicans was inextricably linked to the status of Asians; in comparison, white

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For a contemporary account of living conditions of Mexicans from a white reformer’s perspective, see G. Bromley Oxnard, *The Mexican in Los Angeles: Los Angeles City Survey* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1970). The original was published in 1920 and was a report commissioned by the Interchurch Movement of North America.
Angelenos viewed Mexicans as less foreign and less objectionable than their Asian counterparts. Mexicans were also crucial to ending numerous labor shortages. Public health programs promoting “Americanization” targeted Mexican women and children. Mexican women were an incredibly small portion of the total immigrant population, but they assumed central importance to public health officials because of the stereotype of the “fertile Mexican woman.” Public health clinics promoted prenatal care for Mexican women and offered parenting classes. They hoped that the young and impressionable children would better absorb American cultural values than their immigrant parents.  

The Great Depression brought about a sudden shift in perceptions of Mexicans. Their cheap labor, so attractive before, was now deemed a threat to white jobs. The old biological inferiority theory that public health officials associated with Asians now came to apply to Mexicans as well. Eugenecists like C.M. Goethe wrote screeds condemning the immigration of Mexicans, labeling them a “sanitation menace” that caused outbreaks of disease. He also advocated bringing Mexicans into the immigration quota system employed by the Johnson-Reed Act, which he hoped would guarantee America’s “race purity”; he already bristled at having “the blight of ten million Negroes.” Other whites worried that Mexicans would become a burden on the state’s welfare system as they were forced out of many jobs in favor of whites. For all these reasons, Los Angeles’s white population began clamoring for the massive repatriation of Mexicans, whether immigrant or native-born, to Mexico.

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92 Molina, 9-10  
Americans believed deporting Mexicans would significantly reduce unemployment and create new jobs for whites, ending the depression; companies laid off Mexicans, and some aided them in returning to Mexico. Some who were too proud to take welfare or charity returned voluntarily. Many Mexicans maintained close familial, psychological and cultural ties with their homeland, and it was not uncommon for many to plan on eventually returning. Not all returned voluntarily, however. Most Mexicans who left the United States during the Depression were deported.

The deportation process in the 1930s was often haphazard and biased. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) could arrest immigrants without warrants (which were often obtained after the fact), and detainees were not typically allowed access to a lawyer until after interrogation. The INS inspector had total control of the proceedings, acting as “interpreter, accuser, judge, and jury.” While the cases were sent to the national office in Washington, D.C. for final review, in practice they generally just approved the findings of the inspectors. The reason reported for most Mexican deportation cases was being in the United States illegally. Over 400,000 Mexican aliens were repatriated (along with their American-born children) in the 1930s. Mexicans represented nearly fifty percent of deportees between 1930 and 1939, despite making up just one percent of the population.

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95 Balderrama and Rodriguez, 2.
97 Balderrama and Rodriguez, 66.
98 Balderrama and Rodriguez, 66.
99 Balderrama and Rodriguez, 64.
101 Balderrama and Rodriguez, 67.
In Los Angeles, the Mexican consulate played an active role in resisting forced repatriation, and aided both Mexican nationals and United States citizens of Mexican descent. The consulate, established in 1885, provided legal assistance to Mexican nationals and in some cases acted as an advocate for Mexican workers in labor disputes. Though the consulate could only technically intervene on behalf of Mexican citizens, for the first fifty years of its existence the consulate served the Mexican community in general. Close family ties and different citizenship rules in the United States and Mexico made drawing distinctions between resident aliens and American citizens difficult. While the United States extended citizenship to all people born on American soil, even if their parents were aliens, Mexican law recognized all children born to Mexican nationals as citizens of Mexico, regardless of place of birth. Another issue was the large number of resident aliens in Los Angeles. Mexican immigrants who became naturalized American citizens were often viewed as “traitors” who had severed their ties to their homeland and culture. Many Mexicans appeared reluctant to become naturalized American citizens because they desired to remain under the protection of the consulate.

Initially, the Mexican consulate remained optimistic that only illegal immigrants would be deported when the county of Los Angeles began repatriating in earnest in 1931. The actions of overzealous INS agents and sensationalized accounts in the press, however, exacerbated anxieties within the Mexican community over raids.

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103 Balderrama, 7.
104 Balderrama, 7-8.
106 Balderrama, 8-9.
107 Balderrama, 15-16.
conducted by immigration officials. The Mexican consulate refused to aid the INS in its search for illegal immigrants. The consulate did aid those who wanted voluntarily to return to Mexico, arranging for transportation and giving limited monetary aid. The Mexican community in Los Angeles also had a number of community organizations that provided aid to repatriates, including the Comité de Beneficencia Mexicana [Mexican Charity Committee], a mutual aid society established in the early 1930s.

Aside from the Los Angeles consulate, the Mexican government largely remained out of the repatriation issue. Scholar Yossi Shain describes the relationship between the Mexican government and the United States diaspora as one of “profound ambivalence.” Historically, the relationship between the government and the diaspora was tied to the relationship between the United States and Mexican governments. The two governments often used the diaspora members as “pawns or even hostages in the service of their domestic and bilateral agendas.” The consulate’s actions ran afoul of United States-Mexico relations, and a 1936 directive from the Mexican government ordered consul officials to restrict socio-political activities and made clear distinctions between Mexican nationals and Mexican-Americans.

While many whites felt that too much charity was “wasted” on Mexicans, and argued that repatriation was an answer to relieve the burden they placed on the California welfare system, not all white interests were in favor of large-scale repatriation. Farmers and agricultural corporations viewed legislation to deport Mexicans as especially

\[\text{\small Footnotes:} 108 \text{ Balderrama, 16-17.} \\
109 \text{ Balderrama, 18.} \\
110 \text{ Balderrama, 25-26.} \\
111 \text{ Luin Goldring, “The Mexican State and Transmigrant Organizations: Negotiating the Boundaries of Membership and Participation” (Latin American Research Review Vol. 37 No. 3 [2002]), 62.} \\
112 \text{ Shain, 669.} \\
113 \text{ Shain, 674.} \\
114 \text{ Shain, 677; Balderrama, 115.} \]
disastrous, since they had trouble recruiting and retaining white workers for field labor.\textsuperscript{115} Not until after the United States entered World War II and all industries faced labor shortages did the government express interest in bringing Mexican workers back into the United States. Founded in 1942, the Bracero program recruited tens of thousands of Mexican workers to fill crucial industrial and agricultural jobs over the course of the war, including many who had only recently been repatriated back to Mexico.\textsuperscript{116} The Bracero program likewise stimulated an accompanying spike in illegal immigration, leading a Border Patrol official to complain that the program had prompted Mexican laborers to believe that “if they can get to this side by any means or avenue they will be given work.”\textsuperscript{117}

The outbreak of World War II in Europe and the end of the Great Depression sparked a massive internal migration within the United States, and Los Angeles was one of the areas of growth. The Los Angeles metropolitan area (which included Glendale, Long Beach, Pasadena, and Santa Monica), registered a population of nearly three million in the 1940 census. By the time of the special census in 1944, Los Angeles had seen a population growth of just over fifteen percent, to a population of nearly 3.4 million.\textsuperscript{118} In terms of population added, Los Angeles ranked first among metropolitan areas, followed closely by Detroit.\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{116} Balderrama and Rodriguez, 287. The term “Bracero” literally means “day laborer,” but also has a more negative associative meaning of “wetback.”
\textsuperscript{117} Correspondence to W.F. Kelly (Assistant Commissioner for Alien Control, Immigration and Naturalization Service, Philadelphia, PA), from W.F. Miller (Chief, Border Patrol Section), dated May 28, 1943. Kelly Lytle-Hernandez Collection of Border Patrol Research Papers, Box 2 Folder 17, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.
\textsuperscript{118} U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, “Characteristics of the Population, Labor Force, Families, and Housing, Los Angeles Congested Production Area: April, 1944 (Los Angeles and Orange Counties).” “Tension File” Box 442 (Alabama-California), folder titled “Los Angeles.” Records of the
The 1940 census had only three racial categories – White, Negro, and Other – and because of the practice of categorizing Mexican-Americans differently based on how much indigenous heritage they had, it is difficult to determine their population by looking at the racial categories in the 1940 census. Mexican-Americans with more so-called “Spanish blood” were often categorized as white, while Mexican-Americans with greater indigenous heritage often fell under the Other category. A better measure of the Hispanic population is language. After over a decade of repatriation and voluntary movement back to Mexico, the 1940 California census recorded a Spanish-speaking population of 416,140; the city of Los Angeles was home to a quarter of that population, at 107,680.\textsuperscript{120} Two years later, the city’s Mexican population had grown to 133,000, and another 86,000 Mexicans became residents of surrounding areas in the county.\textsuperscript{121} This reflected a recovery from the depression-era mass deportations, as the period between 1931 and 1940 had seen immigration from Mexico to the United States fall to just 22,319, the lowest rate since the 1890s and a ninety-five percent decrease from the 1920s rate.\textsuperscript{122}

Los Angeles’s black community also grew exponentially during the war. Between 1940 and 1943, Los Angeles had an estimated increase of 42.6 percent in black

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\textsuperscript{119} Office of War Information release, dated April 19, 1944. Records of Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Joy P. Davis, Compliance Analyst, 1943-45, Box 405, folder titled “Census Data.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

\textsuperscript{120} Testimony of Carey McWilliams (Chief, Division of Immigration and Housing, Department of Industrial Relations, State of California), Before the Los Angeles County Grand Jury, October 8, 1942. Copy obtained from the Ron Lopez Sleepy Lagoon Research Papers Ca. 1930-1970, Box 2 Folder 2, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.


\textsuperscript{122} “Mexican Immigration to the United States, by Ten Year Periods, 1891-1940.” Division of Review and Analysis: Reference File, 1941-1946, Box 409, folder titled “Mexicans Spanish Americans.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
population. By the time of the special census a year later, the black population had increased by another 30.6 percent. The greater Los Angeles area saw a seventy-eight percent increase in the black population from 1940 to 1944, with the increase in the Los Angeles city limits a staggering eighty-six percent. Los Angeles served as such a mecca for migration because of its expanding role in war industries. By 1943, Los Angeles was the third most valuable war production center in the nation, behind Detroit and Chicago, with $8.5 million in war supply contracts and facility projects. Los Angeles ranked second in war supply contracts, serving as an industrial center for aircraft and ship production. Lockheed and Douglas both had aviation plants in the Los Angeles area, employing nearly 90,000 workers by July 1944.

Many minority workers initially found it difficult to break into war work in Los Angeles. Testifying before the Los Angeles County Grand Jury in October 1942, Guy Nunn from the War Manpower Commission explained the unique problems facing workers of Mexican descent. Bureaucratic red tape prevented older, Mexican-born workers from participating in the war industry due to their non-citizen status, while American-born Mexican youths faced a lack of training facilities that would take them. “Companies often refuse to hire Mexicans on the grounds that they are not skilled

123 Social Science Institute, “Internal Migration of Negroes, 1940-43 (Estimates). Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of John A. Davis, Director, Box 360, folder titled “Migration – Negro.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
124 “Notes for Tension File, November 18, 1944. “Tension File” Box 442 (Alabama-California), folder titled “Los Angeles.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
125 War Production Board, “Twenty Metropolitan Areas with Most War Supply Contracts and Facility Projects.” Records of Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Joy P. Davis, Compliance Analyst, 1943-45, Box 405, folder titled “Census Data.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
126 “Employment in Selected Aviation Plants, July 1944.” Division of Review and Analysis: Office Files of Consultant Wilfred C. Leland, Jr., 1943-1945, Box 384, folder titled “Minority Workers by Industries.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
workers. The schools turn around and refuse to train Mexicans to skills because the companies will not hire Mexicans in many instances,” Nunn testified, arguing that this cycle of rejection was depriving a manpower-starved war industry of a new supply of workers.

A 1942 report by the Office of War Information (OWI) confirmed Nunn’s testimony and documented a recalcitrance not only to hire minority workers, but also to train them for war work. The OWI found that the Los Angeles branch of the United States Employment Service was actually complicit in restricting minority access to training by locating training facilities far away from minority population centers, making it logistically difficult for minority workers to attend training classes. Even those who did manage to complete training found it difficult to gain employment if they appeared “too racial” or “too dark,” with companies preferring less-experienced white help. The aircraft industry, one of the biggest employers, insisted that it did not discriminate in hiring but had few Mexican-Americans on its payrolls.127

The FEPC also lacked the power to enforce its own provisions regarding the hiring of minorities, which exacerbated the difficulties faced by minority workers in Los Angeles. Mexican-Americans fortunate enough to get hired in the war industry, like blacks, were confined to the lowest-paying and most menial jobs, with little opportunity for advancement.128 While the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) parent

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127 Special Services Division, Bureau of Intelligence, Office of War Information, “Spanish Americans in the Southwest and the War Effort, Report No. 24,” dated 18 August 1942. Division of Review and Analysis: Reference File, 1941-1946, Box 409, folder titled “Mexicans Spanish Americans.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
organization officially supported minority workers – both as a collaborative effort with the government to boost war industrial production, and as a long-term strategy to gain more members and grow union power for the postwar period – many local union branches ran counter to national union policy and rejected minority workers. “In the great majority of the occupations and trades which are unionized, the Mexicans are automatically barred from, as they are not allowed to belong to the union, thus keeping them from renumerative employment,” stated a report on crime statistics, connecting the inability to get satisfactory employment with an uptick in crimes committed by minorities.129

In an effort to improve the participation rate of Spanish-speaking Americans in the war effort, the government produced a booklet, “Spanish Speaking Americans in the War: The Southwest.”130 The booklet was a bilingual publication, meant to serve as propaganda both for companies considering hiring Spanish-speaking Americans in war industries and for Spanish-speakers themselves to feel included in the war effort. The booklet highlighted the important role played by Spanish speakers in the armed services, food production, and war industry through photographs, statistics, and personal stories. Illustrating the importance of Mexico in the Spanish-speaking community, a picture of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Mexican President Manuel Ávila Camacho shaking hands graced the back cover of the booklet, complete with inspiring statements from both.131


130 “Spanish speaking Americans in the War: The Southwest.” Division of Review and Analysis: Reference File, 1941-1946, Box 409, folder titled “Mexican Workers.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

131 “Spanish speaking Americans in the War: The Southwest.” Division of Review and Analysis: Reference File, 1941-1946, Box 409, folder titled “Mexican Workers.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
By the end of 1942, manpower shortages resulted in an increasing reliance on minority workers in war industry, including in semi-skilled work. In the shipyards, more Mexican-Americans found employment in semi-skilled and skilled jobs than in manual labor, a trend unheard of prior to the war. Mexican-Americans also enjoyed opportunities for advancement in the aviation industry, with some rising to the position of supervisor. The number of non-white workers in war industries in Los Angeles and Orange counties increased by nearly seventy-five percent between May 1943 and March 1945, with the largest employment of non-white workers in shipbuilding and aviation, and the highest concentration of minority workers by job in foundries. Minority workers by the end of the war were employed in Los Angeles war industries at a rate higher in comparison to their overall population numbers. Where eighteen percent of the non-white population was employed in war work, nearly thirteen percent of the white population was so employed. This heavy concentration in industries most vulnerable to mass layoffs during reconversion to peacetime production made minority workers much more vulnerable than their white counterparts.

At the same time that Mexican-American workers started to make gains in the workplace, the community’s youth faced increased scrutiny. Beginning in the late 1930s, a new generation in the Los Angeles Mexican community – American citizens of

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132 “Wartime Employment of Mexican-Americans.” Records of Division of Reviews and Analysis, Office Files of Cornelius Golightly, Compliance Analyst, Box 397, folder titled “Mexican-Americans.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

133 War Manpower Commission, “Non-White Employment – Southern California,” dated April 20, 1945. Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of John A. Davis, Director, Box 365, folder titled “Utilization of Minority Group Workers Conferences...WMC (So. California). Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
Mexican heritage – became the subject of increasing dialogue and debate. By 1942, nearly twenty percent of the Mexican population in Los Angeles was under the age of seventeen.\textsuperscript{134} These young people coming of age in the late 1930s and 1940s were caught between two conflicting visions of themselves – that of the white community and that of the Mexican community. Faced with this prospect, some youths chose a third vision – their own – which raised ire with both their elders in the Mexican community and the general white community.

The overwhelming stereotype of Mexicans in white Los Angeles was of a lazy, uneducated, overly fertile, unhygienic people who were only successful at unskilled labor, and even then they were considered less acceptable than other workers. The Mexican community was acutely aware of this. In an attempt to improve their status in the racial hierarchy, some members of the community bought into the ideology of “racial uplift.” Heavily promoted to blacks in the late nineteenth century, notions of racial uplift suggested that by living morally, getting an education, and working hard, a minority group could “earn” the respect – and therefore greater civil rights and economic opportunities – of the majority.

Many in the Mexican-American community in Los Angeles believed that the first American-born generation was uniquely situated to achieve this goal. They argued that these youths had the best of both worlds: bilingualism, immersion in both cultures, and better access to education and a higher standard of living than their parents. Publications like \textit{Mexican Voice Magazine} heavily promoted the racial uplift ideology to Mexican youth:

Why is it that we as Mexicans do not command respect as a nation? Are we doing justice to our race when we do not endeavor to change this attitude? But what can one individual do about this situation? He can uplift the Mexican name by constant work — hard work with others who have the same high ideals and aims. By securing an education, not just high school but a college one. By being a clean-cut fellow, trustworthy and dependable, with the highest moral aims. A Mexican boy can and must provide a favorable opinion wherever he goes.\textsuperscript{135}

A 1938 article in \textit{Mexican Voice}, written by young college student Paul Coronel and titled “Analysis of Our People,” argued that the path in life chosen by this generation of Mexican-American youth would be utterly critical to the future health of the community as a whole. Coronel saw education as the foundation of this uplift strategy, a means to overcome “misfortune and backwardness” in the Mexican community that he argued was the outcome of oppression from colonial overlords and corrupt governments. This history of oppression, he argued, directly contributed to rampant vice, gullibility, and a low level of enrollment in high school and college, perpetuating the cycle of oppression. It was the duty of Mexican youth to break the cycle by taking every advantage of educational opportunities extended to them, to pursue higher education in greater numbers, and to use their education to obtain better jobs and thus open the door for future generations of Mexican-Americans.\textsuperscript{136}

While they were expected to conform to white middle-class values, youths were also expected to remain proud of their Mexican heritage. In a 1938 article in \textit{Mexican Voice} titled “Are We Proud of Being Mexicans?” journalist Manuel Ceja recounted


witnessing repeatedly Mexican-American youths identifying themselves as the less-loaded ethnic label “Spanish” when asked about their heritage by whites; he chastised these youth for betraying their proud heritage. 137 Many in the Mexican-American community argued that it was entirely possible to become fully American while retaining a sense of cultural identity and pride in being Mexican. This idea ran counter to the attitudes of those in the community with greater ties to Mexico, like the Mexican Consul, who argued at a San Dimas community meeting that “those who desire to become American citizens should drain their blood, dye their hair blond and change the color of their eyes… A Mexican will always be a Mexican.” In seeking ways to navigate between their Mexican heritage and American citizenship, young Mexican-Americans were encouraged to adopt the model of other immigrant groups, like Italians and Germans, who retained their native culture through ethnic organizations and were able to be accepted as American without denying their national heritage. 138

Supporters of the “racial uplift” ideology heavily promoted education for both boys and girls, but the expected levels and outcomes of education differed by sex. Boys were expected to go to college if possible and have steady jobs and careers in order to raise the profile of the community and to be able to provide for their families. No such outside-the-home career expectations were regularly placed on women. Proponents of adopting white middle-class values regarded homemaking as “the supreme desire of every girl,” and encouraged girls to finish high school and take advantage of the home


economics classes offered to prepare them better for a life as good wives and mothers. While community elders did not explicitly discourage Mexican women from pursuing college educations and professional careers, they did not actively promote that option for them, either.\textsuperscript{139} The most common path for Mexican women to better their economic position was by marrying upstanding, good providers; for some Mexican women, this meant marrying a white man who had unlimited job prospects compared to a \textit{paisano} [fellow countryman]. When looking at marriage statistics, it was much more common for Mexican women to marry outside their ethnic group than for Mexican men; when a Mexican man did marry a white woman, he typically had to have a very successful career.\textsuperscript{140}

Since Mexican women were not typically expected to have careers outside the home, it fell on them to help uplift their community largely through their moral behavior and responsible parenting. Raising a new generation of Mexican-Americans with impeccable morals, a hard work ethic, and a good education was the primary role of the Mexican woman. Because moral behavior was stressed more for women than men, women who did not fit into this strictly virtuous model met with much harsher criticisms than men who violated this high moral code of uplift, seen shortly in the discussion of \textit{pachucas} [female members of the \textit{pachuco} subculture]. The “favorable opinion” that \textit{Mexican Voice Magazine} argued Mexican men should actively cultivate in the white community rested with an evaluation of their performance in the public sphere, because


the status of Mexican men was more intrinsically tied to work and education level than that of Mexican women. Thus, so long as their public interactions with whites were positive representations of their community, men had more leniency in their conduct in the domestic sphere.

Not all Mexican youths bought into the racial uplift ideology and were willing to do what their elders expected of them. These youths rebelled against the older generation’s pressure to fit into white middle-class mores to achieve higher status for Mexican-Americans. Given that ideas of racial uplift had been unsuccessful for the black community, and had in fact been abandoned by major organizations like the NAACP after World War I, there were not very many reasons to believe that conforming to white standards would garner any more respect. Some Mexican-American youths, like youths in every generation, strove to define themselves in opposition to their parents and societal norms.

In Los Angeles, a subculture called *pachuco* emerged in the early 1940s among Mexican-American youths. Among Mexican-Americans in California, the term was roughly equal to the English “hick” and was a term of derision, but over time the word evolved and became more equivalent to the English “punk”; some scholars connect the term “pachuco” to the modern “cholo.”¹⁴¹ *Pachucos* had their own slang, a form of Spanish called Calò, distinctive hairstyles and dress, a willingness to socialize with members of different racial and ethnic groups, and a fondness for typical youth activities like dancing and partying. The exact origins of the term “pachuco” are muddled. Carey

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McWilliams, an activist writing in the 1940s, describes the difficulty in trying to pin down the term:

Many theories have been advanced and reams of paper wasted in an attempt to define the origin of the word ‘pachuco.’ . . . Some say that the expression originally came from Mexico and denoted resemblance to the gaily costumed people living in a town (Pachuca) of this name; other have said it was first applied to border bandits in the vicinity of El Paso. Regardless of the origin of the word, the pachuco stereotype was born in Los Angeles.142

One of the ways *pachucos* chose to express themselves outwardly was the zoot suit. The exact origin of the zoot suit is unknown. Some scholars place the earliest recognizable influence on the zoot suit in 1920s Mexican cinema; others cite influences as varied as Rhett Butler in *Gone With the Wind*, Cab Calloway, Mexican film star Tin Tan, and Frank Sinatra.143 The zoot suit gained popularity among youths across racial and gender lines – in fact, the zoot suit is more often associated with blacks than Mexicans – and the exact styling of the suits differed by location and group.144 The typical zoot suit contained a long jacket with exaggerated shoulders, and oversized pants that flared out at the knee and came in at the ankle. The Los Angeles variation of the zoot suit tended to be less colorful than its East Coast counterparts. One former Los Angeles zoot-suiter described his typical garb:

Yeah, everything was brown. And the coat came down to here [pointing to the knees], right down to here. And the silver chain from the pocket, and the wide, like a pancake, hat, with a real wide brim. If you were short, you would look like a thumbtack! And we used to dress up like that to go to the dances. All of us. All wear the same thing. With the big chain, we’d twirl the chain.145

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144 Alvarez, 84-85.
145 Antonio Alvarez, quoted in Alvarez, 86.
Many Mexican youths in Los Angeles completed their look with tattoos or a hairstyle named the “duck bill,” a pomaded hairstyle worn long and slicked to the center and back.\textsuperscript{146}

While the pachuco subculture was real, it was the stereotype of the pachuco that gained the most widespread attention. According to the stereotype, pachucos were solely Mexican, wore zoot suits exclusively, and engaged in criminal activities as a way to rebel against the societal conventions of both their parents and mainstream white society. In reality, not every zoot-suiter was a pachuco, not all zoot-suiters and pachucos committed crimes, and not all zoot-suiters were Mexican. Writer Beatrice Griffith recalled that “you find youth of Scotch-Irish Protestant, Jewish or Italian, Russian or Negro background who have learned to speak Spanish with Pachuco emphasis [a slang known as Calò], wear the traditional Pachuco clothes and haircuts, and otherwise become lost in the group.”\textsuperscript{147} Socialization across racial and ethnic lines within the pachuco subculture hinted that young Angelenos formed bonds based on a mutual rejection of societal norms. In mainstream Los Angeles culture, though, the pachuco appeared as solely Mexican and nearly always as delinquent.

The Mexican-American community did not embrace pachucos. They were seen as rebels and their prominence in white consciousness, which was disproportionate to their presence in the Mexican-American population, was seen as incredibly detrimental to the goal of racial uplift. A 1943 article in the Mexican Voice directed at Mexican-American servicemen complained, “These teensters of your descent are giving our group

\textsuperscript{146}“‘Zoot Suit’ Crimes in Los Angeles,” Report to Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities in California to California Legislature, 1943. Richard Griswold del Castillo Papers, Box 14 Folder 3, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.

\textsuperscript{147}Mazón, 4.
a bad name.”

The article encouraged the main readers of the *Mexican Voice*, the older generation and those among the younger generation who embraced notions of racial uplift, to police the actions of the pachucos to preserve the reputation of the Mexican-American community. And, in fact, pachucos were accused of not being Mexican enough; but, at the same time, neither were they perceived as “white.” Mexican writer and diplomat Octavio Paz wrote that the pachuco had “lost his whole inheritance: language, religion, customs, beliefs.” They were described as a lost generation of Mexican-Americans, or as “cultural bastards” uncomfortable in both the Mexican culture of their parents and the white, mainstream culture of their American birthplace.

If pachucos were looked down upon, they had it much easier than their female counterparts. Pachucas met much stiffer resistance in the Mexican-American community because they represented not only youthful rebellion but also challenges to patriarchy and gender conventions. The stereotypical pachuca was typically overtly sexual, with clothes that accentuated her womanly curves – tight sweaters and skirts – and high, teased hair styles (referred to as “rats”) as well as heavy makeup. She was uninhibited in public spaces, violating lady-like norms by speaking in slang, smoking, and engaging in fights, for which she hid razors in her rat. Pachucas could also transgress gender norms – some pachucas dressed in the zoot suits of their male counterparts and adopted a butch style. Older Mexican-Americans often interpreted these butch pachucas as lesbians. Parents held up the pachuca as a cautionary tale for their daughters – media scholar Rosa Linda

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151 Author’s name redacted, FBI Report, “Zoot Suiters: Racial Conditions (Spanish-Mexican Activities) in Los Angeles Field Division,” dated 1/14/1944. Richard Griswold del Castillo Papers, Box 11 Folders 7-8, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.
Fregoso recalls her mother referring to pachucas as *muchachas corrientes y callejeras* [cheap, street-roaming girls].\(^{152}\) Pachucas posed as a threat to the community and to patriarchal ideals because they, and specifically their sexuality, could not be contained.

The reality of pachucos and pachucas differed from the stereotype. Many youths showed deference to elders by refraining from speaking Calò in their presence as a sign of respect. Young women were more likely to understand Calò than speak it themselves, or admit to knowing it among polite company; women who openly admitted to knowing and using Calò risked being labeled a *puta* [whore] because of the negative perception of pachucas.\(^{153}\) Among many Mexican-American youth, the pachuco/a style of dress and hairstyle was simply fashionable; not all who adopted it embraced all aspects of the subculture. In fact, especially among women, many who wore the clothing and hairstyles associated with the pachuco/a subculture actively rejected being labeled as pachuco/a. The difference between pachuco/a and those emulating the style often lay in the degree to which they expressed their styles, with true pachuco/a being labeled more “extreme.”\(^{154}\)

After the United States entered World War II, many came to associate the zoot suit with anti-war protests. With strict cloth rationing, the zoot suit became not just seemingly outlandish but unpatriotic. Many Mexican-American and black young men wearing zoot suits verbally sparred with young men in military uniforms, reinforcing white views of zoot-suiters as un-American. While it is true that some youths wore the suits as a form of social protest and as a visible sign of identifying with their ethnicity first and Americanness second, zoot-suiters did not hold universally anti-military

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\(^{152}\) Rosa Linda Fregoso, “Homegirls, Cholas, and Pachucas in Cinema: Taking over the Public Sphere,” *California History* Vol. 74 No. 3, Mexican-Americans in California (Fall 1995), 316-327.


attitudes; many, in fact, joined up. Still, many conservative whites continued to associate the zoot suit with anti-war sentiments.

While some white youths wore zoot suits, the overwhelming white response to zoot suits was critical. Young men and women wore zoot suits as a way to rebel against conformity and assert their own independent identity. Whites attempted to deal with this challenge by associating zoot suits with criminal activities and juvenile delinquency. Some professionals began to identify a sinister “zoot suit movement” across the United States. One article published on 19 June 1943, a few weeks after the zoot-suit riot, in *The Science News-Letter*, described the zoot-suiters as “unorganized,” though they had the potential, the author stated, to “suddenly . . . ‘congeal’ into a unified group for intensive and sometimes threatening fighting.” Dr. Fritz Redl, a professor at Wayne University’s School of Public Affairs and Social Work in Detroit, and the author of a study investigating the phenomenon, characterized the zoot suit as “a symbolic expression of potential unity of attack.” Redl saw zoot-suiters as homogenous in their mindset and motivations, and argued that the zoot suit served as an easy identity marker so that these similarly minded youth could join forces quickly in case of conflict. The article was quick to avoid stirring up hysteria over zoot suits in the wake of the recent Los Angeles riots, stating that not all zoot suit wearing youths were criminals; they could also be jitterbug enthusiasts and young people rebelling against their elders. The overall tone of the article was condemnatory, finding the zoot suit phenomenon detrimental to America’s youth and linked to juvenile delinquency.

Juvenile delinquency had evolved into a national concern, not just a phenomenon attached to particular minority groups. Wartime witnessed an increase in juvenile delinquency in both the United States and Great Britain. The mobilization of women in war industries made American society especially concerned about unsupervised youth. In Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and local newspapers reported a crime wave by zoot-suited Mexicans in the first years of the war. But, as Edward Escobar has shown, in Los Angeles the crime rate was actually lower during the war. The year 1942 saw a twenty-five percent reduction in crimes reported from the previous year, and 1943 saw a drop as well. Mexican-Americans continued to be arrested at prewar rates.\(^\text{157}\)

The total number of juvenile arrests, however, increased steadily throughout the war. Between 1940 and 1941, there was a sixteen percent increase in juvenile delinquency arrests, with a spike in violence and auto thefts. Mexican and black youths accounted for fourteen percent of the increase.\(^\text{158}\) While more whites were arrested for all crimes combined, Mexican youths had higher arrest rates for serious charges like homicide, rape, robbery, and felony assault.\(^\text{159}\) Los Angeles County’s juvenile delinquency records from 1941 showed an eighty-one percent increase in robbery arrests for Mexicans, compared to an eighty-eight percent increase for blacks and a twenty-five percent decrease for whites; a 119 percent increase in assault arrests for Mexicans, compared to an eighty-eight percent increase for blacks; and a forty-eight percent


\(^\text{159}\) Escobar, 189.
increase in arrests for grand theft auto, compared to twenty-three percent increase for blacks and a sixteen percent increase for whites. Escobar’s research demonstrated that the spike in arrests of Mexicans during the whole war can be better understood in the context of changing laws and renewed enforcement of existing laws. For example, when arrests of Mexican juveniles were broken down by category, over fifty percent of arrests fell under the categories “property crimes” and “noncriminal detention,” with “violent crimes” never reaching higher than eleven percent of the total arrests during the war. “Noncriminal detention” was a catch-all category, and was often used by the LAPD as a way to control Mexican youths without formal charges. In terms of the actual prosecution of juvenile delinquents, Mexican youths faced the same rates as their black and white counterparts, and actually had lower prosecution rates for violent charges. Despite statistics that indicated otherwise, the press continued to report that there was a crime wave of epic proportions instigated by zoot-suited youth. The William Randolph Hearst-owned papers – the Los Angeles Examiner and Los Angeles Herald and Express – have been particularly implicated in creating an anti-Mexican hysteria, but local governmental officials did little to stem the fear-mongering. In fact, the official government view of Mexicans seemed to be that they were biologically inferior and inclined toward crime. Newspapers latched onto incidents of gang violence and cited them as evidence of the danger of the Mexican pachucos, disregarding the fact that many victims of gang-related altercations were fellow Mexicans. One such example is the Sleepy Lagoon case in 1942, widely considered to be a precursor to the 1943 riots. The

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161 Escobar, 191-193.
162 Escobar, 195-96.
press fixated on the case as the latest example of a growing Mexican problem. The case reflected the legal bias against Mexicans and did much to promote the image of zoot-suited pachucos as troublemakers and criminals.

On the night of 1 August 1942, José Díaz, a young Mexican migrant, attended a neighbor’s birthday party in East Los Angeles near a gravel pit used as a local swimming hole and dubbed “Sleepy Lagoon.” Díaz left the party early in the morning of 2 August, and was found a half hour later, dying of repeated blunt trauma and stab wounds. Díaz died shortly after being transported to the hospital. The same weekend had seen an upswing in violent crime in East Los Angeles, and it was because of this that Díaz’s death attracted attention. Police arrested twenty-four men and women on suspicion of murder, and in the subsequent week swept through the area in a crackdown on gang violence, arresting approximately six hundred young people.

It became apparent that there were significant holes in the prosecution’s case against the “38th Street Gang” as they came to be called (named after the street where the group lived). Witness testimony placed the group’s arrival at the party as later than Díaz’s departure; in fact, two female members of the gang had discovered the dying Díaz shortly after their arrival. Despite problems with the case, the press continued to hype criminal activities of Mexican-Americans and inflamed public opinion to the point where press sensationalism attracted attention from the Office of War Information. The OWI tried to get the press to remove blanket associations of gang violence with Mexicans in their stories and to run positive pieces about Mexican-Americans. The OWI also

163 Pagán, 1-2.
165 Pagán, 222-23.
appealed to the district attorney and judge presiding over the Sleepy Lagoon case to
e xercise leniency.\textsuperscript{166}

As it turned out, the district attorney and judge were less interested in justice than
in sending a message to would-be delinquents. In January 1943, an all-white jury found
twelve of the defendants guilty of all charges; five were found guilty of lesser charges
and another five were acquitted.\textsuperscript{167} The verdict and the harsh sentencing of the guilty
outraged the Mexican-American community and local civil rights activists.

Soon after the trial ended, community activists founded the Sleepy Lagoon
Defense Committee, whose goal was to seek an appeal and a successful reversal of the
verdict. The committee was dominated by white and black civil rights activists and
headed by Carey McWilliams, a liberal journalist and activist who had served four years
as the head of California’s Division of Immigration and Housing. The committee
publicized the plight of the convicted youths by circulating petitions and publishing
pamphlets and books about the case.\textsuperscript{168}

The first publication, a pamphlet entitled \textit{The Sleepy Lagoon Case} with a
foreword penned by committee member Orson Welles, appeared in June 1943 and was
reprinted in September.\textsuperscript{169} The second was a short book written by a Hollywood
screenwriter, Guy Endore, in June 1944, and titled \textit{Sleepy Lagoon Mystery}.\textsuperscript{170} Both
publications presented the facts of the case and foregrounded the biases present in the
prosecution and sentencing. They also underscored the committee’s belief that the

\textsuperscript{166} Griswold Del Castillo, 37
\textsuperscript{167} Mazón, 21.
\textsuperscript{168} Mazón, 23-27.
\textsuperscript{169} \textit{The Sleepy Lagoon Case} (Los Angeles: The Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, 1943). Copy obtained
from N.A.A.C.P. General Office Files 1940-55, Zoot Suit Riot File 1943-44.
\textsuperscript{170} Guy Endore, \textit{The Sleepy Lagoon Mystery} (Los Angeles: The Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, 1944).
Copy obtained from N.A.A.C.P. General Office Files 1940-55, Zoot Suit Riot File 1943-44.
Sleepy Lagoon case, along with the later zoot suit riots, represented the work of a fascist fifth column present in the United States, promoting racism and strife and undercutting American unity.

The Sleepy Lagon case hinted at another ugly reality Mexicans faced: police discrimination and brutality. The increasing arrest rate of Mexicans corresponded to an increasing rate in complaints brought against the police department on behalf of Mexicans. The first twenty years of the twentieth century saw only seventeen charges of police misconduct toward Mexicans; in the interwar period, the number jumped to fifty-six. Most of the charges in both time periods involved the use of unnecessary force. Only two cases in the years between 1920 and 1939 resulted in a sustained complaint, one for conduct unbecoming an officer and one for an illegal search. \textsuperscript{171} Interactions between the Mexican-American community and the LAPD grew increasingly combative. The police often harassed Mexicans who entered predominantly white parts of town, arrested Mexican women solely for the purpose of demanding sexual favors, and detained youth who appeared idle on trumped-up charges of vagrancy. Young men were often the recipients of beatings, especially if the officers thought that they had been “insulted.” As a result of continual discrimination and violence, the Mexican-American community harbored a deep distrust of the police force. \textsuperscript{172}

The makeup of law enforcement agencies in Los Angeles did nothing to ease the tense relationships with the Mexican-American community. An FBI report conducted after the riots found only twenty-two of the 2,547 members of the Los Angeles Police Department, or less than one percent, were of Spanish or Mexican descent. The Los

\textsuperscript{171} Escobar, 135.
\textsuperscript{172} Escobar, 175-76.
Angeles Sheriff’s Office fared slightly better at three percent, with thirty of 821 deputies of Mexican heritage. Even more disturbingly, given the rise in the number of arrests of Mexican youth for juvenile delinquency, only three members of the Los Angeles County Probation Department were of Mexican descent (and interestingly, given the promotion of homemaking for women in the Mexican-American community, all of the probation officers of Mexican descent were women). Officials there cited a high need for Mexican-American probation officers, but complained about a dearth of qualified candidates to meet the high demand.\textsuperscript{173}

Another source of tension in the Mexican-American community arrived with the war: a sudden onslaught of military installations and servicemen in Los Angeles, in the very areas bordering many Mexican-American neighborhoods. Los Angeles attracted servicemen on weekend leave from bases in the surrounding area; up to 50,000 servicemen on leave in Los Angeles was typical for any given weekend.\textsuperscript{174} The biggest disruption to the daily life of those in the Mexican-American community was the construction of the Naval Reserve Armory. The Armory was designed to be a training school for communications, and the servicemen who went through it were invariably white given the Navy’s policies of segregation during World War II. The Armory was situated in the neighborhood of Chavez Ravine, home to working-class Mexican-Americans and adjacent to two other predominantly Mexican-American enclaves, Alpine Street and Temple Street. The geographic setting of the Armory ensured that Chavez Ravine was not the only neighborhood affected by the daily comings and goings of

\textsuperscript{173} Author’s name redacted, FBI Report, “Zoot Suiters: Racial Conditions (Spanish-Mexican Activities) in Los Angeles Field Division,” dated 1/14/1944. Richard Griswold del Castillo Papers, Box 11 Folders 7-8, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.

\textsuperscript{174} Mazón, 67-68.
sailors working and on leave; downtown Los Angeles was accessible via Figueroa Boulevard, which meant that white servicemen had to pass through all three Mexican-American neighborhoods in the area. ¹⁷⁵

Mexican-Americans perceived the presence of the servicemen as an intrusion, and the less-than-warm reception they received rankled the servicemen. Juvenile delinquency in Los Angeles, especially among Mexican-Americans, was at its highest concentration in the Alpine and Temple areas. Both were home to “street gangs,” which, while not necessarily criminal, were certainly territorial. ¹⁷⁶ Hostile encounters between servicemen and Mexican-American youth proved alarmingly frequent, and ranged from verbal abuse to physical altercations. The fact that Mexican-American youths dared to “push back” against white encroachment on their neighborhoods offended the servicemen’s notion of white privilege. ¹⁷⁷

A more grave transgression was the harassment of women. Female Angelenos complained of harassment by white servicemen; many women wrote to Navy officials deploring the unwanted attention they received, to no avail. The cases of harassment of white women by Mexican-American men garnered far greater concern. ¹⁷⁸ As was mentioned in the Prologue, the threat to the sanctity of white womanhood served as a major psychological trigger of white racist violence, and the “white woman attacked by a hypersexual black man” became a common trope in rumors that started race riots. In Los Angeles, brown replaced black in that trope, and isolated incidents became magnified. To white Angelenos, these stories of harassment of white women by Mexican-Americans

¹⁷⁵ Pagán, 146-147.
¹⁷⁶ Pagán, 151-152.
¹⁷⁷ Pagán, 155.
¹⁷⁸ Pagán, 158-159.
fed into the picture the press had constructed of an entire minority youth population that was delinquent and dangerous – and in need of being stopped.

The riots first began on 3 June 1943, and as in many other riots, the exact origins of the event were initially shrouded in conflicting rumors. In one story, the *New York Times* reported that the attacks on zoot-suiters formed part of a larger “clean-up campaign” by servicemen, prompted by an assault on two Navy wives in East Los Angeles.\(^{179}\) Another story traced the beginning of the attacks to jealousy over Navy men talking with young Mexican women.\(^{180}\) The Navy attributed the cause of the altercations to a much earlier time, saying that they had begun with an assault on sailors in December, and that over fifty similar incidents had occurred in early 1943.\(^{181}\) The media focus on zoot-suit violence had overlooked a growing problem of violence between servicemen and civilians, which seemed to foreshadow the violence exhibited by servicemen in the riots. Between 1 May and the start of the zoot-suit riots, police recorded eighteen violent incidents involving servicemen, with seven resulting in fatalities.\(^{182}\) Only one of those incidents involved zoot-suiters, but since the press had been hyping zoot-suit crime, the image of the criminal zoot-suiter dominated the public consciousness more than the image of violent servicemen.

In fact, two incidents in the Mexican-American neighborhood of Alpine, on 30 May and 3 June, seemed the likeliest catalysts for the riots. On 30 May, sailors and zoot-suiters fought, allegedly over young Mexican women. Subsequent retaliatory vigilante actions by off-duty LAPD officers against the zoot-suiters in Alpine exacerbated the

\(^{182}\) Mazón, 68-69.
situation. The riots started in earnest on 3 June in Alpine, when soldiers jumped a group of Mexican-American zoot-suiters, ironically on their way home from a meeting at a police station to discuss ways to curb juvenile delinquency.

The rioting lasted several days, flaring up every night. Groups of servicemen roamed the city streets, searching out and beating Mexican and black youths with clubs and chains and stripping them of their distinctive zoot suits. The opening lyrics for the late 1990s neo-swing song “Zoot Suit Riot” by the Cherry Poppin’ Daddies mirrored the disjointed and chaotic nature of the early riot:

Who’s that whisperin’ in the trees? / It’s two sailors and they’re on leave Pipes and chains and swingin’ hands / Who’s your daddy? Yes I am Fat cat came to play / Now he can’t run fast enough You’d best stay away / when the pushers come to shove

If their desired targets were not immediately available, the military mobs were not above breaking into homes in search of zoot-clad youths. The LAPD jailed the beaten zoot-suiters instead of their attackers, further validating the vigilante actions of the servicemen and escalating the intensity of the rioting. The few isolated outbreaks of violence the first night spiraled into an all out “zoot war” in the next few days, expanding to include the Boyle Heights neighborhood in East Los Angeles, a Mexican-American community which, unlike the Alpine-Temple-Chavez Ravine area, did not have a long history of

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183 Escobar, 235.
184 Mazón, 69-70.
187 Pagán, 167.
hostile encounters with servicemen.\textsuperscript{188} The riot also eventually spread to Watts, a predominantly black neighborhood.\textsuperscript{189}

The attacks were not confined strictly to zoot-suiters, either. As one unidentified black reservist recalled:

I was coming home on the street car tonight when a big bunch of sailors got on, moved along to where I sat. In the seat across from me there was a young Mexican shipyard worker with a helmet and work clothes. They dragged the Mexican kid out of the car. Outside he was undressed completely, and his clothes taken away. Then he was beaten and kicked around. They came up to me, and one guy said “you one of them zoot suiters too?” I said no, and pointed to my clothes, ordinary street clothes. I said I was in the Air Corps Reserve and they said they didn’t care a damn what I was. Then they dragged me off, and the street car went on. Outside they moved in on me, but then a police car drove by, and they left.\textsuperscript{190}

Another black serviceman named Leo Johnson, on leave and in uniform, recalled being harassed by a group of “40 or 50” white servicemen who advised him to “get the hell out of town,” and moved in on him when he resisted being told what to do; he too was saved from a beating by the presence of a police car.\textsuperscript{191} If the riots had begun as vigilante justice against perceived criminals, they very quickly devolved into a very traditional race riot where victims were not targeted for their personal style but for their skin color. As \textit{Survey Graphic} noted in its August 1943 article exploring the riots, of the Mexican youths pictured in police line-ups – arrested often on charges of “vagrancy” even when they were the ones beaten – less than half of them wore zoot suits.\textsuperscript{192} Rather than policing a specific transgressive group, the white mob punished the minority community

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{188} Pagán, 173.
\item \textsuperscript{189} Pagán, 179.
\item \textsuperscript{190} Unidentified black serviceman, quoted in “Press Blamed for Spread of Zoot Suit Riots,” \textit{PM}, 10 June 1943.
\item \textsuperscript{191} Leo Johnson, quoted in “Press Blamed for Spread of Zoot Suit Riots,” \textit{PM}, 10 June 1943.
\item \textsuperscript{192} “Behind the Zoot Suit Riots,” \textit{Survey Graphic: A Magazine of Social Interpretation}, August 1943. Copy obtained from N.A.A.C.P. General Office Files 1940-55, Zoot Suit Riot File 1943-44.
\end{itemize}
as a whole for daring to challenge white privilege and authority – in the form of resisting white incursions into minority neighborhoods, objecting to poor treatment of minority women at the hands of white men, and engaging in activities that whites deemed “unpatriotic” like speaking a foreign slang or flaunting clothing rationing by wearing zoot suits.

The black eyewitnesses discussed above both questioned white authority, and as such were nearly targets of mob violence themselves before fate, in the form of a passing police car, intervened. That in both instances the presence of a police car served as a deterrent, despite the well-documented lack of police intervention throughout the rioting, suggests that the mob recognized that the police tacitly supported vigilante violence only against certain targets deemed delinquent, namely zoot-suited youths and Mexican-Americans. The black eyewitnesses represented neither; both were in the military, with one dressed in street clothes, the other in his uniform. To be caught committing violence against an unsanctioned “target” would place the servicemen in serious trouble, as the police would be much more likely to enforce law and order than when servicemen were attacking groups singled out as “criminal.” In addition, attacking fellow service members could earn them harsh punishment from military authorities.

Admiring press coverage of the violence in the early stages of the riot, which in all likelihood further legitimized soldiers’ actions in the mind of white mobs, prolonged the riot. In its first story relating to the riot, the Los Angeles Times chose the headline “Zoot Suiters Learn Lesson in Fights with Servicemen” to grace the front page of the local news section. The story went on to condone the violence: “Those gamin dandies, the zoot suiters, having learned a great moral lesson from servicemen, mostly sailors,
who took over their instruction three days ago, are staying home nights.”

The local press that had hyped the connection between zoot suits and juvenile delinquency and criminality welcomed the vigilante justice exercised by the sailors, figuring it as a potent response to a perceived problem that the LAPD had been impotent to address or stamp out. The civilian population was convinced by the press depiction of the riots as corrective violence against the zoot-suiters. Riot witness Marietta Lee, who was sixteen at the time, described picking up Marines in her mother’s car and taking them to the riot scene. “Los Angeles was like a war zone and we had to do something about it. The pachucos had just taken over. I felt that I was doing my share for the war effort.”

But as the rioting spun out of control, the tone of coverage changed. By the morning of 8 June, the Times had the riot as front page news, and the applauding tone had changed to one of “riot alarm” as the worst day of rioting made it impossible to ignore that the violence no longer remained confined strictly to a perceived criminal element. The LAPD had finally deemed the altercations a riot on the evening of 7 June and had summoned the whole police force to work with Navy shore patrol to contain the rioting. Citizens who listened to police radio flocked to riot areas and made the task of crowd control more difficult. The rioters had increased in mass so much that traffic downtown was blocked by marauding mobs searching for zoot suiters.

On 7 June, both the Army and Navy declared a section of Main Street out of bounds for servicemen; the next morning, the Eleventh Naval District declared the entire

193 “Zoot Suiters Learn Lesson in Fights with Servicemen,” Los Angeles Times, 7 June 1943.
195 “Riot Alarm Sent Out in Zoot War,” Los Angeles Times, 8 June 1943.
city of Los Angeles off-limits to sailors on liberty in an attempt to stem the violence.\textsuperscript{196}

An estimated 3000 servicemen roamed Los Angeles looking for victims at the height of the rioting before the ban was implemented.\textsuperscript{197} The ban radically decreased the rioting, but bouts of rioting continued to occur until 10 June. There were no reported fatalities during the rioting, and only 112 people who reported serious injuries. The unusually small number of serious casualties was in part due to the nature of the rioting, in which roving bands spread out in search of targets rather than coalesced into large masses in a few places. It was also in part due to the nature of the targets – as scholar Eduardo Obregón Pagán noted, “young civilians made difficult prey,” since they were familiar with the neighborhoods and could flee and hide more easily.\textsuperscript{198} No numbers exist for less serious injuries, which were more likely to be unreported. Between 4 June and 10 June, the bulk of those who required emergency medical treatment were civilians; only eighteen of the 112 people treated were servicemen. Civilians also made up the bulk of those arrested, with ninety-four civilians, mostly zoot-suiters, arrested, in comparison to twenty servicemen. Another 500 people were taken into police custody.\textsuperscript{199} Nearly 200 were juveniles, and another 200 juveniles were released to their parents without formal charges pressed.\textsuperscript{200}

Some scholars, most notably Mauricio Mazón, have argued that the soldiers and sailors who participated in the rioting did so not merely because they were fed up with

\textsuperscript{196}“Los Angeles Barred to Sailors by Navy to Stem Zoot-Suit Riots,” \textit{The New York Times}, 9 June 1943, 23.
\textsuperscript{197}“Press Blamed for Spread of Zoot Suit Riots,” \textit{PM}, 10 June 1943.
\textsuperscript{198}Pagán, 180.
\textsuperscript{199}Counter-Intelligence Summary on Zoot Suit Riots. Richard Griswold del Castillo Papers, Box 9 Folder 3, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.
\textsuperscript{200}Exhibit no. 1 \textfrac{1}{2} to dispatch no. 1855, from William P. Blocker, American Consul at Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, dated August 3, 1943, on subject of “Zoot Suit Disturbances at Los Angeles, California.” Richard Griswold del Castillo Papers, Box 9 Folder 3, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.
police inactivity, but also because they were under immense psychological pressure.

Mazón wrote:

By mid 1943 the romance of the ideal serviceman had faded appreciably for both civilians and servicemen. In many instances the psychological behavior of servicemen paralleled that of disgruntled workers, such as the coal miners [who struck in spring 1943]. There was a notion of “letting off steam” – which in the military took the form of “kidding around” – that exemplified passive resistance to the war.201

The perceived criminality of the zoot-suiters made them an acceptable target for venting frustration with the jarring transition from civilian to military existence. Statements from the Navy in New York Times coverage of the riot indicated that most of the Navy rioters had been in the service between one and six months, and the rioters “showed a spirit as of a college fraternity initiation” during the riot.202 Indeed, an internal Naval communication indicated that among the servicemen rioting, there were “no old timers” but instead “young reservists just caught and they are egged on by civilians telling them what [a] fine job they are doing and by the press.”203 Because the zoot-suiters were represented in the press as not only criminal, but unpatriotic, still-to-be-deployed soldiers and sailors could beat them out of a sense of vengeance for their counterparts already fighting and dying overseas, as well as to prove themselves when they had not yet had the opportunity to be battle-tested. Stripping the pachucos of their zoot suits also allowed the recently-recruited servicemen to exercise a degree of power and control that they had had stripped away from them since joining the military; Mazón describes the defrocking of

201 Mazón, 57.
203 Phone conversation between Captain Heim and Admiral Bagley, dated 11 June 1943. As cited in Mazón, Appendix F, 133.
zoot-suiters as “a degradation ceremony in which recruits took the role of drill instructors and zoot-suiters were assigned the part of the recruits.”

The role of zoot suits in the riots attracted far more press than the role of the military. Dr. Joseph Catton, a San Francisco psychiatrist, explained the zoot suit as a cry for attention. When asked why other cities did not experience similar riots connected to zoot suits, Dr. Catton answered that “some communities attract more . . . quackery and bizarre expressions of all types.” The Los Angeles City Council seriously considered a law making the wearing of a zoot suit punishable by thirty days in jail as another way to end the rioting. Councilman Norris Nelson called the zoot suit “a badge of hoodlumism,” adding that “we prohibit nudism by an ordinance and if we can arrest people for being under-dressed we can do so for being over-dressed.” Similarly negative outlooks on zoot-suited Mexicans were reflected in a headline about Mexican migrant workers that appeared in the 12 June edition of the San Francisco Chronicle: “No ‘Zoot Suits’: Hard-Working Mexicans Arrive to Help Valley’s Wartime Harvest.” Los Angeles Chief of Police C.B. Horrall explicitly tied zoot suits to criminality and juvenile delinquency:

We can trace this whole thing to the fact that most of the young people are second-generation Mexicans whose parents could not speak English. The children got some schooling and lost respect for their parents. This lack of parental control is the underlying cause of the whole thing. But we had no difficulty until the zoot suit gangs were given recognition by the press, following outbreaks in which one or two were killed. Publicity is what they were seeking. If one got his picture in the paper he became a shining example to the others. But troubles like this are not confined to Los Angeles. You ought to look around New

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204 Mazón, 87.
205 “Why Zoots? Psychiatrist Says Youths Unable to Get In Service Seek Attention,” San Francisco Chronicle, 10 June 1943, 10.
207 “Zoot War Still On,” San Francisco Chronicle, 10 June 1943, 10.
York. San Francisco has them, too, and many other cities. We’ve worked on these gangs but we haven’t broken them up.\textsuperscript{209}

Many whites steadfastly refused to believe that racial discrimination formed the riot’s root cause, and instead publicly sought to lay the blame on a rise in juvenile delinquency or on the involvement of “subversives” looking to undermine American unity.\textsuperscript{210} Mayor Fletcher Bowron attributed the riot to juvenile delinquency among minority groups, and was quoted in the press as stating that there was “no question of racial discrimination involved . . . We have here unfortunately a bad situation as the result of formation and activities of youthful gangs, the members of which, probably to the extent of 98 percent or more, were born right here in Los Angeles.”\textsuperscript{211} The International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU) issued a formal statement that they believed an Axis “fifth column” was behind the riots. An investigator for the Tenney Committee, which investigated un-American activities in California, blamed the communists.\textsuperscript{212} One official even cited marijuana addiction as a potential contributing factor in the riot.\textsuperscript{213} In all cases, government officials were insistent that overt white racism played no role whatsoever in the problems that sparked the riots. Liberal activist Carey McWilliams countered that racism was at the very heart of the riots, citing police mistreatment of Mexicans as a reason for the problems. “Police policy of strong arm treatment and mass arrests during the past few years has been one of the main causes” of recent problems, he argued.\textsuperscript{214}

\textsuperscript{211} “Zoot War Still On,” \textit{San Francisco Chronicle}, 10 June 1943, 10.
Police conduct in the riot did much to reinforce McWilliams’s point. While the LAPD officially denied an anti-Mexican bias, many eyewitnesses reported that police often stood idly by while servicemen attacked zoot-suiters. Los Angeles County Supervisor Roger Jessup publicly stated that “all that is needed to end lawlessness is more of the kind of action as is being exercised by the servicemen,” adding that “if this continues zooters will soon be as scarce as hen’s teeth.”215 The unwillingness of the police to curb the vigilante tactics of the servicemen partly explained why the rioting raged for so long. Some contemporary observers even considered whether the LAPD played a conspiratorial role in inciting and supporting servicemen violence against zoot-suiters. Carey McWilliams wondered if the absence of arrests in the 30 May incident, so atypical for an arrest-happy police force, constituted part of a larger strategy to foment antagonism against Mexican-Americans among the white community. Former social worker and author Beatrice Griffith argued that following the 30 May incident, servicemen had “reconnoitered” Mexican-American neighborhoods to determine where zoot-suiters congregated, better to prepare assaults against them.216 A representative of the Los Angeles chapter of the NAACP reported that on some occasions, policemen had been seen in the company of marauding servicemen, or had been observed not intervening when servicemen attacked civilians.217

The media also came under fire for exacerbating the riots. Los Angeles newspapers – particularly those owned by Hearst – were supportive of the vigilante tactics of the servicemen, describing the riots as a “zoot war” and painting each wearer of

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215 Escobar, 237.
216 Mazón, 69-70.
217 Letter from Thomas L. Griffith, Jr. (Los Angeles Branch – NAACP) to Walter White (Secretary, NAACP), dated June 9, 1943. Copy obtained from N.A.A.C.P. General Office Files 1940-55, Zoot Suit Riot File 1943-44.
a zoot suit as a hardened criminal. Editorials lauded the efforts of the servicemen. One editorial that appeared in the *Los Angeles Daily News* stated that “the time has come to serve notice that the City of Los Angeles will no longer be terrorized by a relatively small handful of morons parading as zoot suit hoodlums.”\(^{218}\) The same editorial argued against police intervention on behalf of the riot victims, arguing that “to delay action [vigilante justice] now means to court disaster later on,” implying that violence was used against zoot suiters as a method of social control.\(^{219}\) One black military policemen assigned to riot control commented that “everyone here blames the newspapers” for the extent of the violence.\(^{220}\) However, the newspapers showed consistency given the earlier trend of critical reporting on Mexicans and zoot-suiters. The disdainful tone only changed when the United States government pressured the local press, citing the potential international relations disaster that could come not only from the riots, but also from reports that condoned vigilante violence against minorities.\(^{221}\)

The Los Angeles rioting and the resultant media coverage did indeed cause international headaches. As seen during the waves of deportations during the Great Depression, the Mexican-American community in Los Angeles maintained close ties to Mexico through the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles. The Mexican government, due to a broader definition of citizenship, maintained a vested interest in the welfare of people of Mexican descent in the United States. The zoot suit riots and the blatant targeting of Mexican-American youth by American servicemen deeply concerned Mexican officials.

\(^{219}\) McWilliams, 226.
\(^{221}\) McWilliams, 226.
The United States State Department at first hoped that the riots would quickly blow over, but Mexican news outlets seized the story even as American outlets outside of Los Angeles quickly dropped coverage.

Mexican newspapers like *El Porvenir* and *Novedades* focused on the racial angle of the rioting with headlines like “*Atendado a Mexicanos en Los Angeles, Cal., por Marineros y Soldados*” [Attack against Mexicans in Los Angeles by Sailors and Soldiers]. The Counsellor of the Mexican Embassy, Rafael de la Colina, was quoted as saying that he considered the riots “acts of violence” against Mexicans living in Los Angeles who “were not accused of any crime.” *El Porvenir* also quoted American activist Carey McWilliams, who described the riots as the “logical culmination of the provocative attitude of police officials against the Mexican section of the community during the past eighteen months.”

While *El Porvenir* bowed to pressure from the United States embassy by printing a clarification/retraction two days later, “*Se Trata de Vagos y Maleantes*” [It Concerns Loafers and Rogues], *Novedades* held firm. The American embassy described its publisher, Ignacio Herrerias, as “brood[ing] over the

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222 Correspondence from Henry S. Waterman (American Consul), Embassy of the United States of America in Mexico, to the Secretary of State, June 11, 1943. Richard Griswold del Castillo Papers, Box 9 Folder 3, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.

223 Enclosure no. 1 to Despatch no. 777, dated June 11, 1943, from Henry S. Waterman, American Consul, Monterrey, Mexico, on the subject of “Local Press Reaction to Zoot-Suit Riots in Los Angeles.” Richard Griswold del Castillo Papers, Box 9 Folder 3, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.

224 Enclosure no. 1 to Despatch no. 777, dated June 11, 1943, from Henry S. Waterman, American Consul, Monterrey, Mexico, on the subject of “Local Press Reaction to Zoot-Suit Riots in Los Angeles.” Richard Griswold del Castillo Papers, Box 9 Folder 3, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.

225 Enclosure no. 2 to Despatch no. 777, dated June 11, 1943, from Henry S. Waterman, American consul, Monterrey, Mexico, on the subject of “Local Press Reaction to Zoot-Suit Riots in Los Angeles.” Richard Griswold del Castillo Papers, Box 9 Folder 3, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.
subject of racial discrimination so much that it has almost become a mania with him.”

But instead of placing the blame for anti-American coverage on Herreria, the United States blamed the British who backed *Novedades*’s English-language page, sniffing that the British, given their difficulties in India, were hardly ones to take the high moral road regarding race relations. The official government newspaper, *El Nacional*, waited until 17 June to weigh in on the rioting, and while striking a conciliatory tone meant to maintain diplomatic ties, it still urged that racial discrimination and stereotyping needed to be eradicated from the United States. Meanwhile, American publications in Mexico were not sparing the United States, either. “The *Time* article treats the zoot-suit disturbances in such a way as to make it appear an anti-Mexican movement and blames the police for encouraging attacks on Mexicans and accuses the military authorities of laxity,” complained Ambassador to Mexico G.S. Messersmith in a letter to the Secretary of State describing an article on the riots in the Mexico City express edition of *Time*.

Indeed, the *Time* article, which also ran in the American edition of the magazine under the title “California: Zoot-Suit War,” was harsh on police, military, and press conduct during the riot. In addition to only mentioning Mexican-American victims of the rioting – no attention was paid in the article to black victims – “California: Zoot-Suit War” explicitly connected the rioting to the American history of assimilation and racial

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226 Letter from Guy Ray, American Embassy, Mexico, to Laurence Duggan (Adviser on Political Relations, Department of State), June 22, 1943. Richard Griswold del Castillo Papers, Box 9 Folder 3, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.

227 Letter from Guy Ray, American Embassy, Mexico, to Laurence Duggan (Adviser on Political Relations, Department of State), June 22, 1943. Richard Griswold del Castillo Papers, Box 9 Folder 3, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.


229 Correspondence from G.S. Messersmith, Embassy of the United States of America in Mexico, to the Secretary of State, June 19, 1943. Richard Griswold del Castillo Papers, Box 9 Folder 3, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.
problems by discussing the pachuco subculture as symptomatic of typical second-generation maladjustment and referencing the anti-Chinese race riots of the 1870s.\textsuperscript{230}

Media coverage, in both the United States and Mexico, of the Los Angeles riot as race-based and targeting Mexicans rankled the State Department. In the interest of maintaining good relations with an ally, the United States could not afford for the zoot suit riot to be categorized as a race riot. The American embassy in Mexico launched a full campaign of damage control, attempting to control media coverage and spin the riots in America’s best interest. The riots were not about race, embassy officials argued; they were about criminals and juvenile delinquents, all of whom were United States citizens and not Mexican citizens and who had terrorized Los Angeles. The vigilante soldiers and sailors were merely tired of waiting for a beleaguered police force to control this underclass and took justice into their own hands. The American embassies in Mexico leaned heavily on the Mexican government and Mexican press to adopt and promulgate this definition of the riots. In Mexico City, they had a series of “informal conversations” with newspaper reporters to sell their version of the riots.\textsuperscript{231} The Monterrey embassy sent an article from the \textit{San Antonio News} that they thought better portrayed the riots as solely against delinquent zoot-suiters and not as a racially-motivated riot to the editor of \textit{El Porvenir}, who printed an article reflecting the official American view two days later.\textsuperscript{232}

The damage control effort met a surprising roadblock in the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt. In a press conference on 16 June, Roosevelt categorically stated that she

\textsuperscript{230} “California: Zoot-Suit War,” \textit{Time}, 21 June 1943.
\textsuperscript{231} Correspondence from G.S. Messersmith, Embassy of the United States of America in Mexico, to the Secretary of State, June 19, 1943. Richard Griswold del Castillo Papers, Box 9 Folder 3, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.
\textsuperscript{232} Correspondence from Henry S. Waterman (American Consul), Embassy of the United States of America in Mexico, to the Secretary of State, June 11, 1943. Richard Griswold del Castillo Papers, Box 9 Folder 3, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.
believed that the rioting in Los Angeles stemmed from longstanding animosity towards Mexicans in California and the American Southwest. Indeed, historic pervasive discrimination, including subjecting Mexican-Americans to the Jim Crow system, was the reason that Mexico went so far as to refuse to send any workers in the Bracero program to Texas.\(^\text{233}\) The whole of the United States, Roosevelt argued, had a race problem that it must begin to face.\(^\text{234}\) Her comments sent government officials and California media figures, who had spent over a week denying any racial angle to the rioting, into a tizzy. The editor of the *Los Angeles Times* asserted that Eleanor Roosevelt was trying to “deliberately… create a vicious international racial antagonism without a foundation in fact,” and indirectly accused her of communist sympathies, as anyone who believed in racial discrimination as a cause of the rioting was popularly labeled a communist. The editor went on to cite all the positive examples of Mexican-white social interaction in California, concluding “We like Mexicans and we think they like us.”\(^\text{235}\) The president of the California State Chamber of Commerce demanded Roosevelt retract her statement and denied that the riots were at all about race. In a statement that was sure to leave a bitter taste in the mouths of Mexican-Americans, Preston Hotchkis wrote:

> The statement that the citizens of California have discriminated against persons of Mexican origin is untrue, unjust, and provocative of disunion among people who have lived for years in harmony. Instead of discriminating against Mexicans, California has treated them with the utmost consideration, and many of their number are listed among the most prominent and most useful citizens of the State.\(^\text{236}\)

It is doubtful that many Mexican-Americans shared Hotchkis and the *Times* editor’s vision of California as a racist-free utopia.

\(^{233}\) “Mexico: Bad Neighbors,” *Time*, 07 February 1944.
\(^{234}\) “First Lady Traces Zoot Riots to Discrimination,” *Los Angeles Times*, 17 June 1943.
\(^{236}\) “Mrs. Roosevelt Challenged on Zoot Statement.” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 June 1943.
American officials in Mexico went so far as to collaborate on an official riot investigation with the cooperation of both Los Angeles city and county officials and the Mexican Consulate. In the report, it was noted that none of the 200 or so zoot-suiters arrested by police during the riots was Mexican-born. However, the Mexican consulate granted these youth official protection because, according to Mexican citizenship rules, these American-born youth of Mexican-born parents had dual citizenship. This view of citizenship vexed both the Los Angeles government trying to prosecute these individuals and the American government trying to insist on the lack of a foreign relations problem because none of the arrested were born in Mexico (and thus, in the eyes of the United States, were not Mexican citizens). Meanwhile, the press both overhyped the riots and undersold the police department’s ability to enforce law and order. The report concluded that race had nothing to do with the riot; it conveniently glossed over evidence to the contrary, like the slum conditions of the immigrant poor, the history of terrible minority community-police relations, and the steadfast conviction on the part of some Mexican officials, like Consul Manuel Aguilar, that race was central to explaining the riots. In fact, the author of the report assumed that the only people who could possibly still cling to the definition of the zoot suit riot as a race riot were communists.\textsuperscript{237}

The press’s role in inciting, or at the very least encouraging, the zoot suit riot was a question that lingered long past the riot’s aftermath. A 1956 study by sociologists Ralph Turner and Samuel Surace examined the press’s view of Mexicans and zoot suiters by sampling the \textit{Los Angeles Times} for the decade leading up to the riot, categorizing stories referring to Mexicans. They expected to find a significant spike in anti-Mexican

\textsuperscript{237} Report by William P. Blocker (American Consul General), to the Secretary of State on the “Zoot Suit Disturbances at Los Angeles, California,” August 3, 1943. Richard Griswold del Castillo Papers, Box 9 Folder 3, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California-Los Angeles.
stories, but instead found a steady level of neutral or positive stories rather than a rapid increase in negative reporting. They did find that all mention of zoot suits, which only appeared after 1940, were resoundingly critical. The researchers concluded that the press had contributed on some level to the construction of a negative image of zoot suiters, and the popular acceptance of this view could explain crowd behavior during the riot. Zoot suits were more easily identified and overwhelmingly threatening than the generic term “Mexican,” and, the researchers argued that was why zoot-suiters suffered the brunt of violent attention.²³⁸

As the riots wound down on 12 June, the Citizens’ Committee, established at the request of California Governor Earl Warren to research the causes of the riot, published their eight-page report.²³⁹ The committee found that it was “a mistake . . . to link the phrase ‘zoot suit’ with the reported crimes.”²⁴⁰ In fact, the findings of the committee ran counter to the official governmental response. The report found that racial discrimination was at the very heart of the recent unrest, recommending that the LAPD do away with racial profiling in arresting suspected gang members and attempt to ameliorate their relationship with the Mexican-American community through measures such as special training, the hiring of Spanish-speaking officers, and increased availability of counsel for youths arrested on suspicion of gang activity. The committee stressed that future disturbances could be prevented by fostering greater understanding between the Mexican and white communities.²⁴¹ Juvenile delinquency persisted as a concern in the Citizens’

²⁴¹ “Report and Recommendations of Citizens Committee.” Copy obtained from N.A.A.C.P. General Office Files 1940-55, Zoot Suit Riot Files 1943-44.
Committee report, as it was in the grand jury called to investigate juvenile crime and delinquency. The grand jury found that the rapid population influx due to war migration had placed a severe strain on the existing governmental agencies and facilities that dealt with juvenile delinquency.\textsuperscript{242}

In the wake of the riot in Los Angeles and elsewhere in the nation, the state of California conducted an investigation of the police response to rioting. The Interim Report of the Peace Officers Committee on Civil Disturbances was published in the early fall of 1943 and outlined the potential causes of riots, the appropriate response, and methods for riot prevention. Like the Citizens’ Committee report, this report stressed the importance of impartiality, equal treatment and protection of minorities, and the fostering of community relations.\textsuperscript{243}

The “Zoot Suit” riots of 1943 indicated a shift in the racial hierarchy in Los Angeles. In the early twentieth century, Mexicans had gone from being relatively invisible in Los Angeles to being the targets of Americanization by public health officials who viewed them as redeemable and assimilable in a way their Asian counterparts were not. The Great Depression had caused a reversal in this attitude of acceptance; Mexicans transformed in the white mind into an economic liability, necessitating repatriation to Mexico to alleviate the burden on American society. The labor shortage of World War II made the cheap and available labor of Mexicans desirable once again, but changes in Los Angeles’s Mexican-American community prompted intense dialogue and resistance among Mexicans to shifting white attitudes. Young Mexican-Americans asserted their

\textsuperscript{242} “Findings and Recommendations of the Grand Jury of Los Angeles County for 1943, Based Upon its Inquiry into Juvenile Crime and Delinquency in That County.” Copy obtained from N.A.A.C.P. General Office Files 1940-55, Zoot Suit Riot Files 1943-44.

\textsuperscript{243} “Interim Report of the Peace Officers Committee on Civil Disturbances.” Copy obtained from N.A.A.C.P. General Office Files 1940-55, Zoot Suit Riot Files 1943-44.
own individual identities and resisted their social worth being tied strictly to their labor. In the face of war, they dared to define themselves as Mexican first, Americans second.

The pride and individuality of pachuco culture shocked and angered many in the white community. Whites labeled Mexicans as degenerate and criminal, and saw their presence as a necessary evil. The cultivation by the government and press of negative stereotypes of the Mexican in general and the pachuco in particular encouraged both official and unofficial retaliation against the Mexican community in Los Angeles. When white servicemen and Mexican zoot-suiters interacted in public spaces, it was only a matter of time before violent conflict broke out. Because the zoot suit had become a “badge of hoodlumism,” American diplomats were more easily able to spin the riot as vigilante violence against a criminal element rather than a full-blown race riot primarily targeting Mexican-Americans in general.

Several months after the rioting, an appeal was filed on behalf of the members of the 38th Street Gang convicted for the Sleepy Lagoon murder, alleging that they had not had a fair trial. The men languished in prison for another year before finally, in October 1944, the ruling was overturned and they were freed.244 While the case was never retried, the accused were never officially exonerated. They remained marked for life. The “badge of hoodlumism” seemed no longer to be attached to their clothes, but embedded in their very identities. Mexican-American youth became permanently regarded as defiant and criminal.

In regard to the riot’s impact on group identity, Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles faced a fate similar to blacks in Harlem. After the Harlem riot, the black populace there became associated with restlessness, an agitation for equality, and a

244 Pagán, 208.
willingness to resort to rioting to protest systemic racism that kept them perpetually disadvantaged. This association carried over into the 1960s rioting and came to be attached to urban black communities across America. Detroit blacks escaped such labeling after the 1943 riots in part because the community tensions there involved native-born Detroit citizens against recent migrants, and blacks there were not singled out as a separate entity on the same scale as Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles or blacks in Harlem. Instead, the stereotypical racist white southerner became the scapegoat for Detroit’s woes and the target of perpetual derision and tension in the city.

In the context of the other 1943 riots, the Los Angeles riot was as intrinsically tied to identity and protest as the Harlem riot, but shared the most in common with the smaller riots in Beaumont, Texas, and Mobile, Alabama. Both of these riots, discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, involved perceived transgressions against white authority – though in the Mobile riot, this perceived transgression was merely black men occupying jobs formerly held only by white men. As in Los Angeles, the Beaumont riot had whites violently protesting perceived criminal action by a minority group. All three riots fit the profile of the older-style race riots, which involved whites using mob violence to reassert white hegemonic power over minority communities perceived as transgressive.

Los Angeles also shared a lot in common with Detroit, the subject of the next chapter. Intensive migration caused friction in neighborhood borderlands and workplaces as different racial groups came into increasing contact with each other. In Detroit as in Los Angeles, residential segregation created problems of overcrowding and poverty in minority neighborhoods. And efforts to boost the war effort in both cities resulted in escalating social conflict. The creation of military installations bordering Mexican-
American neighborhoods in Los Angeles brought a sharp increase in military personnel, most originally from other areas of the country and unaccustomed to Los Angeles’ racial diversity. The conversion of domestic industry to war production in Detroit, dubbed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt the “Arsenal of Democracy,” introduced not only an influx of southern workers to the city, but the rise of workers previously barred from most areas of industrial employment – women and minorities. Just as white servicemen violently protested the perceived criminal threat of the Mexican-American zoot-suiter, white workers in Detroit violently protested the perceived economic threat of minority workers as they were employed in increasing numbers in skilled positions previously reserved only for white workers.

But the Detroit riot was much larger in scope and more horrific, pushing discussions of the zoot suit riot off the national stage. In Los Angeles, the riot had been intermittent, with rioting taking place at night over the span of a week and in the form of small roving bands covering large areas. Detroit convulsed with constant rioting for nearly three days, with large mobs seeking black victims in the main commercial avenue downtown and blacks destroying and looting white-owned stores in the black neighborhoods. While there had been a relative dearth of serious casualties in terms of the length of rioting in Los Angeles, and no fatalities, Detroit had huge numbers of serious injuries and a death toll of thirty-four. The loss of one million man-hours crippled America’s “arsenal of democracy” and caused serious disruptions in war industrial production, as other industrial centers depended on Detroit’s factories for key manufacturing parts and materials. The causes of the Los Angeles riot were seen as more localized, as few American cities outside the Southwest had significant populations of
Mexican-Americans, the main target of the riots. But Detroit had tense racial conditions that were eerily similar to those in cities all over the United States with black communities. The severity of Detroit’s riot sent a ripple of panic through other American cities that race riots could happen anywhere, at any time. And this unnerving idea ensured that it was the Detroit riot that remained indelibly etched in the public consciousness as awareness of the Los Angeles zoot suit riots faded.
CHAPTER 2
“DETROIT IS DYNAMITE”:
EXPLOSIONS IN THE “ARSENAL OF DEMOCRACY”

“There is a growing subterranean race war going on in the city of Detroit, which can have no other ultimate result than an explosion of violence, unless something is done to stop it.”

On 29 December 1940, Franklin Roosevelt addressed the nation in one of his trademark “fireside chats.” In his speech, Roosevelt stressed the need for the United States to support Europeans and Asians in their efforts to combat fascism in the global war that had been raging for over a year. He identified war production as America’s key contribution to fighting fascism, and called attention to one city in particular – Detroit – a bastion of production he nicknamed the “Arsenal of Democracy.”

Though Detroit had all the tools necessary for war production on a massive scale, the process of production was far from smooth. The federal government expected Detroit to be its “Arsenal of Democracy,” the dependable linchpin in America’s efforts to fight the war abroad. But in many ways Detroit waged its own internal war, one that often disrupted its supporting role in the larger global conflict. The mass conversion of civilian industries meant a need for workers that Detroit’s existing labor pool could not meet, so thousands of migrants flooded to the city and severely taxed its infrastructure.

246 Several books have examined Detroit in the early war years. The best general work is Alan Clive’s study of Michigan during the war, State at War. The phenomenon of southern out-migration is described in James Gregory’s The Great Migration. While Dominic Capecci Jr.’s book is titled Race Relations in Wartime Detroit, it deals not with race relations in general but rather with the Sojourner Truth Project controversy; nonetheless, it is the most thorough study of wartime housing problems. The wartime housing issue is also addressed briefly in Thomas Sugrue’s Origins of the Urban Crisis. Discussions on labor and race in Detroit appear in August Meier and Elliott Rudwick’s Black Detroit and the Rise of the U.A.W. and James Geschwender’s Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency. Drawing upon these works and neglected primary sources, one can weave together a clearer picture of the social and racial turmoil in Detroit during the war years.
This migration also brought many different ethnic and racial groups that had previously remained relatively separated into closer contact. As a result, social, religious, and political conflicts aggravated the local housing shortage and generated new labor problems.

Race was a central point of conflict in World War II Detroit. Longtime white residents of Detroit resented the rapid increase in black population in the city. The wartime labor shortage meant that white workers increasingly saw more black coworkers on the factory floor. But these black workers were no longer confined to the foundry or the cleaning staff. The war afforded minority workers the opportunity to hold semi-skilled or skilled positions that had previously been closed to them. White workers responded by engaging in unsanctioned work stoppages called “hate strikes” to protest the hiring and promotion of black workers, perceiving them as an economic threat. Detroit was one of the worst cities not only for these kinds of worker protests, but also for companies in violation of FEPC policies.

Residential segregation meant that black newcomers to Detroit faced not only overcrowding, but also a rapidly deteriorating housing stock in black neighborhoods. Unable to expand their neighborhoods beyond existing borders with white neighborhoods, Detroit’s black community agitated for the only option potentially available to them to alleviate the housing shortage: government housing projects designed to house war workers. Their efforts were met with fierce resistance and sometimes violence. Detroit whites blamed the increasingly bold racial violence on the recently arrived southern migrants, arguing that they had brought the Ku Klux Klan
northward with them. These white Southerners served as scapegoats for general white racial hatred that, like the Klan, had existed in Detroit long before the war.

The racial tension present in Detroit was a symptom of a long simmering “subterranean race war” in the nation that intensified during the war. It was most apparent in Detroit. The restive mood in Detroit alarmed the public as early as 1942, when *Life* published an article titled “Detroit is Dynamite” which warned of the potential for an escalation of violence.247 The strengthening of FEPC enforcement in the spring of 1943 had observers worrying that the “Arsenal of Democracy” was primed for an explosion as renewed waves of labor protests rippled through Detroit’s factories. Their worst fears were realized in June 1943 when the city erupted in days of rioting, leaving thirty-four dead as the city resembled a war zone.

The Detroit riot horrified the American public more than any other riot in 1943 for myriad reasons. The loss of life and property were more extreme than in any other riot that summer. The riot in perhaps the most key American industrial center crippled the war industry for days, a blow to the war effort. But most importantly, the riot was a sobering reminder that the “race war” was no longer below the surface but out in the open. It left the United States open to ridicule in Axis propaganda for not only failing to live up to its founding creed of liberty and equality, but also for being unable to control its own population as civilians engaged in mob violence and mass lawlessness. But it also prompted more soul-searching than the riots in Los Angeles, Beaumont, and Mobile. This riot was not in the South, notorious for lynching and race riots; nor was it in California, where xenophobia made Mexican-Americans and Asians the victims of race riots and vigilante violence. Detroit was in the industrial North, the supposed model

region for tolerance and equality. To acknowledge racism in Detroit meant to acknowledge that racism was a national problem, not a southern or southwestern one. And that made everyone complicit. It is little wonder that most Americans tried to blame the violence on southern migrants or Axis agitators, as to do otherwise meant implicating themselves as participants in a racist society.

Detroit’s eruption had its roots in its long history as an industrial powerhouse, which made it a magnet for migrants from other countries and other American regions. Since the early twentieth century, Detroit’s economy had been heavily dependent on the auto industry. After Henry Ford introduced the assembly line, auto manufacturers sprang up in Detroit and employed area workers in mass-producing cars. The proliferation of the auto manufacturers resulted in the creation of new businesses catering to the auto industry, providing raw materials, parts, and services necessary for auto production. Ford was the first major auto manufacturer, and remained the industry’s leading innovator. In 1914, Ford announced a financial innovation to accompany his technological ones: the “$5 Day,” a shockingly generous pay rate ostensibly available to all Ford employees. In reality fully thirty percent of the workers did not meet the qualifications to receive the wage.248 But the publicity surrounding the announcement was enough to drive Americans seeking better wages and a better life northward. These migrant workers proved especially valuable after World War I, when immigration restrictions constricted the flow of foreign workers.

Detroit had long been a city of immigrants. Starting in the 1870s and spiking after the birth of the auto industry, immigration from Eastern Europe and the Middle East

added to the existing cultural mix of French, German, and Irish residents. The largest ethnic group was the Poles, who were actively recruited by the state of Michigan to provide cheap labor for Detroit’s factories. As late as 1930, thirty percent of Detroit’s population was foreign-born, and Detroit’s Polish numbered 350,000 out of a population of 1.5 million.\textsuperscript{249} Tension and conflict were not uncommon in a population fractured by ethnicity, religion, and language.

New federal immigration measures after World War I meant that the supply of cheap foreign labor for Detroit’s factories effectively dried up, leading auto industry leaders to look for a new source of labor. They found it in the South. To the mix of immigrants was added rural Southerners, and particularly blacks. The black population exploded from fewer than 6,000 in 1910 to 120,000 in 1930, an increase of 2,000 percent.\textsuperscript{250}

Though the auto industry constituted the major employer of the city’s workers, blacks faced overwhelming exclusion from the industry, relegated to only the dirtiest and lowest-paying jobs in the auto plants if they were hired at all. Most worked as janitors, domestics, and foundry workers. The only significant employer of black workers in the auto industry was Ford, which generally employed a percentage of blacks comparable to their percentage of the total population.\textsuperscript{251} Though blacks occupied the generally “undesirable” jobs, their increased presence in the workforce alarmed nativists and foreign-born immigrants alike.

\textsuperscript{251} Widick, 26.
In the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan rose to prominence in Detroit, capitalizing on social turmoil and anxieties. Stridently anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, and anti-black, the Klan experienced a meteoric rise in membership – from 3,000 to 22,000 – in the first three years of the decade.\textsuperscript{252} Its success in a city of largely Catholic immigrants spoke to the deep-seated fears of Detroit’s native-born population, the disorientation caused by its recent southern transplants, and the desire of immigrants to find something in common with the mainstream white population (in this case, their hatred of blacks). By 1924, the increasingly powerful Klan moved out of the shadows and boldly backed a pro-Klan candidate, Charles Bowles, for mayor. Bowles nearly stole the election, losing only after 17,000 votes were invalidated.\textsuperscript{253}

After its failed bid for the mayoral office, the Klan pursued another of its pet projects: residential segregation. The Klan advocated a residential segregation law, and if the political establishment would not cooperate, it tried to enforce residential segregation on its own by supporting the formation of “neighborhood improvement organizations” to maintain a neighborhood’s racial and religious characteristics and to deny occupancy to anyone deemed undesirable.\textsuperscript{254} This reaction was prompted by the increase in black population. The successes of the black middle class meant that more blacks were attempted to find housing in white areas.

April 1925 saw a wave of violent confrontations in which white neighbors hounded black homeowners, sending menacing messages, crowding around their homes, harassing them, and threatening violence if they did not sell. Blacks had little hope of protection from city police. The city government recruited white officers from the South,

\textsuperscript{252} Levine, 137.
\textsuperscript{253} Widick, 3-4.
\textsuperscript{254} Levine, 158.
resulting in a police force indifferent to blacks at best and menacing at worse. The period between 1924 and 1925 saw not only an increase in Klan violence but police violence as well: that year more than forty blacks died at the hands of police.\footnote{Widick, 16.}

One of the most notable attempts to break the colorline of white neighborhoods involved the efforts of a middle-class doctor, Ossian Sweet. After several years of practicing in a white neighborhood with a white clientele, he decided to move to a house on Garland and Charlevoix in Detroit’s east side in July 1925. Sweet expected trouble from his new neighbors and anticipated no help from the police. He enlisted a few friends and family members to help with the move and stay with his family until any imminent danger had passed. They armed themselves for self-defense. Not long after their move, white neighbors formed the Waterworks Improvement Association and tried to force the Sweets to sell. When Sweet refused, whites congregated around his house at all hours. When the crowd attempted to attack two of the occupants returning to the house, chaos broke out and the panicked blacks shot into the crowd. One man was killed and another wounded. All the occupants of Sweet’s home were arrested and jailed for first-degree murder, and the eleven adults were put on trial.\footnote{Levine, 162-165.}

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization that worked to improve the lives of American blacks, hired lawyer Clarence Darrow for the defense, and the presiding judge in the Wayne County court was the newly appointed Frank Murphy, the future Supreme Court Justice. The potent combination of the famed orator and the progressive judge ensured a relatively fair trial before an all-white jury and a white community that had been calling for a lynching.
Darrow’s strategy was simple. The jury would not accept a simple claim of self-defense due to prejudice, so Darrow decided to prove the ineffectiveness of the police to provide protection, the role of the Klan in agitating the neighborhood, and therefore the necessity of Sweet and his family arming themselves for protection. He countered the prosecution by pursuing a line of questioning designed to expose the hypocrisy of the prosecution and many of the witnesses. After heated deliberations, the jury could not reach a verdict and the Sweets were released.\(^{257}\)

After the Sweet case, whites turned to more binding forms of enforcement to ensure strict residential segregation, and adopted the racially-restrictive covenant model that had originated in St. Louis. “Whites-only” covenants in deed restrictions designated the racial makeup of a given area by restricting who could legally occupy the land in question. The neighborhood associations enforced these covenants. With this system, whites effectively restricted black residents of Detroit to certain areas of the city and maintained this pattern of residency for the next two decades.

As Detroit entered the 1940s and left the Great Depression behind, it was at the brink of change. As the United States became further involved in the conflict, the pace of migration to Detroit quickened. Reasons for migration to Detroit after 1940 did not significantly differ from pre-1940 reasons. The main attraction of Detroit, as always, was jobs. In 1940, about 150,000 blacks lived in Detroit, which constituted nearly ten percent of the population and almost all of the nonwhite population.\(^{258}\) By the time of a special 1944 census, the nonwhite population in Detroit had jumped to over 200,000, an increase

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\(^{257}\) Levine, 19.
\(^{258}\) UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 21, Folder 2, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
of thirty percent, compared to a total population increase of two percent.\textsuperscript{259} By 1950, Detroit’s population had grown by 225,000 – and black migrants made up more than two-thirds of that number, with a population growth of over 150,000.\textsuperscript{260} The black population of Detroit doubled between 1940 and 1950, with the bulk of this population boom occurring during the war. What was different about the 1940s from earlier migration periods was the dramatic increase in migration rates, and most of the newcomers within this group came from the South.

Black and white Southerners made up the largest migratory group to settle in Detroit in the 1940s. Their presence was so pronounced that a popular running joke referred to it. “How many states are there in the Union?” went the opening. “Forty-six – Tennessee and Kentucky are now in Michigan,” came the reply.\textsuperscript{261} The North, and Detroit especially, had an abundance of industrial jobs as the Great Depression came to a close and industry shifted to production of war materials. These jobs were very attractive to many poor Southerners who eked out an existence primarily by farming and sharecropping. Black Southerners were drawn to Detroit not only for work, but also for the opportunity for a better life that it represented. The North was no paradise for blacks and still had forms of segregation, not unlike the South, but blacks in the North could vote, a right generally denied them in the South. And although the most lucrative jobs, like assembly line work, were generally closed to them, the variety of jobs available was

\textsuperscript{259} UAW Research Department Collection, Box 15, Housing – Negro 1945-6 Folder, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
\textsuperscript{260} UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 21, Folder 2, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
still a significant improvement over those available in the South. Many southern blacks, especially those from rural areas, belonged to a sharecropping system that kept them poor and economically dependent on white landowners. Many blacks moved north to escape such crushing dependency.

Black newspapers such as the influential *Chicago Defender* led the call for southern blacks to come north. The editor of the *Defender*, Robert Abbott, had started the push for northern migration as early as World War I. The *Defender* gave many reasons to move north. Wages were substantially better, with the hourly wage in the North sometimes equaling a full day’s wage in the South. But in addition to all the economic reasons, the North also provided a comparative safe haven for blacks from the blatantly biased legal system and routine violence to which blacks were subjected in the South. The reasons for migrating north that the *Defender* first proposed during World War I still applied after the end of the Great Depression and the renewal of industry in the North. Blacks heeded the call during the early months of the war.

The sudden influx of workers and their families coming to Detroit for jobs was a shock to the city’s infrastructure. Companies were not required to find lodging for all the people they were hiring, and they neglected to give new workers much information about the housing situation. Some migrants came north expecting to find the American Dream, or at least to escape poverty; many were motivated by patriotism. Detroit manufacturers took out ads in southern newspapers and on the radio advertising steady jobs at good wages, with the added bonus of helping the Allies win the war by producing necessary

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war materials. Ford even went so far as to stage recruiting rallies in the South.\textsuperscript{264} Many migrants were bitterly disappointed, however, by the reality they found when they got to Detroit, such as shantytowns and racial restrictions in housing and employment. In the face of bleak reality, patriotism lost some of its luster.

Many temporary solutions were proposed to alleviate the housing crunch caused by the sudden flood of migrants. People rented out rooms in their homes to workers. Apartment buildings subdivided existing apartments to allow for more tenants. Some families lived in trailers, shacks, and even tents on the outskirts of town until they were lucky enough to find more permanent housing.\textsuperscript{265} Companies like Ford eventually provided some forms of temporary housing, like quarters at their Willow Run plant, but these places were much more like hotels designed for brief stays than homes for new employees.\textsuperscript{266}

Rigid residential segregation further aggravated housing problems. Segregation was both informal and formal.\textsuperscript{267} Informal segregation took the form of certain groups living together and excluding others, through societal pressure and self-policing. Formalized residential restrictions included covenants in property deeds that stipulated that homes could only be sold to whites. Strident neighborhood associations pushed such covenants and actively maintained strict exclusivity in their neighborhoods. The inherent “whiteness” of much of the city neighborhoods and suburbs, coupled with the impracticality of poorer workers being able to afford transport to work from the distant suburbs, meant that blacks were largely confined to specific pockets in the city that had

\textsuperscript{264} Clive, 172-173.
\textsuperscript{266} Clive, 173-174.
\textsuperscript{267} Capeci, \textit{Race Relations in Wartime Detroit}, 9.
been traditionally occupied by blacks.\textsuperscript{268} The best known of these black neighborhoods was Paradise Valley, located near the heart of Detroit and bounded on one side by the main thoroughfare of Woodward Avenue.

Paradise Valley, located on Detroit’s northeast side, was the center of black Detroit. Larger in area than its nearby poorer neighbor, the neighborhood of Black Bottom, it was home to one-third of all blacks in Detroit through the late 1940s. Paradise Valley was anything but a paradise. Crime, disease, and inadequate city services were perennial problems. Most of the housing comprised older wood-framed homes decades old and prone to fire, and overcrowding became a ubiquitous problem. It was no surprise when federal housing inspectors declared two-thirds of Paradise Valley substandard. Old buildings, inadequate facilities, absentee landlords, and rampant subdivision of apartment and motel rooms contributed to the poor quality of life.\textsuperscript{269}

The federal government had a vested interest in a Detroit industrial base that functioned at full capacity with contented workers. After seeing the housing problems, the government decided to create 700 units of public housing designated specifically for war workers and their families. Like the rest of housing in Detroit, the projects were to be segregated. Despite the more difficult housing situation for blacks, only one project, with 200 units, was designated for black occupancy. The black community eagerly anticipated completion of the project, christened the Sojourner Truth Housing Project. Construction on the project broke ground in September 1941.

The residents of nearby neighborhoods did not receive news of the project enthusiastically. The site was located on the boundary of two distinctive communities,

\textsuperscript{268} Sugrue, \textit{The Origins of the Urban Crisis}, 44-46.
\textsuperscript{269} Sugrue, \textit{The Origins of the Urban Crisis}, 36-37.
Polish Hamtramck and black, upper-class Conant Gardens. The two groups had coexisted relatively peacefully. The premise of having more black neighbors in a nearby housing project created by the federal government prompted whites in Hamtramck to protest through an association called the Seven Mile Fenelon Improvement Association (named after major roads in the area). Black homeowners in Conant Gardens also raised concerns about the project, but supported it after receiving assurances that the housing was to be permanent and was not likely to attract a lower-class, criminal element due to screening of housing applicants.

During a long legal battle, both the white neighborhood association and black community organizations tried to sway the federal housing authorities. Both sides sent delegates to Washington to appeal to the federal government, with the “whites only” side supported by the district’s representative, Rudolph Tenerowicz. On 15 January 1942, the federal government capitulated and reversed the black occupancy decision, which would have meant that a housing project named for a pioneering black woman would have housed only white workers. However, the ruckus raised by the black community over the fact that one neighborhood association had so easily cowed the federal government caused yet another reversal on 2 February 1942. The government designated the project for black workers. The white community continued to protest, but as construction on the project neared completion in February 1942, the federal housing authorities stood firm.

28 February 1942, was move-in day, but white members of the community were not content to let the move-in proceed quietly. The actions of a white mob blocking the streets leading to the project resulted in police action. Rather than contain and disperse the mob, many of whom had known Ku Klux Klan affiliations, police prevented the black

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occupants from moving. Police attacked and tear-gassed the black residents of the Sojourner Truth project. In the ensuing riot, police arrested 220 people – all but five of them black.  

The riot effectively halted occupation of the project. The federal government maintained that it still supported black occupancy, but the local government did nothing to provide protection for black families moving into the project. The situation began to turn around in April when a federal grand jury indicted members of the white resistance on charges of conspiracy to prevent blacks from occupying the project. On 29 April, a full two months after the confrontation, black families finally entered their new homes under armed guard.

A full year later, problems with housing projects had still not been solved, prompting official statements and speeches by the UAW and the Detroit Housing Commission. An official speech by the UAW in March 1943 cited figures from the City Planning and Detroit Housing commissions. It predicted that despite project construction, come July 1943 there would still be a shortage of 12,000 units in Detroit. It also predicted that the housing crunch would get worse, pointing out that many people suffering, given a vacancy rate of just .04 percent, were single migrant workers who would eventually seek to bring their families north, creating a further demand for more housing. It attributed problems such as high employee turnover and absenteeism to the housing situation. The most telling figure that illustrated the low priority given to

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271 Martin, 113.
272 “Sojourner Truth Housing,” item in the “Along the NAACP Battlefront” section, The Crisis, April 1942, 137-138.
274 “Sojourner Truth Homes,” item in the “Along the NAACP Battlefront” section, The Crisis, June 1942, 199.
housing was that of federal money earmarked for new plant construction as opposed to new worker housing. Though the government allocated $17 billion to build war plants, it set aside only a few million dollars to build housing for the workers the new plants required.\(^{275}\)

In April, Charles Edgecombe, the director of the Detroit Housing Commission, struck a moderate pose, condemning both those who assigned blacks to projects in the least desirable locations as well as “idealists” who advocated integrated housing. Edgecombe proposed taking the path of least resistance by carefully selecting locations that satisfied blacks looking for quality areas and whites looking to keep residential areas along existing segregated lines. Edgecombe warned that continued strife associated with Detroit housing projects would only hurt future financial considerations, assuming that the federal government would decide that building projects in Detroit was too much trouble.\(^{276}\)

Housing was not the only front on which citizens of Detroit battled one another. The social climate was fractious and bitter. There was general tension, in various configurations, among established Detroiters, recent Polish and Czech immigrants, and the newly arrived southern migrants. White supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Legion warred with black organizations like the NAACP. Churches did not have immunity from this general discord; Protestant denominations and other groups accused Catholic churches of adding fuel to the fire of racial conflict. Lastly,

\(^{275}\) UAW Research Department Collection, Box 15, Housing- Detroit Area Folder, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

\(^{276}\) UAW President Walter P. Reuther Collection, Box 6, Folder 8, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
labor unions and business leaders bickered constantly over a seemingly endless string of issues.

The internal battles in Detroit and their implications for the war effort eventually drew national attention. “If machines could win the war,” Life magazine said in its 1942 article, “Detroit is Dynamite,” “Detroit would have nothing to worry about. But it takes people to run machines and too many of the people of Detroit are confused, embittered and distracted by factional groups that are fighting each other harder than they are willing to fight Hitler.”

Exploring Detroit’s economy and housing problems, Life brought attention to the volatile social atmosphere in the city and its negative implications for the war industry. When it came to talking about the lack of a cohesive community in Detroit, the article pointed out that many of Detroit’s residents were recent migrants who tended to be less loyal to their new home and instead kept close ties with their respective groups. Ethnicity and race played the largest roles in Detroit life. Poles clustered together in Hamtramck, southern whites lived in disparate areas but kept familial ties to continue their southern culture, and blacks lived in segregation from both groups.

Communists clashed with socialists and the conservative, right-leaning Catholics on union and public issues. Communists were influential in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), with over 800,000 members and control of over one-fifth of the CIO’s unions by some estimates. In the UAW, communists played a central role as organizers, particularly in the important 1941 strike at Ford’s River Rouge plant. But their key presence did not diminish the controversy and ideological conflict with socialist

277 “Detroit is Dynamite,” Life, 17 August 1942, 17.
278 “Detroit is Dynamite,” Life, 17 August 1942, 15-23.
and conservative elements that also constituted the union ranks. The difference was so pronounced within the UAW that president R.J. Thomas often had a difficult task in keeping the two major factions, the socialists led by Walter Reuther and the Communists led by George Addes, from tearing the union apart.\textsuperscript{280}

The most controversial group in Detroit was not the communists but the Ku Klux Klan. Though the organization had been driven largely underground after the murder of Works Progress Administration worker and organizer Charles Poole in 1936, the Klan continued to haunt Detroit, seemingly lurking around every corner and having an invisible hand in every racial conflict.\textsuperscript{281} Citizens often made the Klan a scapegoat for the prevalent racism and bigotry as a way of ignoring their own role in the racial problem. Native Detroit residents blamed the presence of the Klan on the recent southern migrants, saying that they had brought the group northward. The Klan, though, had been very strong in Detroit in the 1920s, well before the arrival of the Southerners. This fact seems to have escaped the collective public memory.\textsuperscript{282}

Placing all the blame for the Klan on certain groups, such as southern migrants and Polish immigrants, assumed that these groups were uniformly racist. Though the Klan no doubt strengthened because of the influx of southern white migrants, many of whom harbored racial prejudices, not all Southerners could be easily stereotyped. Claude Williams offered but one example of a Southerner who vehemently rejected Klan ideology. A Presbyterian minister, Williams’s condemnations of racism and Klan

\textsuperscript{280} Geschwender, 50-51.
\textsuperscript{281} Poole’s murder was committed by the more radical arm of the Klan, the Black Legion. “The Murder That Brought Down the Black Legion,” The Detroit News Rearview Mirror, Detroit News Online. URL: http://info.detnews.com/history/story/index.cfm?id=151&category=events.
“Stamp Out the Black Legion,” flyer circulated by the Farmer-Labor Party of Wayne County, 1936. UAW President Walter P. Reuther Collection, Box 2, Folder 22, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
\textsuperscript{282} Clive, 10-11.
activity drew attention in the aftermath of the June 1943 riots.\footnote{283} Like the Southerners, the Polish community had its own motives for supporting Klan activity. As foreigners, Poles directly competed with blacks for low-skilled and low-paying jobs. However, the Polish community was not of one mind when it came to the racism issue. After all, it had been a Polish newspaper in Hamtramck that had criticized what it saw as hate mongering in the community during the Sojourner Truth Project controversy.\footnote{284} Yet, in their attempts to explain the existence of organizations like the Klan, whom they blamed for their racial woes, native Detroiter made Southerners and Poles into scapegoats by universally labeling them bigots.

Detroit’s contentious factions may not have created such an explosive situation if it were not for the rapid expansion of Detroit’s industries. Available industrial jobs shot up by forty percent between 1940 and 1947.\footnote{285} Workers of all ethnicities and ideologies came to the city for lucrative factory work. But Detroit manufacturers did not wholeheartedly welcome the source of renewed prosperity, the war industry. When war broke out in Europe in 1939, the American government sought to increase production of war-related materials. Detroit was the subject of intense government attention because of a combination of factors that made it ideal as a base for war production. The auto industry had the most advanced mass-production factories in the nation, controlled a full one-third of the nation’s metalworking business, and had a substantial force of skilled workers.\footnote{286} Manufacturers in Detroit were at first reluctant to convert to war production

\footnotesize{283 Frank Hughes, “Experts Trace Race Conflicts To Dixie Exodus,” The Chicago Daily Tribune, 27 June 1943.
284 “Detroit is Dynamite,” Life, 17 August 1942, 19.
286 Letter from John H. Tolan, Chairman of the House Committee Investigating National Defense Migration, to Henry A. Wallace, Chairman of Supply, Priorities, and Allocation Board, 17 December 1941.}
because the cost of conversion was high, and war work might be lucrative in the short term but would end when the war did. After nearly a year of accepting limited government contracts and waffling about total commitment, industry in Detroit slowly started to mobilize for war production. Existing factories retooled, and new ones, such as the massive bomber plant of Willow Run, located outside of Detroit, were built specifically to meet new military production contracts.287

While America played the role of a largely neutral supplier to other countries at war, the government had difficulty getting the auto companies to comply with all but the most limited of defense orders. Until direct American involvement in the war, automakers fiercely resisted “mobilization,” preferring to fill government contracts on the side while still focusing on auto production. The intense competition among auto manufacturers led to actual supply shortages that affected military production, which resulted in government curtailment of auto production. The auto industry in Detroit initially expressed concerns that limits on production of non-military goods would cause widespread unemployment.

Auto companies were also concerned that conversion would be a costly and difficult process. Corporate executives, such as General Motors’ Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., stated in 1940 that “automobile plants are not adaptable to the manufacture of other products.”288 Sloan and his colleagues pursued this line of reasoning to protect profits, assuming that their companies would have to build costly new factories to meet large-

287 Meier and Rudwick, 136.
scale defense orders if ordered to convert to war production. The corporate representatives were directly opposed by the UAW-CIO, whose officials testified before Congress that auto plants could be retooled without much trouble. While Sloan argued that only ten to fifteen percent of existing plant machinery could be adapted, UAW-CIO President R.J. Thomas said that union investigations had concluded that the number was significantly higher, around fifty percent.

When the United States entered the war with the mindset of “total war,” the complete mobilization of military and domestic forces, the auto companies had less leverage to resist defense conversion. The government eagerly embraced the outlook of the UAW-CIO and, emboldened by greater government control of the industry, began to enforce compliance that they could not independently coerce. Though active American participation meant more government pressure on the auto industry to convert, achieving the full capacity of Detroit’s industry proved difficult. One survey conducted by the Detroit and Wayne County Tool, Die and Engineering Council early in the war found that machinery in thirty-four auto plants that were capable of running 252,320 machine hours weekly was only operating at 87,296 machine hours, or thirty-five percent capacity.289

Such discrepancies between projections and realities were common during the early conversion period, when labor shortages were acute.290

While not everyone worked within its confines, the war industry was without question the heart and soul of Detroit’s economy. The promise of industrial jobs lured so many people to Detroit, and factories and shops making war materials were the major

290 Clive, 18-25.
employers of labor. Two major divisions marked the local manufacturing economy: the major automotive manufacturers and the smaller companies that made the base components for them. The wartime experience for workers differed depending upon the division in which they worked.

Unionization was in its infancy in Detroit in the early years of the war. The Great Depression had hit Detroit hard as many Americans eschewed expensive goods like automobiles in favor of stretching their budgets in a time of high unemployment rates and few new jobs. Union organizers found the economic climate inhospitable. It was not until the auto industry started to recover from the depression that the UAW was able to gain recognition as the sole bargaining agent for Detroit’s autoworkers.

Founded in 1935, the UAW had used tactics such as the sit-down strike to begin an intense drive to unionize the auto industry in late 1936. In 1937, General Motors was the first of the Big Three auto companies – GM, Chrysler, and Ford – to unionize following a strike in Flint, Michigan.291 The UAW organized Chrysler soon afterward. In a few short months, the UAW had managed to unionize two of the three major auto manufacturers. Slowly, organizers worked toward the final holdout: Ford, the most influential auto manufacturer in the city and the biggest employer of black workers in the industry.

The UAW had been trying to unionize Ford since at least 1937, and had met with fierce resistance by the company. Ford utilized racial politics to complicate unionization efforts at every opportunity. Companies had long used blacks as strikebreakers, with the implicit threat that since black workers were willing to accept lower wages and did not as a group demand unionization, they might replace white workers entirely. Racist views on

291 Meier and Rudwick, 35.
the part of management always prevented that from becoming a reality, but companies did not hesitate to play the “race card” to keep white workers in check. Ford went one step further and hired many black workers in segregated positions at a time when other companies did not hire blacks at all, and cemented its esteem in the black community by supporting various philanthropic efforts.292 This fostered a sense of loyalty among blacks that was difficult for union organizers to overcome. Traditionally, black workers saw the UAW as a white man’s union and were reluctant to join. They did not believe that it would adequately address discrimination in hiring and firing, restriction to certain jobs, and poorer wages and working conditions.293 Ford had made excellent use of the race issue and black skepticism to undermine labor organizing drives. By conditioning white workers to respond negatively to employing blacks in large numbers, and cultivating favor among the black community, Ford successfully played workers against one another and delayed unionization.

A strike in 1941 at the massive River Rouge plant was the turning point in the UAW’s drive to unionize Ford. When workers who supported the union walked off the job on 1 April, the UAW was unsure how the 17,000 black employees of Ford would respond. UAW officials worked hand in hand with the NAACP leadership and prominent members of the black community to try to convince blacks that unionization would ultimately benefit everyone, and that black workers should back the union by refusing to work at the plant during the strike. However, on the morning of 2 April, around 2,000 mostly black workers still remained inside the plant. After much discussion with the NAACP, one-third of them left voluntarily, convinced that by identifying first as  

292 Meier and Rudwick, 14-15.  
293 Meier and Rudwick, 34-35.
workers they might be able to benefit from membership in the UAW.\textsuperscript{294} That was enough to sway the sentiment of the black community and end the strike in the union’s favor. Due to support for unionization from both black and white workers, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), a federal government entity that served as a mediator in conflicts between employers and unions, ruled that Ford had to hold a collective bargaining election in forty-five days, and the strikers went back to work on 14 April, nearly two weeks after the strike had first begun.\textsuperscript{295} When the election took place in late May, the UAW won recognition as Ford’s representational union. Ford went one step further and declared a closed shop agreement, where the company would only employ union members. Initially reluctant black workers then joined the union to keep their jobs.\textsuperscript{296}

The success of the UAW in organizing directly benefited workers in the war industry, and in turn the war industry proved a boon to the union. The biggest employers, and those most heavily unionized, were the large auto manufacturers such as the Big Three. Massive plants like Ford’s River Rouge facility converted to production of bombers and engines to fill government orders and employed thousands of new workers, fresh recruits for the union, to maximize production. The presence of strong unions ensured that the companies addressed worker concerns. Under a watchful union eye, companies practiced policies like seniority and promotion requirements uniformly. The federal War Labor Board tightly regulated manufacturers to ensure that the conditions and policies the companies agreed to in exchange for lucrative federal contracts were enforced.

\textsuperscript{294} Geschwender, 30-31.  
\textsuperscript{295} Meier and Rudwick, 101-103.  
\textsuperscript{296} Geschwender, 32.
Manufacturers across the metropolitan area, with the exception of Ford, continued
to slot black workers into low-paid jobs, like janitorial or foundry work. Black workers
at the Ford Company were among the best-paid black workers in the community. There
were also limited opportunities at Ford for blacks to work in areas like assembly line
production. But black workers got bad deals when it came to seniority and promotion,
policies that tended to favor skilled workers. Nonetheless, blacks still had relatively good
job security at Ford.\textsuperscript{297} Blacks had difficulty attaining and maintaining jobs with the
smaller manufacturers that made component parts for Ford and other auto companies.
These companies generally embraced hiring practices that put blacks at a distinct
disadvantage compared to their white counterparts.\textsuperscript{298} These smaller companies typically
hired on reference, and Detroit’s strict social and residential racial segregation made it
difficult for blacks to get the necessary references. The nature of the workplace also
discouraged blacks from being hired. Many white workers still refused to work with or
come into close proximity to blacks, and these companies were on a small enough
physical scale to make separating the two groups difficult and impractical.\textsuperscript{299} For the
blacks who did manage to get jobs with these companies, the minimal presence of unions
in the companies meant less protection from arbitrary dismissal.

Even though black workers made up a relatively small portion of the Detroit
factory labor force overall, their numbers still increased as the labor market became
ravaged by the draft. With increased employment of minorities came a demand to end
job discrimination. Under pressure from civil rights activists like A. Philip Randolph,
President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 in June 1941 to address the diversifying

\textsuperscript{297} Meier and Rudwick, 83-85.
\textsuperscript{298} Sugrue, \textit{The Origins of the Urban Crisis}, 27.
\textsuperscript{299} Sugrue, \textit{The Origins of the Urban Crisis}, 108-109
workforce. Forbidding job discrimination based on a person’s “race, creed, color, or national origin,” the order also established the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) to enforce its mandate.\textsuperscript{300} At first, the FEPC had little effect on job discrimination. It was not until late 1942, when complaints from minority workers began to pile up, that the FEPC finally conducted in-depth investigations of job practices at major industrial centers. Not surprisingly Detroit received the most complaints and was targeted for the first wave of investigations in early 1943.\textsuperscript{301}

At about the same time that the FEPC began to examine job discrimination in Detroit more closely, the UAW’s Research Department was doing its own assessment of black employment patterns and problems. In September 1942, the union sent out a questionnaire on black employment to its locals. These questionnaires asked for the employment numbers at the plants both then and the year before, allowing the union to gauge overall plant growth and whether hiring of blacks had kept pace. The questionnaire also asked about “upgrading,” or promotion, of black workers and whether such actions had generated friction among local membership.

Such questionnaires not only help to document the growth of plants due to war mobilization, but also suggest the attitudes of the rank-and-file union members in their own words. Some questionnaires indicated success at enforcing FEPC policies to change the makeup and nature of the workforce. “They [management] transferred [blacks] because the government said they must do so,” stated the representative from Detroit Lubricator. The union representative at DeSoto stated that “on or about September 15, 1942, the first Negroes in the history of the DeSoto Plant were employed.” But other

\textsuperscript{300} Executive Order 8802, issued June 25, 1941. From U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.
\textsuperscript{301} Advance Release from the Office of War Information, War Manpower Commission, November 27, 1942. Copy obtained in the NAACP General Office Files, 1940-55, FEPC file.
questionnaires showed the stubbornness of management in discrimination against blacks. The representative at Brabant Brass Manufacturing Co., a smaller plant, stated that he did not “think the management are hiring Negro employees as he should.” Management at Hudson Motor Car Company was seen as giving “reluctant cooperation,” which was predictable given the work stoppages at that plant tied to upgrading of blacks. Management was described as “indifferent” at Dodge Truck, and “very reluctant and non-cooperative,” but “showing a little more progressive attitude lately” at Plymouth Motors. Occasionally management had good intentions but was hampered by the attitudes of its workers, as in the case of Vellumoid Company, where the union representative reported that “management seemed inclined to hire Negroes – but employees talked it down. Several southern employees working here and claimed they would quit.”  

Renewed efforts to enforce FEPC guidelines on fair employment following the investigation in February 1943 resulted in several “hate strikes.” This phenomenon, initially a curious anomaly in the normal pattern of labor relations, began in the early war period but intensified in 1943. While typical strikes were precipitated by organizational disputes and demands for better pay and carried out with the union’s blessing, hate strikes had no union approval and no obvious economic rationale. White workers carried out these wildcat strikes, protesting the presence of blacks in their workplace and resisting the promotion of blacks to jobs traditionally held only by white workers. The increasingly common wildcat strikes reflected the level of resistance of white workers to progressive FEPC policies. White workers remained entrenched in their racism after

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302 UAW Research Department Collection, Box 19, Folders 6-7, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
decades of being conditioned by companies to regard black workers as their economic competitors during strikes or times of depression. Suddenly faced with working side-by-side with blacks, whites protested in an attempt to restore the old order.

These strikes plagued Detroit in the spring of 1943, culminating in the memorable and inflammatory Packard strike in early June. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in the Department of Labor, white workers struck to protest employment or promotion of blacks at least five times from March to June 1943, and these strikes resulted in 2,446,920 man-hours lost, the equivalent of 101,955 days of labor. These were just the major, officially reported hate strikes; it was widely acknowledged that much activity went undocumented. Many smaller, shorter work stoppages escaped widespread publicity. One such stoppage was at the Briggs’ Mack Avenue plant, where workers ceased production when black women took their spots on the production line. Union officials brought the stoppage to a screeching halt in a mere ten minutes when they informed the workers that they would support the company in firing anyone who protested.

Although the motivating incidents behind hate strikes appeared to be varied, they all shared a common theme: desire on the part of whites to limit direct contact with black workers. A hate strike at United States Rubber in March was one of the largest of these conflicts, involving over a thousand workers. The Hudson Navy Arsenal strike saw an estimated 750 workers walk off the job for one day to protest working with one black

304 Meier and Rudwick, 162-163.
The unorganized, vehemently antiunion Vickers plant, which had previously used racial tension as a tool to prevent unionization, actually supported black workers during the March strike and instead of caving in to the protest of 800 striking white workers, they hired more blacks. Management responded to hate strikes by either using the race card to their advantage – as in the case of Vickers hiring blacks to destabilize the workforce and prevent unionization – or by tacitly supporting the striking workers, hoping that they would be able to protest effectively FEPC policies that the companies were obliged to follow but did not always support in spirit.

The Packard Motor Car Company was one of the companies that did not enthusiastically support FEPC policies. A wildcat strike in November 1941 over the hiring of two black metal polishers ended after the company dismissed the black workers. When another wildcat strike occurred at the company’s Airplane Motor Plant in late May 1943, after three blacks were upgraded, the company initially followed the same policy: they downgraded the black workers, ostensibly until the situation could be resolved. This time, however, Packard’s black employees responded with a walkout of their own, in which about 1,500 workers, or sixty percent of the plant’s black workers, protested the company’s decision. Added to the protest of the black workers was increasing pressure from federal regulators, such as the FEPC, to enforce regulations concerning equal and fair hiring and promotion practices that until this point had been largely ignored. The company reinstated the workers a few days later. But the troubles at the Packard plant had just begun.

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305 Moore, chart on 14. Numbers are an estimate and may be inaccurate, as the numbers involved in some strikes differ by source.
306 Meier and Rudwick, 163 (footnote).
307 Geschwender, 34-35.
On 3 June, white workers at Packard initiated another wildcat strike over the reinstatement of the black workers. By some reports, nearly ninety percent of the white workforce participated, bringing production to a complete halt. Workers struck in the early hours of Thursday 3 June, and the plant was not up to full operational speed again until Monday, 7 June. The UAW quickly issued a statement declaring the stoppage an unsanctioned, wildcat strike. Union-run sound cars drove outside the plant in an attempt to convince the idle men to go back to work, but the cars were withdrawn when it seemed that the hostile workers would resort to tipping over the vehicles.

Union efforts to stop the strike through formal channels failed. In meetings with the shop stewards and other officials of the union, the union stressed the official policy of abiding by the guidelines of the FEPC and the no-strike pledge, but several stewards agreed to these ideals in meetings only to continue encouraging their workers to hold out. The reaction in the company followed the same lines. Though official company policy mandated following federal guidelines, many company officials kept their bias against black workers and hoped that a white wildcat strike would accomplish what they could not do with company policy. Unable to secure the full cooperation of company officials, the union called in Army Colonel George Strong, the Army Air Force’s industrial relations officer for Detroit, to take over running the plant. With the Army involved and the union backing the company, the strike came to an end with the ouster of twenty-nine workers accused of leading the strike.

309 “All Output Halted by Race Dispute,” The Detroit Free Press, 4 June 1943, 1. Also, letter from the NAACP to General Henry H, Arnold of the Army Air Forces, expressing gratitude for Col. Strong’s fair handling of the Packard strike. Copy obtained from the NAACP National Office’s general office file on labor unrest.
310 “Packard Plant Returns in Normal Production; Strike Leaders Ousted,” The Detroit Free Press, 8 June 1943, 15.
Shortly after the Packard strike, allegations surfaced of possible Ku Klux Klan involvement in the strike, and UAW-CIO President R.J. Thomas led the demands that the Klan be investigated to determine if it had instigated the strike. Thomas’s perception of the Klan elaborately plotting dissension behind the scenes was largely ruled out after an FBI investigation found only a small fraction of Detroit’s population, 3,000 at most, to be active Klan members. Though no one found any damning connections between the Klan and the Packard strike, the public considered the Klan to have had at least some influence at Packard, where the majority of white workers were recent southern migrants. To many Detroiters, the Packard problem was directly related to the maladjustment of southern migrants. Blaming the Klan was an easy solution. Detroit prosecutor William Dowling, in a speech in 1944, alleged that attempts to blame the Klan were part of a communist plot to disrupt war production. He also suggested that white workers had struck to protest the black workers’ attentions toward white women, a typical white racist fear tactic. Such rhetoric and innuendo only served to show that the Klan did not hold a monopoly on bigotry in Detroit. Characterizations of blacks as economic competition or sexual predators illustrated the institutionalization of racism as a way of asserting and maintaining white unity and dominance in the structures of power.

The wildcat strikes carried out during the spring of 1943 illustrated the divide between union officials and rank-and-file workers. Union officials were very

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313 William Dowling, “Speech on ‘The Race Riot’.” Delivered to the Kiwanis Club on 27 June 1944. Transcript of the speech was included in the NAACP National Office’s general office files on the 1943 Detroit riots after being forwarded to the Detroit branch from the East Side Merchant’s Association and the Jewish Community Council. Dowling, along with Detroit’s police commissioner Witherspoon, were both regarded as being less-than-progressive members of the city government.
progressive, wholeheartedly supporting measures like the FEPC policies and integration of union locals. They recognized that worker solidarity was more important than race; without a united front, companies could and did use race to divide workers among themselves and stifle union efforts. The typical white union worker, however, recognized only that blacks had traditionally been used as strike breakers and had accepted lower wages, posing a threat to white job security. The white workforce in Detroit was very diverse, including Polish, Czech, Italian, Slavic, and Irish workers, Catholics and Protestants, and Southerners and Detroit natives. They were often at odds. Most seemed to agree on one point: they did not want to work with blacks. After all, the press had reported that during the Packard strike a Southerner at the plant had shouted, “I’d rather see Hitler and Hirohito win than work next to a nigger!” over a megaphone.\(^{315}\) The unions could preach racial tolerance and solidarity all they wanted, but there was no way they could control the attitudes of their workers. The hate strikes exposed a problem within the unions that had no clear solution.

The anonymous Packard striker who shouted “I’d rather see Hitler and Hirohito win than work next to a nigger!” not only represented rank-and-file worker resistance to union policy, but also the position of white racism on the home front. Whereas in Los Angeles vigilante sailors had attacked zoot-suited Mexican-Americans as unpatriotic proxies for their Axis enemies, white workers in Detroit who engaged in hate strikes showed a willingness to preserve white privilege at the potential cost of the Allied war effort. If the only way to achieve an Allied victory was through wholesale changes to the

racial status quo that benefited minorities and eroded white power, then such a victory was simply at too high a cost to be acceptable. The Nazi ideology of racial purity appealed to the most virulent strains of American white racism. Sympathy to this idea helped explain why a white worker could declare that he would rather have an Axis victory if it meant that he could continue to work in an all-white environment.

At the same time, the drastic nature of this statement, uttered in the thick of a war awash with patriotic propaganda dehumanizing the Axis enemies, reflects extreme desperation. At no previous point in America’s “subterranean race war” had white hegemony seemed more vulnerable, at least from the view of the white working class. Blacks were joining the industrial workforce in increasing numbers, hired in semi-skilled and skilled positions at an unprecedented pace, and this threatened the white monopoly on the most lucrative industrial labor positions. White workers recognized the difficulty in returning to the prewar racial status quo, and thus these black workers represented economic competition not just in wartime, but also for decades in the future. The newly arrived white southern migrants, because they were recent hires and lacked the years of industrial work experience of Detroit natives, were especially vulnerable to competition from black workers as they had similar seniority status. By bringing production at crucial war industrial plants to a halt in hate strikes, white workers tried to exercise agency and alter what they saw as a bleak economic future for themselves.

After the Packard strike, the UAW Research Department sent out another questionnaire on black employment and upgrading to locals. The Packard representative responded that “this management had been very reluctant to upgrade as requested by union because stoppages have occurred in every instance.” Bohn Aluminum & Brass
Corp. reported that it had experienced problems at one of its plants and had called in the FEPC as a result. Some companies still maintained a voluntary segregation of workers, such as Ditzler Color Unit and Hupp Motor Car Corp. More blacks were listed as having skilled jobs than in the 1942 surveys, but fewer than fifty percent of the black workers held these positions, and evidence of racial problems in the workplace was still undeniably prominent.  

The Packard strike kicked off an explosive summer for America’s Arsenal of Democracy. Alarm about the state of race relations in Detroit grew. The Association of Catholic Trade Unionists declared in its paper *The Wage Earner* that “there is a growing subterranean race war going on in the city of Detroit, which can have no other ultimate result than an explosion of violence, unless something is done to stop it.” The perpetual housing shortages, the closer social proximity of blacks and whites, and the recent hate strikes had escalated racial conflict. City officials, aware of the tense situation, met in an attempt to outline a plan for military and police cooperation in the event of a riot; however, these planning meetings were not conclusive.  

As the month of June progressed, small disturbances broke out that should have been early warning signs. In nearby Inkster on 13 June, a brawl started in Inkster Park between blacks and whites and spilled over into the streets and into neighboring Romulus Township before the police restored order. Fighting broke out at East Detroit’s Eastwood Amusement Park on 15 June, when whites attempted to chase blacks out of the park.  

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316 UAW Research Department Collection, Box 19, Folder 8, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.  
317 Meier and Rudwick, 100.
These clashes, along with several smaller altercations, slowly spread through Detroit.\footnote{Robert Shogan and Tom Craig, \textit{The Detroit Race Riot} (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), 9-10.} In all these instances, the violence was caught early on and curbed by police.

20 June began like any other hot summer Sunday. Record heat waves swept through the major cities in June, and people tried to escape the heat the only way they knew how – by going outside.\footnote{“Summer Rolls In on Wave of Heat,” \textit{The New York Times}, 23 June 1943, front page.} People in Detroit flocked to public parks such as Belle Isle, located in the Detroit River, for relief and recreation. One of the largest public recreational areas in the city, Belle Isle was an entire island in the river that was connected to Detroit proper by a single bridge. Public areas like Belle Isle were by no means able comfortably to handle the number of people then living in Detroit. The large crowds at Belle Isle resulted in traffic jams and scuffles over recreational areas as blacks and whites came into closer contact and jockeyed for space in the overcrowded environment. Tempers rose to match the hot temperature. By nightfall, fistfights had broken out on the island and on the bridge.\footnote{Report of Thurgood Marshall, Special Counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, “Concerning Activities of Detroit Police During the Riots June 21 and 22, 1943,” 3. Copy obtained from the NAACP General Office Files 1940-55, 1943 Detroit Race Riots file.} Police attempted to maintain order and succeeded in dispersing the Belle Isle crowds, but the groups simply roamed elsewhere downtown.\footnote{Earl Brown, “The Story Behind A Race Riot” first draft. Copy obtained from the NAACP Legal Files, Detroit Riot 1943 Affidavits and Reports.} Specifics remain hard to pinpoint, since different versions of the early events of the riots appeared in newspapers, organizational reports, and even the official government account.\footnote{The official government report on the riot was widely regarded as inaccurate and inadequate by a number of organizations, including the NAACP.}

Rumors began to spread that further agitated people in downtown Detroit in the early hours of 21 June. Two rumors used the Belle Isle disturbances as their starting
point, and since they cannot be corroborated they may be apocryphal. One rumor spread among whites was that a black man had raped and murdered a white woman on the Belle Isle Bridge. Another rumor, spread among blacks, was that whites had thrown a black woman and her baby off the same bridge. These rumors played on deep-seated racial fears, and used arbitrary violence as a means to assert power, in the same manner as lynching had for the past several decades in the South. True or not, these rumors emboldened angry roving crowds to begin rioting and then drew more people into the violence. As the violence escalated, it became clear that there was an outbreak of two separate but related riots: one black and one white. Neither group could reach the initial point of contention, Belle Isle, because the police had still cordoned off the bridge. Instead, the violence centered on two different but adjoining areas.

The white half of the rioting formed on Woodward Avenue, a main artery in Detroit. The rioters initially sought out and attacked black patrons of nightlife establishments bordering Woodward, such as an all-night theater catering to war workers on the swing shift. Word of the violence had not spread sufficiently by the next morning, and the result was the direct clash of unsuspecting black commuters heading to work along a Woodward Avenue filled with increasingly bold white rioters.

By morning the small roving hordes had increased in numbers to sizeable mobs, all roaming along Woodward looking for victims. Hapless black pedestrians were chased and savagely beaten. Black motorists were forcibly stopped, pulled out of their cars, and beaten as more mob members overturned and set fire to their vehicles. Streetcars

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323 Shogan and Craig, 42-44.
324 Lewis, 1261-1264.
carrying commuters were stopped and surrounded by whites who demanded all black riders exit the car and surrender to the whims of the crowd.\textsuperscript{326} The simple morning commute in Detroit turned into hellish scenes, as blacks were robbed, chased, beaten, and stabbed.

The account of John Lewis’ encounter with the Woodward Avenue mob is typical of the experiences of riot victims. His story was described by Thurgood Marshall’s article “The Gestapo in Detroit,” which appeared in \textit{The Crisis} and was culled from affidavits taken by the NAACP in their investigation of the rioting:

One Negro who had been an employee of a bank in Detroit for the past eighteen years was on his way to work on a Woodward Avenue streetcar when he was seized by one of the white mobs. In the presence of at least four policemen he was beaten and stabbed in the side. He also heard several shots fired from the back of the mob. He managed to run to two of the policemen who proceeded to “protect” him from the mob. The two policemen, followed by two mounted policemen, proceeded down Woodward Avenue. While these policemen were escorting him, the man was struck in the face by at least eight of the mob, and at no time was any effort made to prevent him from being struck. After a short distance this man noticed a squad car parked on the other side of the street. In sheer desperation, he broke away from the two policemen who claimed to be protecting him and ran to the squad car, begging for protection. The officer in the squad car put him in the back seat and drove off, thereby saving his life. During all this time, the fact that the man was either shot or stabbed was evident because of the fact that blood was spurting from his side. Despite this obvious felony, committed in the presence of at least four policemen, no effort was made at that time either to protect the victim or to arrest the persons guilty of the felony.\textsuperscript{327}

Lewis was at the center of one of the most memorable photographs from the riot, circulated in many different national publications. His deposition is a particularly damning account of Detroit police conduct during the riots.

Why were the police unwilling to disperse or control the rioting mobs when they had been able to deal with the disturbance at Belle Isle the previous evening? Detroit

\textsuperscript{326} Various articles from the \textit{Detroit Free Press} Extra edition, 22 June 1943.
police had been called out in full force to deal with the riot. The first and likely the only sensible action officers took was to barricade the side of Woodward Avenue that bordered Paradise Valley, the nerve center of black Detroit.328 This action prevented the separate mobs from directly clashing and potentially prevented an even higher death toll. The rest of police actions did not fall in line with this move. Police officers were dispatched by car, on horseback, and on foot to contain the riot. Some officers attempted to maintain order and defend black victims, and in turn became targets of the mob themselves. The vast majority of the police sent to restore order became passive bystanders to the violence, in some cases standing directly amid the mob and watching blacks get beaten. Even when police did intervene, they mostly did so halfheartedly, even proving unwilling to prevent rioters from continuing attacks on blacks supposedly safe in police custody. Many police targeted and arrested the black victims instead of the white attackers. As the day wore on and the mob got even more out of control, police resorted to using tear gas to break up crowds.

While police dealt with white mobs on Woodward Avenue, a parallel riot had erupted in Paradise Valley. Early on, the rioting resembled the Woodward Avenue riot pattern of attacking victims of the opposite race, a reaction of fury both to white incursion into black space and to the riot rumor of whites killing a black woman and her child. Like the Chicago riot in 1919, blacks were not simply passive victims of white aggression. Black citizens of Detroit fought back. The white fatalities of the riot took place in black neighborhoods, with the exception of John Holyak; a black mob attacked

328 Alfred McClung Lee and Norman D. Humphrey, *Race Riot (Detroit, 1943)* (New York: Octagon Books, 1968), 33. This book was written in 1943 by two professors of sociology at Wayne University (today Wayne State University) in downtown Detroit, both of who were eyewitnesses to the riots.
the defense worker well to the north of the black area of Paradise Valley.\textsuperscript{329} Residents in black neighborhoods armed themselves for self-defense against white mob incursions into their spaces. Blacks had reason to fear such invasions of their neighborhood in times of riot; in the 1919 Chicago riot as well as the 1943 Los Angeles riot, whites had used cars to stage strategic strikes into minority areas. While the police blockade along Woodward Avenue kept out the bulk of the roving white mobs, it was impossible completely to shut off all means of access to black neighborhoods, especially in mixed neighborhoods on the borders between black and white spaces.

But once the blockade was put in effect, the tide of whites flowing into the black neighborhood ebbed. Robbed of a chance at confrontation with whites, black rioters vented their fury by targeting property owned by white merchants, either torching the store, looting it, or both.\textsuperscript{330} The destruction of white-owned property located in a black neighborhood served as a symbolic protest against economic structures in the United States that gave capitalism a decidedly racist bent when it came to property and business ownership. This part of the Detroit riot had a precedent in Harlem in 1935. And like in the Harlem riot in August 1943, discussed in Chapter 3, Detroit blacks did not loot indiscriminately; they specifically spared minority-owned businesses.\textsuperscript{331}

Police response to the Paradise Valley rioting was considerably harsher and more forceful than the Woodward Avenue efforts. The police commissioner gave police officers license to shoot any suspected looters on sight. They targeted blacks suspected of looting as well as innocent passersby. The police commissioner attempted to deputize black citizens to help control rioting, but these newly minted deputies had no guns or

\textsuperscript{329} Capeci and Wilkerson, 93.
\textsuperscript{330} “Paradise Valley in Ruins, but Traffic Flows Again,” \textit{The Detroit News}, 22 June 1943, front page.
\textsuperscript{331} Capeci and Wilkerson, 9.
nightsticks to protect themselves and received no police support. Instead of policing rioters, these deputies spent most of their time policing the police. One of these deputized officers, Johnny Jackson, gave an account of his experiences during the riot. He told of one of his fellow deputies persuading white police not to shoot two fourteen-year-old girls, only to be hauled away himself in the police car, beaten, and turned over to white rioters on Woodward Avenue. Another incident he related was witnessing a police car pull up to a curb and shoot a black boy, no questions asked. By the time the deputized officers were finally able to get help, the boy was dead. Police attempted to justify shooting him by saying he had possibly been a looter the day before. The seemingly random patterns of police brutality seemed designed to provoke fear in the black community and reinforce white police power.

*The Crisis* illustrated the extent of police brutality toward blacks when it published an article titled “The Gestapo in Detroit,” written by attorney Thurgood Marshall, who co-authored the official NAACP report of the riots with Walter White. Marshall used two compelling elements in the article - statistics and personal stories gathered from affidavits - and framed them in strong language. Police killed seventeen of the twenty-five dead blacks. The police claimed that the blacks had been shot while engaged in looting, but two of the deaths were confirmed cases of innocent bystanders being targeted. Marshall argued that the sworn affidavits showed a pattern of police

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332 Deposition of Johnny Jackson, deputized officer. Copy obtained from NAACP Legal Files, Detroit Riot 1943, Affidavits and Reports.

333 These affidavits were gathered by the NAACP in support of a planned grand jury investigation of the riot, and most of the affidavits center on black victims of police brutality. Several letters on file seem to suggest that the NAACP did not simply go “hunting for witnesses” but may have followed through these individual complaints with formal interviews and the creation of affidavits. Most witnesses interviewed seem to be long-term, “respectable” black Detroiter, such as Johnny Jackson, who was chosen as a temporary police deputy based on his solid middle-class standing in the community as a Ford worker, or John Lewis, who was a longtime resident and loyal worker (nearly 20 years) at a downtown bank.
behavior: in many instances, squad cars patrolling black neighborhoods pulled up to a corner, the policemen got out of their vehicles and ordered blacks to disperse, and they beat or shot anyone who did not. Even fleeing with the supposed guarantee the police offered of escaping injury was not a sure bet, since several people were shot in the back while evidently doing so.

The individual stories drawn from the affidavits were often shocking. One account told of a black soldier, still in his Army uniform and walking peaceably on his way to a theater, being savagely beaten and left for dead by a group of policemen. A woman who witnessed the beating took the man to the hospital. Other stories drawn from affidavits included the police seizure of, shooting up, and general ransacking of a YMCA after no clear provocation. Taken together, these individual incidents combined to give one plausible explanation for why the black populace distrusted its police force and why the riots required federal troops to restore order.

One incident in the Paradise Valley rioting that garnered national attention was the police seizure of and shootings in a black-occupied apartment building. While the story was not mentioned in the Detroit Free Press, the leading local newspaper, it made the New York Times front page, which detailed a “Two Hour Battle With Snipers.” According to the Times, several blacks armed with shotguns ran into an apartment complex and commenced sniping from its upper floors. In response, “local and state police pumped more than 1,000 rounds of ammunition and dozens of tear gas bombs”

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334 Deposition of John Lewis, soldier. Copy obtained from NAACP Legal Files, Detroit Riot 1943, Affidavits and Reports.
into the complex to drive them out. The incident reportedly ended with the surrender of
the surviving black shooters; two of them had died.336

The same story was told in a very different light in the pages of the *Crisis*. A
policeman had been shot in a vacant lot nearby the apartment building, but the shooter
had already been identified and killed. Then, the police turned on the apartment building:

> Searchlights were thrown on the building and machine guns, revolvers, rifles, and
deer guns were fired indiscriminately into all of the occupied apartments facing
> the outside. Tenants of the building were forced to fall to the floor and remain
> there in order to save their lives. Later slugs from machine guns, revolvers, and
deer guns were dug from the inside walls of many of the apartments. Tear gas
> was shot into the building and all the tenants were forced out into the streets with
> their hands up in the air at the point of drawn guns…
> While the tenants were lined up in the street, the apartments were forcibly
> entered. Locks and doors were broken. All the apartments were ransacked.
> Clothing and other articles were thrown around on the floor. All of these acts
> were committed by policemen. Most of the tenants reported that money, jewelry,
> whiskey, and other items of personal property were missing when they were
> permitted to return to their apartments after midnight. State and city police had
> been in possession of the building in the meantime.337

A slew of affidavits supported the *Crisis*’s version of the incident. The incident appeared
to be just one glaring example of rampant police misconduct during the riots.

Chaos reigned on what came to be known afterwards as “Bloody Monday.” The
local police proved that they were unable to bring peace to the warring city. At 10:00
a.m., Detroit Mayor Edward J. Jeffries, Jr. finally called Michigan Governor Harry F.
Kelly for reinforcements. Kelly agreed to send Michigan state police and troops, and also
requested federal troops. Twelve whole hours passed before a combination of state and
federal troops came in and were able to halt the riots.338 Governor Kelly declared a

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338 Capeci and Wilkerson, 9-10.
modified state of martial law, calling in federal troops to occupy the city.\textsuperscript{339} A 10:00 p.m. curfew was enforced, and large events such as the double-header baseball game between Detroit and Cleveland and high school graduations were attended by troops to prevent further violence.\textsuperscript{340} Property losses from the riot totaled about $2 million, and an estimated one million man-hours were lost in the defense plants, more than were lost during all the labor disruptions in the United States in both January and February that year.\textsuperscript{341} Detroit, with its damaged streets patrolled by soldiers who enforced the law and a strict curfew, bore more of a resemblance to a war zone than a city at the heart of America’s war industry.

By the time the rioting quieted on the early hours of 22 June, thirty-four people had been killed. Twenty-five were black. Seventeen of them were killed by police, with at least two confirmed cases of the victims being innocent bystanders targeted by the police who were trying to control looting or respond to shooters. The remaining eight black victims met their ends in myriad ways. Elderly Moses Kiska and twenty-year-old Charles Grundy were gunned down by a group of whites in a passing car who had set out to “kill us a nigger.”\textsuperscript{342} Carrie Hackworth, the only black woman to die in the riots, was killed while riding in a car in a black neighborhood, her skull crushed by a brick that was thrown through the windshield. Her black assailant had mistaken the light-skinned Hackworth for white, and for that she paid the ultimate price.\textsuperscript{343}

Of the nine whites killed, the death of Italian immigrant Dr. Joseph De Horatiis garnered the most attention. The doctor was on his way to make a house call in a black

\textsuperscript{339} Woodford and Woodford, 347.
\textsuperscript{341} Shogan and Craig, 89.
\textsuperscript{342} Capeci and Wilkerson, 82.
\textsuperscript{343} Capeci and Wilkerson, 90.
neighborhood when a concrete projectile struck his car, resulting in a crash. Despite the crash knocking the doctor unconscious, a black teenager opened the car door and lobbed another chunk of concrete at the doctor at close range, killing him instantly. That teen received the harshest punishment of any rioter, a sentence of seven and a half to twenty-five years in prison.\textsuperscript{344} One policeman, Patrolman Lawrence A. Adam, was shot by a black gunman while responding to a call; another officer instantly killed the shooter, but Adam died ten days later of tetanus from his buckshot wounds.\textsuperscript{345} A mob of black youths attacked defense worker John Holyak and his coworkers on their way home from work, severely breaking Holyak’s arm before he could escape; taken to the hospital, he was struck by a pulmonary embolism and pneumonia and died a few days later.\textsuperscript{346} In a border neighborhood home to both blacks and Poles, Sally Grabowski was shot while walking in the street, caught in the midst of a confrontation between white youths with bricks and baseball bats and a black man protecting his grocery store with a gun.\textsuperscript{347} She was the only white woman killed in the riot.\textsuperscript{348}

The story of the Detroit riots broke on 22 June 1943. It was one of many incidents jockeying for position on the front pages of the nation’s newspapers. Due to the war effort and a possible major coal strike that threatened to cripple the nation, the Detroit riot did not get significant front-page space, but was discussed in the interior pages. Most national newspaper coverage of the riots labeled the blacks as victims. Not everyone agreed with that line of reasoning. In a letter to Martin S. Hayden dated 12 July 1943, Mayor Jeffries revealed his views on the riots:

\textsuperscript{344} Capeci and Wilkerson, 80.
\textsuperscript{345} Capeci and Wilkerson, 89.
\textsuperscript{346} Capeci and Wilkerson, 93.
\textsuperscript{347} Capeci and Wilkerson, 111.
\textsuperscript{348} Capeci and Wilkerson, 93.
The newspapers, either by accident or deliberately, did not handle the early stages well . . . No daily news reporter or photographer dared to enter the Negro section. Therefore, all the pictures were of white groups pursuing . . . Negroes, and no pictures were taken where Negroes were the aggressors . . . I repeat, the newspaper accounts, especially those carried by newspapers in other communities and national magazines, pictures this as happening as a persecution of the Negroes by the whites. The exact antithesis would be more accurate.  

What Jeffries apparently neglected to remember was that police barred the entrance to “the Negro section,” Paradise Valley, to prevent further violence. The press, along with most everyone else, was unable to get through to cover black rioting. Jeffries and other white Detroit leaders chafed at the representation of blacks as blameless victims, when in reality they had been active agents of violence, both in the name of self-defense and as an expression of extreme anger at the racial status quo.

Photographs became one focal point of the Detroit riot coverage. The images captured the horror, brutality, and ugliness of racial conflict within America. But the photos selected by different print media revealed what the publications wanted to emphasize. The only print media in which riot photos made the cover or front page were the local newspapers, the Detroit News and Detroit Free Press. Photos of the riots were placed in the interior pages of major newspapers like The New York Times, The Washington Post, or The Chicago Tribune. Major black weeklies like the Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago Defender either placed the riots in the context of other recent disturbances or focused, in the case of the Defender, on riot prevention, and did not feature riot images prominently. In no major magazine did riot photos make the cover, yet Life and the NAACP’s monthly publication The Crisis contained articles with large photo spreads. Considering the limited impact the story had in the national headlines, the

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lack of photos in prominent places should not be surprising. The amount of space
devoted to photos varied from none in the National Urban League’s publication,
*Opportunity*, to eight and a half pages in *Life*.

The riot story and its images were featured more prominently in local newspapers,
but the way the two major local papers – the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News* –
used riot photos spoke volumes about the political and social orientation of each
publication. The *News* was known as the more conservative of Detroit’s papers. The
majority of images it showed from the riot were of various individuals maintaining law
and order, and the aftermath of looting. Only a few days into its coverage did it start to
show images from the riot itself, and then it only focused on mobs setting fire to cars.
The *News*’s choice of these types of images suggested a reluctance to tackle the
racialized violence in the riots. The more progressive *Free Press* made liberal use of the
many pictures of brutality and violence from the riot. While the images splashed on the
front page were those of policeman rescuing blacks from attack, a two-page photo spread
in the interior showed a full range of riot scenes. Burning autos, jammed hospitals, white
mob attacking black victims, and police attempting to maintain order made up a collage
of destruction. By selecting images of violence, the *Free Press* made a statement against
race hatred. As progressive as the *Free Press* was, however, it still did not use its photos
to critique police actions in the riots as *Life* and the *Crisis* soon did, since allegations of
police brutality did not surface until after the first few days of riot coverage.

A few images ran in multiple publications and became fixed in the public
consciousness. The most notable image from the riots was perhaps that of a white rioter
striking John Lewis as four policemen escorted him, discussed earlier in this chapter.

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The image ran in *The Crisis*, *Life*, and *The Chicago Tribune*, and it was the only image of the riot in *Time’s* coverage. A truncated version of it also ran in *The New York Times*.

The captions given to this photo proved illuminating. *Time’s* simple caption, “Detroit police and rioters: the dynamite exploded,” referenced the well-known article, titled “Detroit Is Dynamite,” that ran in *Life* the previous year. The conservative *Chicago Tribune* used the photo to give information on the number of police called in to duty.

Only *The Crisis* and *Life* – both progressive magazines published a few weeks after the rioting – used the picture to critique the role of police in the riots. *The Crisis* commented:

> The very best photo of the Detroit, Mich., race riot, June 20-22, is shown at the top. Two mounted police and two foot policemen fail to prevent a Negro from being struck by a white rioter. This picture bears out the wide criticism of the role of the police in the riot; they killed 20 of the 25 dead Negroes, shot not a single white person.

*Life* reported:

> Rioter slaps a Negro who is being held by two policemen, while a large group of white hoodlums surges in from behind. Throughout the riot the Detroit police were tougher on Negroes than whites. They used tear gas and (sometimes) nightsticks on white mobs, tommy guns and pistols on Negroes. They killed 15 Negroes, most of who were said to be “looting,” and no whites, although white gangs overturned police cars and beat up policemen in rescuing rioters who had been arrested…

These captions were two instances of the way in which the media used photos and captions together to shape their coverage of the riots.

Perhaps the most stunningly emphatic in its use of images was *Life’s* coverage in its 5 July 1943 issue. The text in *Life’s* article, “Race War in Detroit: Americans maul

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350 “Detroit is Dynamite,” *Life*, 17 August 1942.
353 “Race War in Detroit,” *Life*, 5 July 1943. Notice that the numbers of dead are different depending on publications. This is because of the nature of reporting on a riot – very confused numbers, some riot casualties initially surviving but dying of their injuries in the hospital, and so on. The final official death toll was thirty-four.
and murder each other as Hitler wins a battle in the nation’s most explosive city,” took up a mere half page; its title reinforced the popular belief that any sign of disunity on the home front directly aided the Axis powers. Eight-and-a-half pages of its riot coverage were devoted to twenty images. Half of the photos were of attacks on blacks in the streets or on black property. Only one image even hinted at the black violence in the riot, that of a distraught white storeowner looking at her looted property.\(^{354}\)

*Life* ran images that boldly showed the barbarity and brutality that other publications like *The Crisis* only hinted at in words and captions. One *Life* image showed a black man being menaced by white policemen; the beginning of the caption reads, “Negro ‘suspect’ is cornered by police who seem ready to use their clubs.” *Life* also emphasized the brutality of whites against other whites helping blacks. In two images, white soldiers or policemen aiding blacks are menaced by other whites. One major image, and the only one taking up a whole page, showed a white police officer, knocked unconscious by a soda bottle to the head, falling into the arms of another policemen as they are surrounded by a white crowd. The caption sought to impress the reader with the perversity of the white rioter’s stance:

> Policeman falls into the arms of another officer, knocked cold by a pop bottle. By a weird trick of mob psychology, the white rioters raised the cry of “Hitlerism” when the police tried to stop their abuse of Negroes. They yelled “Just like Germany,” when police turned tear gas on them. One white youth snarled, “Yah, you damn Gestapo” at the policemen who seized him for beating a Negro. Apparently, they did not realize that they were the ones who looked and acted like Nazis.\(^{355}\)

The quotes of rioters comparing the police to the Gestapo seem puzzling at first, especially in light of the seeming indifference displayed to the Axis in the already

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\(^{354}\) “Race War in Detroit,” *Life*, 5 July 1943.

\(^{355}\) “Race War in Detroit,” *Life*, 5 July 1943.
discussed statement from a Packard striker mere weeks before the riot that he would “rather see Hitler and Hirohito win than work next to a nigger.” But both situations stem from the same desire to preserve white privilege and power. White rioters sought to protect their power – or at the very least savagely vent their frustrations at being relatively powerless – by beating blacks. When the police sought to protect blacks, the white rioters saw the police as oppressing them, in the manner of the Gestapo. These police officers were no longer the preservers of the white hegemonic status quo, but the protectors of a perceived new racial order that would disempower the white working class. When *Life* compared white rioters to Nazis, it did not so much indicate a desire to condemn American racism, but rather a desire to distance Americans from their infamously prejudiced enemies and to enforce home front unity. Racial violence perpetrated by Americans only gave ammunition to their enemies and damaged America’s credibility with its nonwhite allies. The riots were indeed exploited in Axis propaganda in Berlin and Tokyo, confirming American fears.\(^{356}\) *Life* reported in its 6 December 1943 issue that propagandists discussed “the zoot-suit riots, the coal strikes, the train wrecks and industrial sabotage, the race riots, the black markets, the successes of isolationist Congressmen, the shabby politics, [and] the grumbling under rationing.”\(^{357}\)

Why were there no pictures, in any publication, of blacks rioting? Black rioting was clearly documented in reports and in the pictures of looted and burned stores that cropped up a few days later in media coverage of the riot’s aftermath. The absence of images showing the black riot did not go unnoticed. In the 26 July issue, two *Life* readers called the magazine out on its omission. The editor’s note gave a valid reason for the


\(^{357}\) “Tomorrow We Will Be Free,” *Life*, 6 December 1943, 114.
selection of images, though. Police trying to keep the white and black mobs apart restricted entrance to the black section of town, Paradise Valley. As a result, nearly all images of black rioting were confined to the aftermath of looting. *Life* had been careful to mention this in the captions of its article, but not all news sources were as prudent. A lack of images from the black segment of the rioting meant that coverage of the riots was slightly lopsided, especially if readers focused mainly on the photographs. In some cases, newspapers had a fairly balanced article on both parts of the riot, but aside from the photos of white aggression, they only had pictures of the aftermath of property damage with which to work. Images of mob violence were more memorable and eye-catching than images of burned-out buildings given the stronger emotional response and empathy generated by bodily violence.

The photographic coverage of the riots had a more profound impact on the public than the most eloquent prose. Americans could read the text of articles and argue the legitimacy of claims of racial strife and social problems, but they could not make such arguments about the photos. How could fellow Americans turn on each other and exhibit the same sort of hatred they fought against overseas? The images provided inescapable proof to naysayers that such discordant sentiments did exist in a supposedly unified, wartime society. The photos of lawlessness and hatred, combined with captions bemoaning the resemblance in rioters’ behavior to the very forces they supposedly stood against, seemed designed to shame Americans and serve as a reminder that racial conflict could not be ignored.

Letters to the editor in *Life* indicated that its photographic coverage of the riots had achieved the intended result. “As a native Detroiter,” said one, “please let me take
this opportunity to express our feeling of deep humility and shame at what has befallen
our city.”358 A serviceman from Brooklyn commented on the abilities and loyalty of
many blacks he had met while attending the University of Michigan and in the service,
and added, “Pictures of Detroit’s riots do not leave a very pleasant thought in the minds
of many of us in the service.”359 Even white Southerners, supposedly the most racist
group in the nation, responded with anger and horror. One Virginia man wrote, “. . . I’d
like to take one of those nice lead pipes and bend it over the head of every one of the poor
white trash and the Yankee hoodlums who contributed such a nice set of pictures from
Detroit.” He added in closing, “Those pictures made me so damned mad I’d even shake
Abe Lincoln’s hand right now!”360

It did not take long for the public to latch on to potential causes of the riots.
While some did blame “agitators” and “subversives,” echoing the “Bolshevik” claims of
1919 Chicago, Detroit’s closest comparison in scale, far more people pointed to rapid
migration to satisfy defense industry labor needs and the subsequent lack of housing as
the root causes. The emphasis on migration in particular was the result of the
contemporary strong interest in sociological explanations. The conclusions reached by
the national media were far different from those of the formal committee established by
Mayor Edward J. Jeffries and Governor Harry F. Kelly. The discrepancy between media
explanations and committee explanations especially rankled The Crisis. Even though the
twin factors of housing and migration were identified early, they still held up to scrutiny
months after the general public derided the official report.

On 25 June, the *New York Times* published an article, “Michigan Inquiry Seeks Riot Causes,” which first hinted at a strong sociological approach to determining the causes of the riot. “This whole thing is sociological and we’ve got to establish, by scientific investigation, what sort of maladjustments bring about such a situation,” Governor Kelly was quoted as saying. Kelly invited Dr. Charles F. Ramsay of the Department of Social Welfare to conduct interviews of the people detained in the riots to determine their backgrounds. Detroit piqued a two-fold interest of sociologists. First, both the general population and academic sociologists had become interested in what they termed “hoodlumism,” or juvenile delinquency, which they worried was on the rise. Such worries had fed into the “zoot suit” riots in Los Angeles a few weeks before the Detroit incident, and the fact that many of the Detroit rioters were youths strengthened the case for juvenile delinquency. More unique to Detroit was the large influx of black and white southern migrants who had come to Detroit for war work. Largely from a poor rural background, the transplanted Southerners had to make certain adjustments to city living and northern culture. It was the degree of success in making that transition that interested sociologists, as did any potential maladjustments that could have contributed to the riots.

Faith in sociology to provide a rational, scientific explanation of society’s ills was at least partly a consequence of New Deal progressivism. During the Great Depression, the government had turned to experts to aid in solving the country’s monetary and social problems in a rational manner. This faith in reason had helped to create the vogue in sociology, and many people outside of the academic sphere familiarized themselves with

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its terms and research. The public interest in sociology became very evident in newspaper articles of the time, and this was especially true of the Detroit riot coverage.

Ramsay’s study of the arrested rioters, almost all black, drew no concrete conclusions about the riot’s causes but discounted the southern influence. Most of those questioned had lived in Detroit for a number of years, were well established, and described their previous experiences with discrimination as negligible.\footnote{364 “Detroit Riot Inquiry Discounts Migration,” \textit{The New York Times}, 27 June 1943.} While Ramsay’s study was a valid scientific attempt to determine the extent of southern influence in the riots, it would have been less biased if he had broadened his survey base. Limiting it to people arrested meant that he missed out on the large white participant base.

Other newspapers also addressed the sociological causes of the riots. The \textit{Chicago Tribune} published a lengthy article by reporter Frank Hughes discussing the sociological angle in detail. In “Experts Trace Race Conflicts to Dixie Exodus,” Hughes interviewed two men he identified as “sociologists,” Claude Williams and Walter White. He gave no academic affiliation for either man; Williams was identified as a Presbyterian minister and Southerner and Walter White as the executive secretary of the NAACP. The article focused mainly on transplanted southern prejudice as the root cause of racial conflict in the North, and gave special attention to the role of religion in fostering these hatreds. Dr. Williams attempted to give a scientific explanation for the intertwining of religion and prejudice. He argued that many of the white Southern migrants came from rural areas, where they had been isolated and had developed a distrust of the outside world, encouraged by “working preachers,” laymen who were their de facto religious leaders. These poor Southerners, Williams posited, brought these prejudiced worldviews
with them when they migrated north, a view which fed into and supported the stereotype of the bigoted southern hick as the source of racial woes, to the horror of more sophisticated northern urbanites. Only as an afterthought did the article briefly address allegations of police ineffectiveness, and even then the tone was not critical of police actions. Hughes came down strongly on the side of southern migration as a leading factor, despite knowing of and citing the Ramsay study.\footnote{Frank Hughes, “Experts Trace Race Conflicts To Dixie Exodus,” \textit{The Chicago Daily Tribune}, 27 June 1943.}

The type of “armchair sociology” engaged in by Hughes and others reflected the impact of New Deal progressivism on public discourse. Professional sociologists shared the fixation on the relationship of migration to Detroit’s woes, but differed in other interpretations. Juvenile delinquency, although studied in academia, was largely sensationalized in the public discourse. Sociologists did share the public’s concern about entrenched racism, but the solutions they posited - a widespread change in white attitudes and the eventual assimilation of blacks into society – were optimistic and impractical given the level of institutionalized racism.

Although the official Detroit inquiry largely ruled out southern influence, the fact of rapid migration and its influence on the housing situation remained sources of discontent. The housing problems described by \textit{Life} in 1942 had not been solved in 1943. A study by the National Urban League pinpointed housing, made worse for blacks due to residential segregation, as a major problem and contributor to a climate of racial tension.\footnote{“Report Outlines Remedy for Riots,” \textit{The New York Times}, 3 July 1943.} There were talks of attempting to stem migration in an attempt to help ease the housing situation, a plan United States Attorney General Francis Biddle denied,
though he had contemplated migration’s relation to Detroit’s ills.\textsuperscript{367} The housing problems in Detroit in 1943 are regarded in contemporary scholarship as one of the leading factors contributing to the tensions that caused the riots.\textsuperscript{368}

There were few serious allegations of “subversive” influences in the riots in the national media. The conservative \textit{Chicago Tribune} played it up more than other papers, but it was still muted. The FBI quickly ruled out Axis plotting as a cause.\textsuperscript{369} However, Martin Dies, a congressman from Texas and the head of the Dies Committee examining racial hatred in Detroit and elsewhere, was convinced that a “fifth column” of Japanese agents had fomented the Detroit riots and proposed to include the city’s unrest in his study.\textsuperscript{370} Various domestic hate groups, such as the Black Legion and the Ku Klux Klan, were blamed as having had an influence on the general discontent, even if they had not directed the rioting. Calls for an investigation of Ku Klux Klan activities in Detroit intensified, and such a task was proposed for inclusion in Representative Dies’ investigation of racial discord.\textsuperscript{371} In reality, an FBI investigation of the Klan conducted shortly after the riot concluded that there was no direct link.\textsuperscript{372} John S. Bugas, the head of the FBI in Detroit, was emphatic in his belief that foreign spies or homegrown racial subversives did not influence the riot. “Do you think that the 200 kids, boys between the ages of 14 and 18, who stopped a street car, pulled off Negroes, and pummeled them, were acting on orders?” Bugas asked, adding, “I don’t.”\textsuperscript{373} The likelihood of foreign or domestic groups orchestrating the Detroit riots was viewed in law enforcement circles as

\begin{itemize}
\item[B367] “Biddle Denies Migration Ban,” \textit{The Crisis}, September 1943.
\item[B368] For more discussion of housing in Detroit, see the work of Dominic J. Capeci, Jr. and Thomas J. Sugrue, cited above.
\item[B370] “Riots to Be Probed by Dies Committee,” \textit{The Detroit Free Press}, 24 June 1943.
\end{itemize}
absurd. The willingness of some white citizens to seize on the idea of outside influences causing the riots reflected their denial of their own complicity in supporting the racism that spurred the violence.

A final potential cause, and one suggested by the final official report, was the alleged contribution of black advocacy organizations to unrest. The official report alleged that black groups such as the NAACP and the National Urban League had fostered discontent among blacks that had made them more aggressive and prone to violence. This finding caused an indignant uproar in the pages of *The Crisis*:

> Violence of whites against Negroes is dismissed summarily in a short paragraph, despite the fact it is asserted this violence extended over a period of twenty hours, from 4 a.m. June 21, until 11 p.m. that same day. During this period more than 1,500 persons were arrested of whom 85% were Negroes. Seventeen of the twenty-five slain Negroes were killed by the police.\(^{374}\)

Mainstream white publications also found fault with the official report. Scapegoating black organizations proved an easy way out for Detroit city officials who had committed serious errors in their handling of the riots. Given that many of the people on the investigating committee were the same officials, the results were hardly surprising.

Detroit remained under martial law for a week following the riot.\(^{375}\) As the troops left and the city began to rebuild damaged structures and return to business as usual, cities around the country took a sobering look at their own community relations. For other major cities, the Detroit riot served as a cautionary tale. The acute factors that created the tense racial climate that spawned the riots were the same pressures faced by industrial centers around the nation. Defense migration had taxed both the physical and cultural infrastructures. Overcrowding and lack of housing caused by mass recruitment

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of labor for defense plants, cultural disagreements and misunderstandings arising from the closer proximity of previously segregated groups, and the maladjustment of recent migrants and youth contributed to the explosive climate in which the riots occurred. It truly seemed that any city was a mere spark away from a full-blown riot.

Detroit vividly demonstrated that America’s “race war” was no longer just under the surface, but out in the open. Many observers could and did rule the Los Angeles riot an isolated anomaly, but once Detroit erupted into rioting, a clear pattern of open racial violence emerged across the nation. The Detroit riot spurred discussions about how best to diffuse tense racial conditions and avoid riots in other places, a topic which is discussed further in Chapter 4. More riots would not only be incredibly damaging to life and property, but to the future health of community race relations, America’s war industrial production, and its international image. Detroit illustrated just how vulnerable northern industrial cities were to race riots. The myopic focus on the South as the source of all of America’s race problems left American society blind to racial conditions that had been rapidly deteriorating in the North since the “great migration” began in earnest at the end of World War I and changed the spatial and racial demography of northern cities.

The focus in media portrayal of the Detroit riot on the white half of the riot left many unprepared for the Harlem riot in August. While the white half of the riot resembled a typical race riot – dubbed “traditionally American” by the NAACP a few weeks after the Detroit riot – the other half of the riot foreshadowed the future of race riots in the United States. The black half of the Detroit riot signaled a community-wide sense of agency, an unwillingness to be passive victims. The black community in Detroit was not willing to accept a racial status quo that systemically maltreated them,

\footnote{Capeci and Wilkerson, 29.}
and they responded with violence when faced with violence. If the defense of their bodies and their neighborhoods by any means necessary was an act of defiance against white hegemony, the destruction and looting of white-owned property in black neighborhoods was open revolt. In this way, the Detroit riot echoed the 1935 Harlem riot and presaged the 1943 Harlem riot.

If the 1943 Detroit riot reflected a nascent spirit of open defiance of the northern Jim Crow system, the 1943 Harlem riot was an intensification of a long process of public protest and discontent. Harlem, headquarters of many national black civil rights organizations and home to many of the earliest national leaders in the movement, had a history of community activism dating to the early 1930s. Grassroots activists tirelessly agitated for equal economic opportunity, boycotting white-owned Harlem stores that refused to employ blacks or employed them in only menial roles. The people of Harlem also fought for access to better education, healthcare, and housing. Discontent over deteriorating conditions in Harlem led to a riot in 1935. Despite a thorough investigation led by sociologist E. Franklin Frazier which recommended ways to ameliorate the quality of life, many of these same issues still plagued Harlem nearly a decade later, requiring only a spark to result in rioting again.
"It would have been better to have left the plate glass as it had been and the goods lying in the stores. It would have been better, but it would have also been intolerable, for Harlem needed something to smash."

On 25 July 1943, a rally was staged in the Bronx to promote racial unity in the wake of earlier riots in Los Angeles and Detroit that summer. The rally title, “No Detroit Here!” explicitly referenced the fear that the contagion of “race war” that had infected Detroit could result in racial violence in other American cities. The “Pledge of Unity” drafted by the rally organizers urged New Yorkers to avoid violence and instead embrace tolerance of citizens of different racial and ethnic groups. The rally was the latest in a series of ongoing attempts to prevent a race riot in New York City. Earlier attempts, such as Mayor Fiorello La Guardia’s plea for tolerance in a special radio broadcast on 27 June and repeated pushes for interracial committees among religious and community leaders, all followed the formula for preventing a race riot similar to Detroit.

As the summer of 1943 wore on and more riots began erupting across the nation in Los Angeles, Mobile, Alabama, Beaumont, Texas, and Detroit, no city looked at the trend with greater unease than New York. On the surface, New York seemed an unlikely candidate for a race riot. Because it was not a major industrial center on par with Detroit or Los Angeles, and had actually suffered a population loss over the course of the war, New York did not face the same acute population crunch or over taxed infrastructure that plagued Detroit and Los Angeles. The center of New York’s black community, Harlem,

378 Pamphlet from Bronx Civilian Defense Volunteer Office – “No Detroit Here!”: A Mass Rally on Racial Unity. Departmental Correspondence, Box [number illegible], Folder 16 [number smudged]. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Municipal Archives, New York.
was home to many national organizations and prominent members of black society, and as an enclave Harlem remained fairly isolated from white Manhattan. But the history of Harlem was one of chronic poverty and lack of adequate attention by the city government and city budget, perpetual housing shortages and high rent and food prices, and a strong tradition of community activism and protest over the poor conditions in Harlem. City officials feared, ultimately correctly, that the frustrations of Harlemites would reach a boiling point.

It was the dismal conditions in Harlem that made New York City ripe for a race riot in 1943, not some influence from Detroit. Organizers of rallies like “No Detroit Here!” failed to recognize the fundamental differences between New York and Detroit that made a riot exactly like Detroit’s, with white mob violence, practically impossible: spatial geography, local politics, and recent history. Black Harlem was larger and more isolated than black neighborhoods in Detroit, making rioting between different groups in borderland areas more unlikely. And local politics that rendered Harlem perpetually under funded and with unequal power compared to other areas of Manhattan were an additional source of frustration, along with the same kinds of economic discrimination that the black population of Detroit faced. But above all, Harlem in 1943 also made New York city officials nervous because its citizens had rioted eight years earlier. The 1935 riot was unlike any race riot anyone had ever seen. In rioting, Harlemites overturned the very notion of a race riot. They attacked white-owned property, not people, and they did so with a strategic focus on those businesses they perceived as most oppressive. They rioted not to reinforce white hegemony of the racial hierarchy, but to protest it. The concessions granted to Harlem by the city in the riot’s aftermath had proved to blacks
that spontaneous riots could be effective in correcting the conditions in their community when legal protest was not an option or was ineffective in addressing their frustrations. The 1943 riot followed that same pattern, and the legacy of the Harlem riots was most evident in the riots of the 1960s, all of which followed this model.

Harlem’s black community during the Depression and World War II also set the model and tone for the nascent national civil rights movement. The focus on eradicating discrimination in employment led first to nondiscrimination laws on the state level and shortly thereafter the national level. The gains made in equal employment freed the civil rights movement in the 1950s to focus on legal challenges designed to end legal and social segregation and discrimination. The tactics of Harlem community activists in the 1930s and 1940s—using local grassroots organization, picketing and boycotting to raise awareness of injustice and discrimination, embracing both conservative and radical groups, and focusing on socioeconomic issues—were adopted by the civil rights movement in the 1960s. The story of Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s provides a valuable historical context not only for the other cities rioting during 1943 but also for the longer trajectory of rioting and civil rights agitation in the twentieth century.

Though Harlem has been synonymous with the black community since the 1920s and the “Harlem Renaissance,” Harlem’s history as a majority-black enclave was a relatively recent one. In the late nineteenth century, the extension of the elevated line into Harlem prompted a spate of development, and the area became a sought-after suburb of the city. But overdevelopment in the housing market, coupled with economic panics, transformed Harlem into an immigrant enclave. By 1910, the majority of Harlem residents were Irish, Jewish, German, and Italian immigrants. Black families had only

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379 Abu-Lughod, 136.
just started to move in numbers to the area west of Amsterdam Avenue, and blacks were still highly outnumbered by their white neighbors.\textsuperscript{380}

The evolution of black Harlem was intrinsically tied to migration from the South and immigration from the Caribbean. From 1890 onwards, black migration out of the South increased black populations in northern urban centers like New York; this migration exploded in intensity during and after World War I. In 1890, the nonwhite population of New York City was 25,674; by 1900, it was 67,304; and by 1910, it was around 91,000, but the overall percentage of nonwhites in New York’s population stayed the same, around two percent.\textsuperscript{381} After 1910, black New York saw a rapid increase in population, with a sixty-six percent jump between 1910 and 1920, and a 115 percent jump between 1920 and 1930. The 1930 black population of nearly 328,000 dwarfed the black population of 1900, with a staggering 387 percent rate of growth in thirty years.\textsuperscript{382} That growth included immigration from British Caribbean colonies; already in 1900, nearly 10,000 black residents of New York, or fifteen percent, listed their place of birth as the Caribbean in the census.\textsuperscript{383} By 1930, foreign-born blacks accounted for nearly 55,000 of black New York’s population, or nearly seventeen percent.\textsuperscript{384}

The black migrants and immigrants who arrived in New York differed from those who migrated to other industrial centers like Detroit and Chicago. Those midwestern cities attracted migrants from the Cotton Belt, where many had grown up in rural areas and had little industrial work experience. Migrants to New York were far more likely to come from southern cities on the Atlantic seaboard and were more likely to have trades

\textsuperscript{381} Abu-Lughod, 133.
\textsuperscript{383} Abu-Lughod, 136.
\textsuperscript{384} Osofsky, 129.
experience that could aid them in securing industrial jobs. The United States census of 1930 reported that over 104,000 black New Yorkers had been born in Virginia, North Carolina, or South Carolina, compared to the nearly 24,000 who had been born in Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia. Caribbean immigrants tended to be better-educated and preferred New York in part because of the growing black intellectual center that was emerging and would come to be headquartered in Harlem.

At the same time New York’s black population received an influx from the South and the Caribbean, the geography of black New York changed. Black newcomers overwhelmingly preferred Manhattan, since it was the site of the majority of industry in the city. Before 1880, the black population of Manhattan was scattered; by 1911, journalist and NAACP co-founder Mary White Ovington wrote of five areas of black population concentration in Manhattan: Greenwich Village, Middle West Side, San Juan Hill, upper East Side, and Harlem. The Midtown-West Side area had been the largest black population center in Manhattan since the 1880s, but it was always a racially mixed zone. This area included the Tenderloin, a vice district.

Changing neighborhood demographics, violence, and urban redevelopment projects enticed or forced a demographic shift out of lower Manhattan and into Harlem. The Tenderloin was the site of a race riot in 1900, spurred by the killing of a white Irish police officer by a black man in defense of his wife. The rioting following the officer’s funeral was savage, with white mobs roving the area and beating black victims, many of whom were turned away from police protection or beaten by the police themselves.

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385 Osofsky, 129.
386 Abu-Lughod, 136.
388 Abu-Lughod, 134
the years following the riot, many middle-class blacks sought to leave a Midtown-West area still rife with tensions.

Other blacks relocated from lower Manhattan due to necessity. Urban redevelopment projects like the construction of the original Penn Station demolished blocks of black businesses and homes.\textsuperscript{389} Black migration to Harlem was both enabled and hastened due to projects like Penn Station. Black businessmen and women, as well as homeowners, used the money they gained from selling their property in lower Manhattan in the path of the project to invest in property in Harlem, which was experiencing an economic downturn. These people became landlords to lower-class blacks displaced from the redevelopment projects who followed the middle class to Harlem.\textsuperscript{390}

White landlords and homeowners initially resisted black expansion into Harlem. Reluctant to accept the changing demography of their neighborhood, landlords banded together to sign covenant agreements in an attempt to provide a unified front and prevent black tenants from occupying certain areas, dubbed “covenant blocks” by the black community.\textsuperscript{391} The difficulty of sustaining a unified response over a large area with many different buildings and landlords doomed the effort to failure. Real estate speculation, as well as a knee-jerk response to just sell and move elsewhere when faced with the prospect of black neighbors, opened the area to further black settlement by 1914.\textsuperscript{392} White landlords were also persuaded by the almighty dollar, since they could charge black tenants more money due to the black demand for housing.

\textsuperscript{389} Osofsky, 93.
\textsuperscript{390} Osofsky, 92-93.
\textsuperscript{391} Osofsky, 106.
\textsuperscript{392} Osofsky, 108-109
The black move to the neighborhood was not an entirely peaceful one. Samuel J. Battle, appointed the first black policeman in Manhattan in 1911, recalled a series of minor riots fought between the black and white occupants of Harlem in 1911 and 1912.\textsuperscript{393} Battle was one of the police who responded to such riots, and he was formally transferred to Harlem in 1913, perhaps because of the growing black population in the area.\textsuperscript{394} While Battle was for many years unique as the only black policeman in Manhattan, the borough of Brooklyn, which at that time had a separate police force, had been hiring black policemen for some time. One of Battle’s inspirations for becoming a police officer was his brother-in-law Moses Cobb, a black policeman in Brooklyn who Battle met when he moved to New York in 1901.\textsuperscript{395}

By 1920, the black community in Harlem had grown to number between 30,000 and 40,000, buoyed by migration for war work. The physical boundaries of black Harlem stretched between 7\textsuperscript{th} and Madison Avenues from west-to-east and between 131\textsuperscript{st} and 141\textsuperscript{st} Streets from south-to-north.\textsuperscript{396} Harlem still had a majority white population at that time, but the 1920s saw an increasingly rapid transition in Harlem’s demographics. As the black community grew and overcrowding became an issue, many of Harlem’s white inhabitants moved to new developments in Queens.\textsuperscript{397} White flight allowed for the further expansion of black Harlem, as real estate agents had an easier time convincing white landlords to accept black tenants to fill their now-vacant units.\textsuperscript{398} 

\textsuperscript{393} Reminiscences of Samuel J. Battle (1960), 23. Columbia Oral History Collection
\textsuperscript{394} Reminiscences of Samuel J. Battle (1960), 33. Columbia Oral History Collection
\textsuperscript{395} Reminiscences of Samuel J. Battle (1960), 13-17. Columbia Oral History Collection
\textsuperscript{396} Reminiscences of George S. Schuyler (1960), 61. Columbia Oral History Collection
\textsuperscript{397} Reminiscences of George S. Schuyler (1960), 62. Columbia Oral History Collection
\textsuperscript{398} Reminiscences of George S. Schuyler (1960), 62-63. Columbia Oral History Collection
Harlem was majority black by 1930, with Central Harlem accounting for sixty-one percent of Manhattan’s black population. When Central Harlem was combined with East Harlem, Riverside, and Washington Heights, the area accounted for a whopping ninety-one percent of Manhattan’s black population in 1930.\textsuperscript{399} The 1930 United States census listed the total population of the Harlem area as 313,650.\textsuperscript{400} The phenomenal rate of black Harlem’s growth continued throughout the 1930s as more people migrated from the South. Central Harlem saw a growth of thirty-seven percent between 1930 and 1940, but its growth rate was eclipsed by Riverside (eighty-four percent) and Washington Heights (forty-six percent).\textsuperscript{401} The 1940 census, which defined Harlem as 110\textsuperscript{th}-155\textsuperscript{th} Streets and 3\textsuperscript{rd}-Amsterdam Avenues, registered a total population of 324,075. Of that number, 257,608 (seventy-nine percent) were black.\textsuperscript{402} Individual areas of Harlem could have a much higher concentration of black population. The August 1946 Urban League Report article, “An Analysis of the Characteristics of the Population in Central Harlem,” listed Harlem’s black population in the 1940 census as 188,028, or 89.8 percent of Harlem’s total population; it is likely these figures referenced Central Harlem specifically.\textsuperscript{403}

Black Harlem’s growth between 1910 and 1940 mirrored the growth of other urban black communities in the North. Blacks had been migrating from the South to the

\textsuperscript{400} Memo to the mayor from the Department of Housing and Buildings, City of New York, dated October 6, 1944. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Box [number illegible], Folder 10: February-December 1944 Harlem – 1943 Race Riots. Municipal Archives of New York.
\textsuperscript{402} Memo to the mayor from the Department of Housing and Buildings, City of New York, dated October 6, 1944. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Box [number illegible], Folder 10: February-December 1944 Harlem – 1943 Race Riots. Municipal Archives of New York.
North and West since the Civil War, but the years between 1910 and 1930 saw the highest rates of migration. In 1910, only five percent of the total southern-born black population of 9,258,000 resided outside the South; by 1930 that percentage had grown to thirteen percent of a total black southern-born population of 10,859,000. These figures, drawn from the United States census, likely obscure a much higher volume of migration, because they fail to take into account deaths and returns to the South. Also, because of the unreliability of the 1920 United States census, which had considerable problems with under-representation, it is extremely difficult to determine if there were a marked difference between 1910 and 1920 and 1920 and 1930.404 It is possible that the decade between 1910 and 1920 might have had a rapid increase in black migration due to work in war industries for World War I. It was not a coincidence that New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Detroit, all industrial centers, saw the biggest gains in black populations between 1910 and 1930.405 These figures fail to illustrate the much larger and long-term impact these migrants had on their new communities, however, by being unable to account for children born to these migrants.

New migrants to Harlem often joined churches as a way to integrate into their community. These churches provided both spiritual and civic leadership for black Harlem. Olivia Pearl Stokes, a theologian with ties to Abyssinian Baptist, best described the church’s central and multi-faceted roles in the community:

The black church has always been three things to the black people… It was the center for all the social life, and launching all the talent in the congregation… It

was, secondly, the center for the move for freedom, for civil rights activity… [and] it was the spiritual center.\textsuperscript{406}

Churches had long played important roles in black politics and the civil rights movement, and Harlem’s churches proved no exception. Churches were used as meeting spaces for rallies about civil rights causes, and civil rights activists sought the support of large churches and radical pastors to lend their strength to grassroots campaigns and political rallies.\textsuperscript{407} Some churches were overtly political in their very formation, like the Harlem Unitarian Church. Founded in 1920, the church appealed to radical activists in the community with its rejection of social and gender norms and its active embrace of community outreach and activism. For the Harlem Unitarian Church, traditional religious orthodoxy maintained the social and political status quo, and the rejection of that orthodoxy was vital in any attempt to change life for the black community.\textsuperscript{408} All churches in Harlem engaged in social programs on various scales. Prior to the New Deal, the churches provided social safety net programs like soup kitchens, charity, and job postings; when New Deal programs began to address these problems, churches continued to supplement the New Deal programs but shifted focus to greater social and political activism.\textsuperscript{409}

By 1930, Harlem’s largest church was the Abyssinian Baptist Church, with 8,000 congregants.\textsuperscript{410} Abyssinian Baptist was led by Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., himself a

\textsuperscript{408} McDuffie, 41.
\textsuperscript{409} Greenberg, 104.
southern-born migrant to New York, who served as minister from 1908 to 1933.\textsuperscript{411} The church’s most crucial contributions to the Harlem community came from the efforts of Powell’s son, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. The younger Powell followed in his father’s religiously-minded footsteps, earning a Master of Arts in religious education in 1931 from Columbia University.\textsuperscript{412} In the six years between his graduation and his transition into his father’s former position as minister of Abyssinian Baptist, Powell gained a reputation as a civil rights leader. His influence brought Abyssinian Baptist into a more political role in the community, and his ambitions gave the church a higher profile citywide. Powell was seen as a crusader for the community and civil rights by his admirers, and as a “notorious demagogue” by his foes.\textsuperscript{413} Powell used the church as a springboard for further community and political ventures. In 1942, he founded the paper \textit{The People’s Voice}, a left-leaning newspaper that championed civil rights causes.\textsuperscript{414}

While the majority of black church leaders-turned-civic leaders were men, the gender imbalance in Harlem church membership meant that most of the participants in church-based activism were women. In Harlem, only sixty-four men belonged to a church for every hundred women members.\textsuperscript{415} The church represented a social outlet for women, many of whom lived in an otherwise more circumscribed social network due to the high participation in domestic work, which was a more isolated work environment than that of black men.\textsuperscript{416} While women were barred from positions of leadership in most churches, they were valuable foot soldiers in the church’s social aid programs and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{411} A. Clayton Powell, Sr., \textit{Against the Tide: An Autobiography} (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1938), vii-viii.
  \item \textsuperscript{412} Domic J. Capeci, Jr., \textit{The Harlem Riot of 1943} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), 18.
  \item \textsuperscript{413} Confidential letter to the members of the City Council, from “a former associate of Powell,” dated 07/03/1943. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Box 3316 Folder 1. Municipal Archives of New York.
  \item \textsuperscript{414} Capeci, \textit{The Harlem Riot}, 21.
  \item \textsuperscript{415} Greenberg, 105.
  \item \textsuperscript{416} Greenberg, 105.
\end{itemize}
civil rights protests, making up the bulk of volunteers at soup kitchens and picketers in mass protests. Because black women were employed outside the home at a higher rate than white women, they were especially invested in the drive for equal employment, and it was women who first launched the largest jobs campaign during the depression, “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work,” discussed below.

Harlem’s churches exerted a powerful influence on the local civil rights movement, but other organizations headquartered in Harlem exercised a powerful influence on a national scale. The NAACP, the Urban League, and various labor organizations, like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, were located in New York, and their geographic proximity enabled close working relationships among the groups. A. Philip Randolph, the president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and Walter White, the leader of the NAACP from 1931 to his death in 1955, were the two most prominent national figures in a movement that was still highly localized. The NAACP continued its long-term strategy of challenging racial inequality through the court system, while simultaneously working with other organizations like the Urban League and labor unions to prod the federal government to address issues like discrimination in employment, housing, and relief during the Depression. These disparate national civil rights groups formed an umbrella organization, the National Negro Congress, to pool their resources and present one united voice in dealing with the federal government. The New Deal ushered in an era of more government responsiveness to the concerns and demands of the black civil rights movement; as historian Cheryl Lynn Greenberg argues, the New Deal “acknowledged that government had a role to play in ameliorating

417 Greenberg, 101-102.
National civil rights groups seized on that admission to apply pressure on the government to improve rights for blacks nationwide.

At the same time that national civil rights organizations lobbied for more political and legal rights from the national government, local groups in Harlem focused on socioeconomic issues to improve the daily life of Harlemites. The way New York’s civil rights movement in the 1930s mobilized, and the issues it addressed, set an important precedent. As scholar Martha Biondi argues, Harlem’s grassroots organization and focus on socioeconomic issues presaged the Black Power movement in the 1960s in northern urban areas. Also important, as Biondi and other scholars like Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore have argued, was the Harlem movement’s coalition with more radical political groups – namely, in the 1930s, the Communist Party. Many of the most vocal civil rights activists from the 1920s to the 1940s belonged to the Communist Party or were sympathetic to it, since it was one of very few political parties at the time that promoted racial equality.

Harlem civil rights activists were focused largely on economic and quality of life issues. Access to more and better jobs; affordable and quality food, housing, and healthcare; and equitable distribution of relief were among the primary issues that drove grassroots organizers. Some of the most fruitful years for organizing in Harlem were between 1935 and 1939, when organizations of different political stripes worked together in a coalition to address these issues. Greater unity in organizing was spurred by the creation of the Popular Front in the Communist Party, which focused on class solidarity and put common community concerns before ideological differences between different

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418 Greenberg, 93-94.
activist groups. While actual active party membership in the Communist Party was small, the critical role that communists played in community organizing made their influence much greater than their numbers suggested. While non-communist (and anti-communist) groups provided the bulk of protestors for mass rallies and picket lines, communists were instrumental in planning and mobilizing the coalition. Until 1939, when anti-communist sentiment related to differing opinions on the Nazi-Soviet Pact broke apart the broad coalition and resulted in a weakened movement that lacked the organizational finesse the communists had provided, the working relationship between radically different political groups brought forward a productive focus on socioeconomic issues in Harlem.

The largest campaign in Harlem during the Great Depression was the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign. The campaign went through many phases, incorporating a diverse set of activist organizations and mass protests to achieve the goal of more black workers being hired in clerical positions in white-owned Harlem stores. The campaign’s track record was mixed, and its legacy was fractured by different opinions on the ultimate goal of the campaign. But the campaign itself introduced the power of mass organization and protest to the people of Harlem, as well as altered the terms of mass protest.

The earliest stage of the campaign began in 1931, with a coalition of Harlem housewives. Largely middle and upper-class women with a history of activism – its vice-president was Lucille Randolph, wife of A. Philip Randolph – the Harlem Housewives League sought more black employment, in any position, in Harlem stores by engaging in private dialogue with white business owners. The Harlem Housewives League did not

420 Greenberg, 98.
specifically seek employment of blacks in clerical positions, a stance that would shift later in the campaign. They sought any black employment, and encouraged black housewives to patronize stores that had black employees.\textsuperscript{421}

The next stage of the campaign, which began in 1934, engaged a broader coalition of groups and was patterned after similar campaigns in Chicago and elsewhere. The Citizen’s League for Fair Play was formed as an umbrella organization to coordinate the campaign. Some organizers, like Sufi Abdul Hamid of the Negro Industrial Clerical Alliance, came in from Chicago to help the Harlem cause.\textsuperscript{422} This stage of the campaign was the first to suggest a widespread economic boycott of Harlem businesses that refused to employ blacks in clerical and sales positions. This had the support of black businessmen and crucially, black nationalists. Black nationalists included “Garveyites,” who were the followers of Marcus Garvey, the founder of the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) who believed in creating a separate black economy to promote self-reliance. A boycott of white businesses that did not employ blacks would directly benefit both black nationalists and black businessmen, who would receive additional business generated by the boycott.\textsuperscript{423} The Chicago organizers emphasized mass action through picketing businesses that refused to hire black workers.\textsuperscript{424} The constant presence of picketers and the pressure they exerted on black consumers to comply with the boycott caused several businesses to agree to hire black workers, including the campaign’s main

\textsuperscript{421} Greenberg, 116-117.  
\textsuperscript{422} Greenberg, 120-121.  
\textsuperscript{423} Greenberg, 117.  
\textsuperscript{424} Greenberg, 122.
target, the Blumstein Department Store, which capitulated and agreed to hire fifteen black women clerks immediately and made a promise to hire more in a few months’ time.425

“Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” began to unravel after its initial successes due to two factors. The first was the New York Supreme Court ruling in October 1934 that rendered picketing illegal, depriving the campaign of its most effective method of public protest.426 The second factor was the disintegration of the campaign’s coalition. Black nationalist organizers and Garveyites Ira Kemp and Arthur Reid, founders of a spin-off group called the Harlem Labor Union, wanted their own supporters to be hired in the jobs they managed to win from white employers. Along with Hamid, they had charges of intimidation and extortion leveled at them both by white merchants and other black activists who disagreed with their tactics.427 The coalition further disagreed over what constituted a sufficient number of new black hires and their level of employment. As a result of this newfound lack of unity among the coalition, many businesses reneged on promises to hire more black workers. The main target of this stage of the campaign, Blumstein’s, did not fire the black clerks they had hired, but they never hired the clerks they had promised to hire “in the near future.”428

The lasting impact of “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” lay in the mobilization of the citizens of Harlem. The campaign laid bare the economic grievances of the community and played on the simmering anger over longstanding socioeconomic inequality. The initial successes of the campaign also proved to the community that exerting public pressure in the form of mass protests could net results and concessions

425 Greenberg, 121-122.
426 Greenberg, 124.
427 Greenberg, 123-25.
428 Greenberg, 125.
from the white business owners and community. A 1938 United States Supreme Court ruling, *New Negro Alliance vs. Sanitary Grocery Company*, eventually reinstated the legality of picketing, but only in the case of racial discrimination in employment. In 1935, the removal of picketing as a viable mass protest option in effect removed a legal outlet for community anger and expression, and allowed for the buildup of greater tension that exploded in the 1935 Harlem riot; after 1938, the limiting of picketing to protest over employment robbed Harlem citizens of a legal way to protest other issues of importance in the community.

The 1935 Harlem riot was the first recorded occurrence of a new style of race riot: the mass protest of white hegemony and socioeconomic inequality through the targeted destruction of white-owned property in minority neighborhoods. The underlying conditions in Harlem made for a charged atmosphere. The depression had hit Harlem residents particularly hard, and the mass losses of jobs affected the quality of living. More and more people in Harlem received relief, though problems plagued the process. The removal of picketing as a legal means of protest rendered the jobs campaign “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” ineffective and rolled back most of what had been gained, leaving a growing sense of resentment. Harlem in 1935 was a tinderbox of potential conflict.

Since the depression affected blacks disproportionately, blacks received aid disproportionately, though the distribution of that aid was problematic. As of the 1930 census, New York City’s black population over twenty-one years of age was 230,069, or five percent of the total population. By contrast, as of 1936, blacks made up 21.6 percent

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429 Greenberg, 132.
Before the depression, when charities were the main givers of aid, the Charity Organization Society estimated that between twenty to twenty-five percent of its charity cases were black families between 1924 and 1930. After 1930, the total percentage of black families receiving aid from the organization jumped to forty to forty-five percent.

Under the New Deal, there were federal, state, and municipal aid programs designed to provide relief. The state and federal programs helped to shore up the overburdened municipal aid programs; by 1935, only twenty-five percent of relief costs were paid by the city. New York City’s municipal relief programs were plagued by corruption, and, many Harlem citizens argued, favoritism and racism. Blacks were largely excluded from positions of authority in relief agencies, even local branches in Harlem. Complaints about lack of community involvement and input into the distribution of relief were combined with overwhelming “red tape.” The complexity of the relief system – there was no single, streamlined entity to turn to for relief – and shifting policies over time made navigating the bureaucratic labyrinth and obtaining relief difficult. As is often the case, payouts were too meager to be of great help, and the requirements to receive aid were numerous and onerous. The Emergency Relief Bureau (ERB), one of many relief agencies, estimated that from 1933 to 1937 it had rejected a full forty-five percent of aid applicants. As of 1935, the ERB had a residency

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432 Greenberg, 140.
433 Abu-Lughod, 139.
435 Greenberg, 142.
requirement of two years in the state and at least one year in the city, which disqualified a large number of recent migrants in Harlem.\textsuperscript{436}

In addition to relief access and distribution, another area of contention was housing. Overcrowding became a chronic problem in Harlem as families sought to save money by downgrading their housing. The result was more people living in smaller and older quarters, with an accompanying deterioration in the quality of life. Harlem’s population density was high, with one block, between 138\textsuperscript{th} and 139\textsuperscript{th} Streets and Seventh and Lenox Avenues, having the highest density in the city, with 620 people per acre. The majority of housing in Harlem, eighty-four percent, was at least thirty-five years old, and only four percent of housing had been constructed in the twenty years prior to 1935. Additionally, only sixteen percent of Harlem dwellings rated in excellent condition.\textsuperscript{437} Blacks paid higher rents, too, with the rental costs rising in the areas of the highest concentration of black residents.\textsuperscript{438} Many families took in lodgers to help offset the high cost of rent, with one block surveyed having thirty-eight percent of its total occupancy taken up by lodgers.\textsuperscript{439} Other New Yorkers faced similar housing woes, and the city proposed the construction of a public housing project in Brooklyn. The Williamsburg Houses were slated for white occupancy only, with no housing projects planned for black occupancy in the immediate future. The failure of new mayor Fiorello La Guardia, who took office in 1934 in part thanks to a coalition of different supporters that included black

\textsuperscript{436} Greenberg, 148.
Harlem, to address adequately the housing woes of blacks rankled the Harlem community.\footnote{Abu-Lughod, 139.}

Frustrations in Harlem came to an explosive head on 19 March 1935, when a small incident sparked a rumor that resulted in a night of rioting. A black teenager named Lino Rivera had been caught trying to take a penknife by two white employees of the Kress variety store on 125\textsuperscript{th} Street, who summoned police when he began to struggle and bit one of the employees on the hand. The police officer arrived and took the boy out the rear entrance via the basement to avoid a gathering crowd. Rumors began to spread that the boy had been taken to the basement to be beaten, and this seemed to be confirmed with the arrival of an ambulance, which was there to treat the bitten employee. When the ambulance left empty, the rumors quickly changed. The boy had now been beaten to death by the police officer, and the coincidental parking of a hearse near the storefront boosted the apparent veracity of this version of events.\footnote{Abu-Lughod, 141-142.} Police did nothing to assuage the growing crowd when they responded to queries in front of the store and at the nearby police precinct with a canned retort of “this is none of your business.”\footnote{“The Complete Report of Mayor La Guardia’s Commission on the Harlem Riot of March 19, 1935,” 2.}

Spurred on by rumors and whipped into a frenzy by street orators and unhelpful police responses, the angry crowd in front of Kress grew and spread geographically, and by late afternoon rioting began in earnest.\footnote{Abu-Lughod, 142.} The main commercial districts along 125\textsuperscript{th} Street, Lenox Avenue, and 7\textsuperscript{th} Avenue were the sites of mass looting throughout the evening and into the night.\footnote{“The Complete Report of Mayor La Guardia’s Commission on the Harlem Riot of March 19, 1935,” 9.} Kress was heavily damaged, as was Woolworths, which
had refused to hire black salesmen.\textsuperscript{445} White-owned stores had their windows smashed and their contents looted, as Harlemites vented their frustration at the very entities that had proven resistant to employing black workers. While some neighboring black-owned businesses were damaged, most of the wrath was reserved for white-owned businesses.

The riot lasted less than twenty-four hours before finally being contained by the police. The riot report estimated that a few thousand people had been involved in the rioting.\textsuperscript{446} The police arrested seventy-five people, and reported sixty-four injuries.\textsuperscript{447} The sole fatality in the riot was sixteen-year-old Lloyd Hobbs, a black teenager shot by police as he was returning home from seeing a movie. The police were lambasted for the killing of Hobbs, who by all accounts had not participated in the rioting and had no prior record, despite initial police reports that tried to justify the shooting by alleging that Hobbs had been caught “pilfering.”\textsuperscript{448} Despite the shooting of Hobbs, the most emphasized statistic in the rioting’s aftermath concerned the level of property damage sustained. The police estimated that 626 windows had been broken; the “windows broken” statistic was commonly used to measure riot damage, and the same statistic dominated police reports for the 1943 riot as well.\textsuperscript{449}

The motivation for the rioting was described in the official riot report commissioned by Mayor La Guardia and released in 1935:

The very susceptibility which the people in the community showed towards this rumor – which was more or less vague, depending upon the circumstances under which it was communicated – was due to the feeling of insecurity produced by

\textsuperscript{445} Gross, 20.
\textsuperscript{447} Abu-Lughod, 142.
\textsuperscript{449} Abu-Lughod, 142.
years of unemployment and deep-seated resentment against the many forms of discrimination which they had suffered as a racial minority.\textsuperscript{450}

The rioting was spontaneous, with no clear leaders or organized movements. This stood in sharp contrast to the concerted protest campaigns of previous years that were led by civil rights groups. In the face of longstanding discrimination, frustrated over a lack of sufficient progress in ameliorating poor living conditions, and absent legal means to protest, Harlem’s citizens lashed out, attacking the symbols of oppression in a very emotional and public protest that could not be ignored. While the elites in Harlem disagreed with the method of protest, they agreed with the sentiment, and one black businessman proclaimed that “these poor, ignorant and rough Negroes on 125th Street were fighting my battle.”\textsuperscript{451}

After the riot, La Guardia established a “Commission on the Harlem Riot of March 19, 1935,” to investigate the underlying causes of the riot. The commission was interracial and included such disparate members of the black community as A. Philip Randolph and Countee Cullen, and Howard University sociologist E. Franklin Frazier was tasked with researching conditions in Harlem.\textsuperscript{452} The commission held hearings, often public, on facets of life in Harlem, including employment discrimination, health services and education, and police conduct. La Guardia got more than he had perhaps bargained. The report found what many in Harlem already knew to be the case: “Long felt hostility to the police, resentment at the inability to get economic opportunities in the

\textsuperscript{452} Abu-Lughod, 142-143.
midst of plenty, were some of the reasons for the rioting." The report also went into
great detail about the conditions in Harlem, providing a candid assessment of the
problems facing the community during the depression. The final report was never
officially released in its entirety – one commission member refused to sign anything that
exonerated the communists of blame, as the report did – and the original concluding
chapter was considered “too caustic” for public consumption and revised and softened at
the insistence of the mayor. The only place where the report ever appeared publicly in
its entirety, original concluding chapter included, was the black newspaper *Amsterdam
News.*

In the original concluding chapter of the commission’s report, the commission
identified economic woes as the underpinning of all of Harlem’s problems. The majority
of black workers were unskilled laborers or domestics, jobs the commission identified as
“menial positions at starvation wages.” Racial discrimination on the part of employers
and some unions prevented most black workers from obtaining better jobs, consigning
black Harlem residents dangerously close to poverty even in economic boom times. The
commission blasted “indifferent city authorities” for the substandard housing, health
facilities, and education in Harlem. Poverty, they argued, robbed Harlem citizens of the
ability to get the city to enforce city codes in housing; because of the low vacancy rate
and high cost of rent, many renters were at the mercy of their landlords. The report found

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foreword. Though the official report should reside in the ample New York Municipal Archives or the La
Guardia papers stored there and at La Guardia Community College’s archives, it seems to have disappeared
from the archival record. The foresight of the *Amsterdam News* in publishing the report in its entirety has
ensured scholarly access to the report.
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that the city had recognized the housing, health, and education problems in Harlem, but
despite repeated “pious and sentimental expressions of humanitarian feelings,” did
nothing.\(^\text{457}\) The commission cited school building expenditures as an example, with only
$400,000 of a nearly $121 million citywide budget slated for Harlem for the construction
of only one school, though the bulk of Harlem’s schools were over thirty-five years old
and in major disrepair.\(^\text{458}\)

The report concluded:

The commission fully realizes that the economic and social ills of Harlem, which
are deeply rooted in the very nature of our economic and social system, cannot be
cured by any administration under our present political and civic institutions. Yet
the commission is convinced that, if the administrative machinery set itself to
prevent racial discrimination in such municipal institutions as the schools and the
city’s subway system and penalized, as far as possible, private concerns and
individuals that practiced racial discrimination, the people of Harlem would at
least not feel that their economic and social ills were forms of racial
persecution.\(^\text{459}\)

The report recognized that while the administration could not rectify problems of class, it
could actively work to reduce the racism that was endemic in the system and in some
small way relieve the problems of the black community. The commission proposed
achieving that goal through mandating antidiscrimination language in all city contracts,
allowing picketing as a form of protest in cases of discrimination in employment,
constructing public housing in Harlem and actively enforcing city housing codes,
building more schools and recreational facilities and increasing staff, constructing a new

125-126.  
127.  
129-135.
hospital or expanding the existing Harlem Hospital and increasing its staff, and creating a citizen’s group to which people could report instances of police mistreatment.\textsuperscript{460}

In the aftermath of the riot and in light of the findings of the riot commission, La Guardia did move to address some of the problems plaguing Harlem and to follow some of the recommendations of the report. A new wing was added to Harlem Hospital and a new Harlem Health Center was built. Four new schools were slated to be built in Harlem during the following year. Relief agencies like the Emergency Relief Bureau added more blacks in positions of authority and paid them on par with their white coworkers. Perhaps the most visible outcome of the 1935 riot was the rapid construction of the Harlem River Houses project by the city housing authority. La Guardia announced in May 1935 that the city’s next housing project would be slated for black occupancy and built in Harlem, and after seizing land from the Rockefellers via eminent domain, the Harlem River Houses were completed by 1937. Though the housing project was highly selective and refused applicants who were unemployed, which limited its ability to reduce Harlem’s housing crunch, the fast-tracking of the project immediately after the riot was a symbolic victory.\textsuperscript{461} The 1935 riot demonstrated to Harlem citizens that a night of mass protest in the form of rioting won more concessions from the city, more quickly, than years of peaceful protest. It was a lesson that would not be soon forgotten.

The 1935 riot, and La Guardia’s tenure as mayor, launched a period when Harlem appeared less socially and politically isolated from the rest of Manhattan. Harlem, for good and ill, enjoyed a great vogue with white New Yorkers looking for entertainment in dance halls and clubs like the famous Cotton Club. The interest in Harlem’s social scene

\textsuperscript{461} Abu-Lughod, 145-146.
was not limited to legal entertainments. Prostitution, gambling, and the numbers racket catered to a white clientele and flourished thanks to uneven police enforcement that ignored white clients and white racketeers but heavily targeted black entrepreneurs and racketeers. Such police enforcement regularly meted out punishment on black business owners for common practices, such as staying open after the legally-mandated 3:00 a.m. closing time for bars, though white business owners did the same and were rarely censured.\footnote{Greenberg, 193.} Harlem remained a popular destination for whites seeking entertainment and vice, but the black community benefited little while white entrepreneurs pocketed the profits.

Despite those issues, Harlem fared better in city politics during the La Guardia administration than in previous ones. La Guardia had actively courted the black vote during his mayoral bid, and throughout his time in office he rewarded black voter loyalty with key appointments. He retained black appointments from the previous mayoral administration, such as Hubert Delaney as Tax Commissioner. He placed blacks in prominent positions, such as the Emergency Relief Board, and appointed the first black female judge in the United States, Jane Bolin. He also named Samuel J. Battle, the first black police officer in Manhattan, Parole Commissioner in 1941. La Guardia avoided tokenism, and his administration appointed and hired blacks to positions throughout municipal government, including the city marshal and district attorney offices.\footnote{Capeci, \textit{The Harlem Riot of 1943}, 7-8.} His response to the 1935 riot won him many new fans as he appeared concerned about the welfare of Harlem and willing to improve conditions there.
The election of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., to the City Council in 1941 gave Harlem a vocal representative for their interests within the upper echelons of municipal government, but the clash of personalities between Powell and La Guardia limited potential gains. The city’s first black councilman, Powell proved a thorn in Mayor La Guardia’s side. While La Guardia was highly regarded in Harlem, he did not believe in granting special attention to one area of the city versus another; Powell’s strategy to elevate Harlem’s visibility and status flummoxed La Guardia. Powell continued his crusade for civil rights, loudly advertising any evidence he found of racial inequality in municipal government. Complaints from Powell in one month alone warranted an entire file in La Guardia’s collection of mayoral papers. The City Council came to regard Powell as a loose cannon. People in Harlem were not universally pleased with Powell either; many were uneasy with the communist leanings of The People’s Voice, the weekly newspaper that Powell backed. Some, including the anonymous author of a smear letter to the City Council, argued that Powell’s personal ambition for political power trumped his commitment to the plight of his community.

Local politics took a backseat to World War II as American involvement increased, first as producers of war materials and then after December 1941, as a combatant. Everywhere, from manufacturing to government budgets, the nation funneled its collective energies into the war effort. For blacks, the focus on the war reminded them of World War I, when the propaganda about defending democracy and liberty abroad had not resulted in an extension of liberty and democracy to them at home. Black activists

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464 Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Box ? [number illegible], Folder 10: May 1942 Harlem – Powell, Adam Clayton
465 Confidential letter to the members of the City Council, from “a former associate of Powell,” dated 07/03/1943. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Box 3316 Folder 1. Municipal Archives of New York.
were determined that this war would be different, and a nationwide campaign called “Double V for Victory” was launched to fight for American ideals abroad and civil rights at home. Poet Langston Hughes summed up the spirit of the Double V for Victory campaign in his poem, “Beaumont to Detroit: 1943”:

Yet you say we’re fighting
For democracy.
Then why don’t democracy
Include me?

I ask you this question
Cause I want to know
How long I got to fight
BOTH HITLER – AND JIM CROW. 466

The war made it difficult to achieve much improvement in areas like education, health and nutrition, and housing due to curtailed city, state, and federal budgets and the overwhelming demand on resources. The war also put demands for greater civil and political rights on the backburner. But black activists would have great success in the one area where they had most agitated for improvement during the Great Depression: employment.

As United States industry geared up for war materials production after the start of World War II in Europe, New York became highly influential in the relationship between the government and private industry. This was perhaps not surprising, given the tight political connections between New York and Washington, D.C., cultivated by Roosevelt. Before he was elected President, Roosevelt had used his governorship of New York as a sort of “lab” for testing ideas to implement in the nation as a whole; his national New Deal programs had predecessors in New York state policies meant to address the early

years of the depression. Roosevelt maintained close political ties to both the office of the
governor of New York and the mayor of New York City, and this explains the impact
that New York state and city politics had on Executive Order 8802. As discussed in the
Introduction, that 1941 order mandated nondiscrimination in labor practices in any
company that had a government contract, and established a national FEPC to investigate
claims of employment discrimination; the order was strengthened in 1943 with Executive
Order 9346. While the immediate pressure for Roosevelt to issue the order came from
black civil rights and labor leaders and their threat to march on Washington, the order and
the FEPC it created shared similarities with New York state legislation and New York
City policies.

New York’s antidiscrimination committee had its roots in the stark inequality in
the state’s war industry at the beginning of the war. In 1940, only ten percent of war
plants hired black workers – the other ninety percent refused even to consider doing so.
In the New York City region, home to most of the state’s black population, black workers
represented not even one percent of war plant workers – they constituted only 142 out of
29,215 employees total. Even plants like the R.J. Hoy Company, whose anti-aircraft gun
manufacturing plant was located in Harlem, refused to hire black workers. Most black
workers in New York were concentrated in domestic or service jobs, with sixty-four
percent of black women working as domestics and forty percent of black men working in
the service sector.

New York Governor Herbert Lehman established a Committee on Discrimination
in Employment on 29 March 1941. The committee was a part of the New York State

467 Biondi, 3.
468 Biondi, 12.
Council of Defense and was made up of twenty-seven members representing industrial, labor, civil rights, and government interests. The goal of the committee was to reduce discriminatory practices in hiring and promotion in all industries through inducement and educational campaigns. The defense industry was specifically targeted because it was the industry experiencing the most rapid growth at the same time that the traditional labor pool was shrinking. Governor Lehman believed that these industries must “find a way to use the labor resources which these minority groups represent” in order to be successful.469

While the committee made a clear distinction between “acute” discrimination (toward Germans and Italians) and “chronic” discrimination (mainly toward Jews and blacks), they believed the solution was the same: education. They believed that the social attitudes that caused prejudice and employment discrimination could be remedied through vigorous education on the merits of different groups and their qualifications for employment. This belief that prejudice could be overcome through education was widely held, and is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4. The committee embarked on an educational campaign with the production of pamphlets designed to promote the benefits of employing minority workers to war industry hiring managers.

One such pamphlet was titled “How Management Can Integrate Negroes in War Industries,” and was written by a committee staff member, John A. Davis, who was described by the committee as a “brilliant young Negro.”470 Published in 1942, the

470 “Report for the Year ending 31 December 1942.” Governor’s Office Correspondence on War Issues, 1940-45, Box 3 Folder 17: Discrimination Committee – War Council. Records of the New York State War Council, New York State Archives.
pamphlet sought to address concerns of management by citing real-life examples of companies that had successfully integrated their workforce. The pamphlet also recommended “steps” in employing black workers. It advised that the first black workers in a company should be white collar, carefully screened by employment agencies and/or black community organizations like the Urban League, and assigned to work under the supervisor most “enthusiastic” about the prospect of integration in the workplace. These first black workers were expected to be “ambassadors” for their race, and their qualifications and characters would render them most palatable to the white workforce. The pamphlet advised that slow introduction of blacks to the workforce, as well as avoiding segregation in work tasks and company facilities, was the key to avoiding a white worker backlash.

While the pamphlet had definite shades of a “racial uplift” ideology – especially strong in the suggestion that workers be well-educated, white collar, and recommended by their communities – its ideas were not wildly out of the ordinary for the time. As discussed in Chapter 2, the auto industry in Detroit relied on black community organizations to recommend black workers for plant jobs because black workers did not have the same social contacts that white workers had in a pre-war hiring system that depended heavily on referrals. The pamphlet’s target audience also explained its focus on gradualism – white managers were not always eager at the prospect of hiring minority workers in positions outside the custodial and foundry jobs they typically occupied.

Many companies only hired minority workers when the white labor force proved

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inadequate to address their staffing needs, or when government entities like the FEPC threatened their government contracts unless they complied.

Companies expressed hesitancy to employ minority workers for fear of white worker backlash and work disruptions – a topic pamphlets like “How Management Can Integrate Negroes in War Industries” took great pains to address. The Committee on Discrimination in Employment was well aware that minority labor was resisted not just on grounds of racial difference but also economic competition. Thus, white worker backlash was strongest against black male workers. A 1942 report by the Committee found that black women enjoyed a significant advantage in gaining employment over black men because black women were not seen as economically threatening. This was due to a much smaller gap in work experience between white and black women than between white and black men, and because women made up a much smaller portion of the pre-war workforce.472 Work stoppages protesting black female workers were rarer and much shorter on average than hate strikes against black male workers. A 1941 article published by the New York State Department of Labor found the bulk of minority employment was in war industry, specifically shipyards and aircraft plants, the industries most likely to shrink (and shed newly-hired minority workers) in the postwar period.473 Because of the temporary nature of this expanded workforce, these companies were more apt to hire minority workers and risk white worker backlash. The minority workers would not be employed long enough to represent a significant economic threat in a

greatly-reduced military-industrial workforce during the postwar period, where union seniority rules that favored the longer-employed white workers would ensure a reversion to prewar, predominantly white employment patterns.

Work disruptions staged by white workers disgruntled over the hiring and promotion of minority workers was not merely a paranoid fear, as strike data compiled by the United States Department of Labor proved. The “hate strike” phenomenon, as discussed in Chapter 2, was not confined to Detroit. Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois saw the most total strikes and work stoppages during 1943, with New York ranked fifth in the nation in strikes with nearly 300. Of the nearly 4,000 strikes that the Department of Labor recorded in 1943, it labeled only fifty as being caused by “racial questions.” For hiring managers already leery of employing minority workers, the specter of racially-motivated strikes was even greater than the number of strikes would suggest. The existence of hate strikes reinforced the notion that hiring minority workers could be disruptive, and this notion was one the Committee on Discrimination Employment, on the state level, and the FEPC, on the national level, both worked to combat. Hate strikes also illustrated the virulence of white racism in the midst of concerted efforts by the government, unions, and civil rights activists to push more progressive social policies both to further the war effort and to promote racial equality.

Rank-and-file white workers who struck to protest minority hiring resisted appeals to unity for the sake of the war effort, demonstrating an unwillingness to alter the racial status quo even temporarily. These workers likely feared any concessions could result in the permanent loss of the economic edge in industry they had long enjoyed over

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minorities, and that the image of white superiority would be severely damaged. The tension between the progressivism championed by government and activists and the racism displayed by the recalcitrant white mainstream was further evidence of a potential “race war” bubbling just underneath the surface of American society.

The importance of the Committee on Discrimination in Employment’s strategy of public education on racial issues to combat employment discrimination can be seen in the Committee’s annual report for 1943. The authors of the report stated that it was not the 435 investigations it undertook that year that “severely taxed” the committee – it was the demand for reports and educational materials. Community groups, labor unions, government, schools, and even antidiscrimination committees from other states requested advice, raw statistics, and prepared pamphlets like “How Management Can Integrate Negroes in War Industries” and “One Nation Indivisible,” a pamphlet targeted at grade schools to educate children on different racial and ethnic groups (the targeting of kindergarten through twelfth grade education is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4).

The members of the Committee on Discrimination in Employment recognized that employers were not solely to blame for discriminatory hiring practices; when government contracts were involved, federal regulations took precedence and sometimes enabled discriminatory practices. Thus, one of the goals of the committee was to work with the federal government to attempt to rectify the situation, which was made much

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475 “Annual Report for the Year Ending in December 1943.” Governor’s Office Correspondence on War Issues 1940-45, Box 3 Folder 19: Discrimination in Employment. Records of the New York State War Council New York State Archives.

476 “One Nation Indivisible” Manual for Education. Governor’s Office Correspondence on War Issues 1940-45, Box 3 Folder 18: Discrimination in Employment. Records of the New York State War Council, New York State Archives.
easier with the passage of Executive Order 8802 in June 1941. The clash between New York state regulations and federal regulations became apparent again in 1945, with the dismantling of the federal FEPC and the institution of a permanent New York state FEPC, a topic covered in greater depth in Chapter 4.

New York City formally adopted the nondiscrimination language as official city policy under La Guardia, who Roosevelt had enlisted to mediate the March on Washington Movement that led to the creation of Executive Order 8802. By May 1942, nondiscrimination in employment became codified by the City Council into Local Law No. 11, which forbade discriminatory job ads or requests to placement agencies. Unlike the FEPC or the state Committee on Discrimination in Employment, the local law did not specifically target the defense industry in its regulation, but since the most rapid hiring during the war was in war industry, in practice its focus was on regulating the war industry.

The state, local, and federal nondiscrimination committees did not guarantee better employment opportunities for black New Yorkers overnight. A survey of employers conducted in 1941 and 1942 found that nearly fifty-five percent did not employ blacks, and that at companies that did, blacks represented only 2.14 percent of all employees. An identical survey conducted in 1943, with a smaller sample size (one-third smaller than the 1941 and 1942 survey), found that the percentage of firms that did not employ blacks had shrunk to just seventeen percent, but certain industries, such as shipbuilding, were much more likely to have never hired any blacks at all. Nearly half of

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478 Abu-Lughod, 147.
the companies reported increasing their black workforce in the past year, and in some places blacks made up fifty percent of the workforce.479

While the newfound state, federal, and local focus on nondiscrimination in employment helped to address the long struggle of the Harlem community to improve black employment, housing, a perpetual problem in Harlem, worsened during the war years. Harlem was home to Manhattan’s most congested single block, between Lenox and 7th Street north of 142nd Street, which had a population of 3,871 people in 1943.480 Harlem’s housing woes started in the 1930s. Harlem was home to an extremely low vacancy rate, averaging about one percent by the late 1930s, with only half of vacancies rated as “desirable.”481 The quality of housing in Harlem had rapidly deteriorated; although the city attempted to improve the quality by razing 276 subpar tenements in the decade between 1934 and 1944, new residential construction could not keep pace with demolition, further contributing to the tight vacancy rate.482 In addition to poor-quality housing and the low vacancy rate, Harlem residents often paid twice the monthly average rent as other residents in Manhattan as of 1939.483

481 Gross, 41.
482 Memo to the mayor from the Department of Housing and Buildings, City of New York, dated 6 October 1944. Departmental Correspondence, Box [number illegible], Folder 10: Feb-Dec 1944 Harlem – 1943 Race Riots. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Municipal Archives, New York.
483 Gross, 43.
By August 1943, the housing situation in Harlem was described as “terribly congested and unlivable.” A 1944 study of Harlem housing by the Department of Housing and Buildings, City of New York, revealed that the housing market became further constricted during the war. Defining Harlem’s boundaries as 110th Street and 155th Street and 3rd Avenue and Amsterdam Avenue, the study found a population increase of three percent between the 1930 and 1940 censuses, but a decline in available housing in the decade between 1934 and 1944. There was a six percent decrease in “Old Law” tenements (those constructed before 1900), a one percent decrease in “New Law” tenements (those constructed since 1900), and a nearly seven percent decrease in private homes converted to tenements. At the same time, the number of tenements that stood vacant increased by 150 percent. The rise in population and concurrent decline of available housing helped explain the frequent complaints of overcrowding in Harlem, along with the fact that as of 1944, nearly 3,000 private dwellings had been converted to rooming houses to try to accommodate the increased demand for housing.

During World War II, blacks moved in increasing numbers to the Bronx, in search of space and more affordable housing than they could find in Manhattan. Their move was aided by white landlords who were more willing to take black tenants because they charged them higher rents (between fifteen to twenty-five percent more), and black tenants were thus more profitable than white tenants. The demographic change in the Bronx angered white homeowners, prompting white flight and lowered property values.

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485 Memo to the mayor from the Department of Housing and Buildings, City of New York, dated 6 October 1944. Departmental Correspondence, Box [number illegible], Folder 10: Feb-Dec 1944 Harlem – 1943 Race Riots. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Municipal Archives, New York.
for those who stayed. One such Bronx homeowner, William Jenkins, wrote to La Guardia and urged that he force landlords to charge the same rental rate regardless of race and lower taxes, in a bid to stem the influx of black tenants and make staying more attractive for white homeowners.  

The New York City government increasingly looked to housing projects to help alleviate the difficult housing situation for lower-income New Yorkers. The city supported the Wagner-Steagall Act in 1937, backed by New York Senator Robert Wagner, which allowed the United States government to grant subsidies to local housing authorities for the construction of low-income housing. This money allowed New York City to expand the program of building housing projects begun during the depression.

Housing projects were not immune from squabbles over race in the 1940s, as the debate over the Stuyvesant Town housing project in lower Manhattan proved. Little progress had been made on public housing projects for blacks since the opening of the Harlem River Houses in 1937. The proposed Stuyvesant Town project was a public-private collaboration, with Metropolitan Life Insurance building the project and earning generous tax exemptions from the city for doing so. The city saw this as a way to fast-track construction of much-needed housing at a time when the construction industry was suffering from a wartime labor shortage and the city was mired in bureaucratic red tape.
But the project’s racial policies caused an uproar, effectively making the city complicit in segregation. Metropolitan Life labeled the project as “whites only,” and took the uncharacteristic approach of not constructing a school to accompany the housing project, which had been standard for other housing projects constructed in the city. If a school had been constructed, the white children occupying the Stuyvesant Town project would have been integrated in the classroom with black children from the surrounding neighborhood.\textsuperscript{488} For the black community, the labeling of Stuyvesant Town as “whites only” was doubly offensive because the housing crisis was much worse for the city’s black population than its white population, and blacks had hoped that housing projects might alleviate the housing problems of blacks.

The quality of life in Harlem suffered in comparison to the rest of Manhattan, and this became especially stark during the war years. Harlem’s leaders bemoaned the perpetually high rent, the high cost and low quality of food – which was exacerbated by wartime rationing – and the lack of adequate community infrastructure in areas of health and recreation. Food prices in Harlem were shockingly higher than the rest of Manhattan. The average Harlem family of five paid $11.50 more per week for food than elsewhere, and the quality was often substandard.\textsuperscript{489} Part of the reason for this gross inflation was the absence of price regulation. Despite its importance as a port, New York was not designated an important war production center; industrial cities like Detroit were subject to rent and price regulations imposed by the federal government to smooth war production. Attempts by the city of New York and the state to pass local and statewide

\textsuperscript{488} Gross, 9.
\textsuperscript{489} Gross, 47.
controls were stymied by the federal government, which wished to avoid conflicting regulations yet refused entreaties to apply rent and price regulations to New York.\textsuperscript{490}

Harlem’s healthcare infrastructure was hampered by a lack of modern facilities and a perpetual shortage of physicians. Harlem had two major hospitals: Sydenham, located at 123\textsuperscript{rd} Street and Manhattan Avenue, and Harlem Hospital, located on Lenox Avenue between 135\textsuperscript{th} Street and 136\textsuperscript{th} Street. Sydenham was founded by a Jewish philanthropic institution in 1892 to train Jewish doctors and had an all-white staff until 1944, when it became the first fully-integrated hospital in the country. The majority of Harlem residents patronized Harlem Hospital, ominously nicknamed “the morgue.” The hospital was perpetually overcrowded, and lacked a cancer unit. It was also the only place where black doctors could secure work in Manhattan; the relatively limited staff positions at Harlem Hospital meant there were fewer doctors than necessary to meet the demands of the population. As a result of inadequate access to quality healthcare, blacks experienced a mortality rate thirty-six percent higher than the rest of the city, with infant mortality a full seventy to eighty percent higher.\textsuperscript{491}

Harlem also lacked sufficient recreational facilities. The creation of new facilities and the staffing of existing facilities were deemed low priorities in the city’s wartime budget, despite pleas from groups like the Citywide Citizens Committee on Harlem that investing in recreation facilities was necessary, especially for the future prospects for Harlem’s children and youths.\textsuperscript{492} Properly supervised recreation, they argued, was critical for children and young adults to avoid high levels of juvenile delinquency. As discussed previously, juvenile delinquency was a chronic national concern during World

\textsuperscript{490}Capeci, \textit{The Harlem Riot}, 64-65.
\textsuperscript{491}Gross, 50-52.
\textsuperscript{492}“City ‘Economy Budget’ Decried as Big Factor Leading to Riots.” \textit{PM}, 3 August 1943, 8.
War II as parents went overseas to fight the war or worked long hours at war plants. Harlem already had a relatively high delinquency rate before the war due in part to a police force that aggressively patrolled Harlem and arrested youths they considered delinquent or neglected. Community activists proposed employing existing school facilities as recreation centers after school hours to give youths a place to go and to deter delinquency but, just as during the depression, budget allocations made such a proposal unrealistic.

Concerns about juvenile delinquency and crime heightened in the spring of 1943, when white newspapers began decrying a “crime wave” of muggings in Harlem. The victims in the stories the newspapers reported were, invariably, white; none of them were Harlem residents but rather were those who had gone into the area for business or pleasure. Most of the muggings had taken place in interracial neighborhoods that formed the borderland between Harlem and the rest of Manhattan. Even the New York Times participated in sensationalist coverage of this alleged “crimewave.” The public outcry was so great that the police and a citizens’ committee launched an investigation. It found that while crime existed in Harlem, the white media had blown the number and severity of crimes way out of proportion.

The perception of Harlem as crime-infested and unsafe for white citizens who frequented its entertainment district nonetheless persisted, and led to the closing of the Savoy Ballroom by the New York Police Department (NYPD) in April. The Savoy was shut down due to alleged prostitution, a common charge leveled at Harlem clubs during

493 Capeci, The Harlem Riot of 1943, 41.
495 Capeci, The Harlem Riot of 1943, 77.
496 Gross, 8. Article on investigation from the 3 April 1943 edition of the Amsterdam Star News.
the war. The black community of Harlem was furious at the closure of the Savoy, and blacks alleged that the real reason for its shuttering was that the ballroom hosted frequent interactions between whites and blacks on the dance floor. Activist Roy Wilkins argued that the Savoy was guilty of “practicing real Democracy by allow[ing] the races, openly, to dance and mingle in harmony,” and “of being in Harlem.” Opponents of the Savoy’s closure pointed out that the ballroom had gone through contortions to comply with local business regulations, and that similar white-owned dance halls were allowed to remain open and were merely warned if found out of compliance. Above all, the black community in Harlem found the targeting of the Savoy an indictment of the morality of their community, and it served as another symbol the white press could seize upon in promoting the image of Harlem as unsafe and seedy. The Savoy incident further contributed to a tense environment in Harlem.

Given the uneasy climate in New York, the news of the Detroit riots in June 1943 caused great alarm. The Detroit rioting had not only featured white mob action against blacks, but blacks had rioted within their own neighborhood in a manner eerily similar to the 1935 Harlem riot. Both city officials and Harlem community leaders were worried about another riot in the explosive political and social climate of 1943. La Guardia made a special radio broadcast advocating racial tolerance on 27 June, which was roundly applauded. Various religious and community organizations called for an interracial

497 Capeci, *The Harlem Riot of 1943*, 138-139.
committee to discuss racial problems and promote dialogue between different communities in the city in order to prevent rioting.499

The Bronx Civilian Defense Volunteer Office staged a rally on 25 July titled “‘No Detroit Here!’: A Mass Rally on Racial Unity.” Five thousand people gathered to hear speeches by luminaries like Ethel Barrymore and watch plays with themes of racial tolerance.500 The rally organizers also promoted a “Pledge of Unity,” which was endorsed by La Guardia. The pledge stated:

We the citizens of New York say it can’t happen here, but we want to make sure: moved by a deep sense of anguish and horror that in the midst of a war fought for democracy there could be manifestations of racial hatred and violence against Americans of any race color or creed, we pledge:

1. That we shall not be moved to mob action against any fellow citizen or group of fellow citizens.
2. That we shall not listen to, nor repeat, any rumors designed to divide us among ourselves.
3. That we shall, at all times, live up to the spirit of our American citizenship and do what is in our power to forward mutual understanding and friendliness among all the various groups which make up our city and our America.501

While the first two pillars of the pledge were explicitly designed to prevent race riots, the third pillar of the pledge was a nod to the efforts to encourage more progressive social attitudes. After the rally, the pledge was streamlined and turned into a flyer to promote tolerance. But significantly, instead of appealing to personal morality to promote racial tolerance, the flyer made direct appeals to patriotism by connecting racial tolerance with

499 Letter from The Presbytery of New York to La Guardia, dated July 30, 1943. Departmental Correspondence, Box [number illegible], Folder 16 [number smudged]. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Municipal Archives, New York.
500 Letter from Citizens Committee for Racial Equality to La Guardia, dated July 30, 1943. Departmental Correspondence, Box [number illegible], Folder 16 [number smudged]. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Municipal Archives, New York.
a successful war effort. The flyer described the practicalities of racial tolerance. “Racial Violence is un-American – it gives aid and comfort to the enemy,” read one line. Another read, “Racial violence is wasteful and costly – it destroys lives – it destroys property – it destroys unity which is essential to American victory.”502 The shift from emphasizing the practicality of racial harmony over idealism illustrated the limits of idealism in changing racial attitudes, indicating that perhaps its authors were convinced that people could not successfully be swayed to racial acceptance solely by appeals to conscience.

While the “No Detroit Here!” rally was admirable in its motivation, in practice it reflected a complete misreading of the racial climate in New York City. The intended audience for the rally, and the subsequent “pledge of unity,” was whites. Indeed, whites had been the primary aggressors not only in Detroit but also in Los Angeles. Rampant racism was very clearly a problem of white attitudes and prejudices and not rooted in minority actions. But New York City did not have the same demographics or spatial geography of Los Angeles and New York, making a race riot with white mob violence highly unlikely in the first place. While the mass transit system provided whites the means to access more isolated minority neighborhoods, police were quick to cordon off such access in times of trouble. And for whites with rioting in mind who could manage get into minority sections of the city like Harlem, they would be vastly outnumbered, rendering such a move unappealing.

The real risk for rioting was the Harlem community. In focusing on racism as being the main catalyst for a race riot, the rally organizers failed to recognize the much

502 Flyer titled “Wanted! 1,000,000 New Yorkers!” calling for people to sign Pledge of Unity. Departmental Correspondence, Box [number illegible], Folder 16 [number smudged]. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Municipal Archives, New York.
more volatile social discontent fueled by persistent socioeconomic problems. The latent anger of the Harlem community over employment discrimination, horrid housing conditions and high rents, lack of access to quality healthcare and education, outrageous prices for poor quality food, and perpetual problems with police brutality had a much greater potential for explosive and disruptive rioting than white racism. And Harlem had the recent memory of the 1935 riot. Many in Harlem were aware that most of the provisions for ameliorating poor conditions laid out in the mayor’s riot commission report in 1935 had either never been acted upon or had been ineffectively implemented. Anger and resentment were high in the summer of 1943, and Harlem was ripe for another riot.

The frustrations that had been festering in Harlem came to a head on 1 August, prompted by an incident at the Braddock Hotel. At 8:05 p.m., Patrolman James Collins of the 28th precinct responded to a dispute at the front desk, where a woman had become upset and disorderly after she did not get the room she requested. The argument escalated when a Mrs. Florine Roberts tried to intervene on behalf of the upset woman. What happened next differed in detail in accounts in the police report as opposed to the rumors that spread in Harlem that night. The police report stated that Mrs. Roberts’ son, an Army private with the last name of Bandy, scuffled with Collins, whacking him on the head, and was shot while attempting to flee.503 The riot rumor claimed that Mrs. Roberts had been pushed by the hotel clerk, and Bandy had come to her defense only to have a

nightstick thrown at him by the policeman; he was shot when he refused to give it back.\textsuperscript{504}

Bandy was taken to the hospital around 11:00 p.m. and survived, but the rumor almost immediately circulated that a white policeman had shot and killed a black soldier. Riot eyewitness Helen Brown believed that the fact that the black man was a soldier ultimately sent many Harlemites over the edge in anger, though she also believed that “opportunists” used the excitement over the rumor to incite rioting.\textsuperscript{505} Samuel Battle, the first black police officer in Manhattan who was at the end of his career at the time of the 1943 riot, cited the history of police mistreatment of Harlem citizens as a reason for the outbreak of the riot. Like Brown, he also attributed the rioting to opportunists like street speakers, whom he labeled “rabble-rousers.” He claimed they stirred up anger and animosity toward La Guardia and the municipal government through spreading preposterous rumors, including one that the alderman in charge of running Harlem for La Guardia took directions from the Pope on how to treat black people, exploiting a strain of anti-Catholicism and anti-Italian sentiment in the Harlem community.\textsuperscript{506}

Like the 1935 Harlem riot, the 1943 Harlem riot was marked by looting within Harlem. The heaviest rioting was concentrated on 125\textsuperscript{th} Street, 7\textsuperscript{th} Avenue, 8\textsuperscript{th} Avenue, and Lenox Avenue.\textsuperscript{507} The damage reports, broken down by precincts, reflected this. The 28\textsuperscript{th} precinct was the hardest hit by looting, with 812 stores damaged – over half of

\textsuperscript{506} Reminiscences of Samuel J. Battle (1960), pp. 54-55. Columbia Oral History Collection
the total riot damage for all of Harlem – and just over $1 million in property damage. The 28th precinct also had the most broken windows, a statistic tracked by the police department, with 2,570 smashed, over half of the entire riot total. The 32nd precinct was close behind in stores and windows damaged, but actually suffered nearly $350,000 more in property damage. The only other precinct to report riot damage, the 25th precinct, was a distant third, with a mere eleven stores looted and $30,620 in property damage.508

While the initial damage estimate was $2.5 million, a few weeks later the estimate was revised to $5 million; when adjusted for inflation, the Harlem riot caused $66 million in current value in property damage.509 The 1943 riot dwarfed the 1935 riot in property damage by at least a fivefold rate.510

Both eyewitness accounts and later studies of riot damage strongly suggested that the looting was strategic not blindly undertaken. Businesses owned by blacks and other nonwhites tended to be spared, as did businesses that hired blacks. Department stores Kress and Woolworths, both heavily damaged in the 1935 riot, were spared; since 1935, both stores had hired black salesmen.511 Eyewitness Helen Brown recalled that a Chinese-owned laundry was spared after the owner put a sign in the window stating that he was “colored” too.512 The discretion shown by rioters was illustrated in the differing fate of two neighboring tailor shops on 7th Avenue. The shop owned by a Jewish man who employed blacks suffered only $350 in damage, while the white-owned shop next

508 George Mulholland (Deputy Inspector), “Police Reports on Causes, Location, Crimes, Injuries, Police Details, etc. in Connection with the Harlem Disturbance – Aug 1-2, 1943.” Dated 21 August 1943. Originally located in La Guardia Papers, Box 2550, Folder 193. Cited in Gross, 17 [Table 1].
509 Riot damage in today’s dollar amount calculated using usinflationcalculator.com.
510 “Dewey Orders State Guard to Stand By; Riots Leave Harlem Stores in Shambles.” PM, 3 August 1943, 3.
511 Gross, 21.
door, which did not employ blacks, sustained $9,000 in damage. Harlemites also showed a willingness to spare businesses in which they had a vested interest. Brown recounted that she had heard of a black couple who stayed up all night outside of a white-owned laundry to protect it because all of their clothes were inside. A photo in daily newspaper PM’s coverage of the riot showed a group standing guard in front of the Lincoln Restaurant to help its white owner protect it from looting.

If the sparing of businesses was strategic, so was the destruction. White-owned businesses that refused to employ blacks were looted rampantly. Businesses that were seen as predatory were destroyed regardless of who owned them, with pawnshops being the best example of this. Also targeted with frequency were grocery stores and butcher shops, which earned the wrath of Harlemites by gouging customers with high prices in comparison with the rest of Manhattan.

As the rioting continued during the night, La Guardia, the NYPD, and New York civic leaders tried desperately to quell it. La Guardia participated in a series of radio broadcasts, five total in twenty-four hours, appealing to Harlemites to stop rioting. For an additional two broadcasts targeted specifically to the 28th precinct, he enlisted civic and religious leaders in Harlem like labor leader A. Philip Randolph and Judge Hubert Delaney. Other Harlem leaders like Walter White and Reverend Johnson H. Johnson

513 Gross, 21.
rode around in cars trying to appeal to rioters in person to stop looting.\footnote{Gross, 15.} Private citizens also sought ways to stop the rioting; Beulah Bell-Morris suggested using music to quell the mobs by mounting loudspeakers on cars to play “sacred songs” like “Nearer My God to Thee” to shame the rioters into civic obedience.\footnote{Letter from Mrs. Beulah Bell-Morris, dated 2 August 1943. Box ? [number illegible] Folder 11: Aug 1943 Harlem – 1943 Race Riots. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Municipal Archives, New York.} La Guardia deputized 1,500 civilian volunteers to help 5,000 NYPD officers restore order, while Governor Dewey prepared 8,000 National Guardsmen to be sent in if needed.\footnote{Gross, 14-16.} Five of the six deaths in the riot were attributed to police actions taken to curb the looting.\footnote{Gross, 18.}

The rioters in Harlem constituted a diverse group. The arrest records compiled by the NYPD suggested that the typical Harlem rioter was male, over twenty-one years of age, and most likely arrested in either the 32\textsuperscript{nd} or 28\textsuperscript{th} precinct. During the riot, 571 people were arrested in the 23\textsuperscript{rd}, 24\textsuperscript{th}, 25\textsuperscript{th}, 28\textsuperscript{th}, 30\textsuperscript{th}, and 32\textsuperscript{nd} precincts. The 32\textsuperscript{nd} precinct accounted for nearly half of all riot arrests, closely followed by the 28\textsuperscript{th} precinct. While early speculation posited a link between the riot and juvenile delinquency, the arrest record did not sustain that hypothesis. Seventy percent of the rioters arrested were over twenty-one years of age; only twenty percent of the arrested rioters were teenagers. The only two precincts which recorded the riot arrest data as broken down by individual ages rather than by age brackets, the 24\textsuperscript{th} and the 30\textsuperscript{th}, recorded the youngest arrested as fifteen and the oldest as sixty-five. While the rioters arrested widely varied in age, they were disproportionately male: female rioters represented fifteen percent of the arrested.\footnote{Memorandum for the Police Commissioner (August 4, 1943): Ages of People Arrested During the Riot. Departmental Correspondence, Box [number illegible], Folder 01: Aug 1943 Harlem – 1943 Race Riots. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Municipal Archives, New York.}

Though outnumbered by their male counterparts, the female rioters in the Harlem riot
represented a much higher percentage than those in the Los Angeles and Detroit riots. Relatively more significant female riot participation coupled with the widely varying ages of rioters confirmed the widespread discontent in Harlem, where few were immune from the higher unemployment rate, higher percentage of dependency on relief, poor housing conditions, and exploitative food prices.

That a wide variety of community members participated in the rioting was supported by eyewitness Helen Brown’s recollections of the riot. Brown had moved to New York in 1923 from Illinois after attending Howard University. At the time of the riot, she was forty-five years old and worked in a war plant downtown. Brown was at home when a phone call from a friend alerted her to the rioting. From her window, Brown saw men and women, boys and girls on the streets, carrying the spoils from looting. She vividly recalled witnessing a man lugging a tub filled with vegetables and ham from a looted butcher shop between 134th and 135th Streets, exclaiming in her oral history, “I said, ‘My God in heaven! Where’s this man going to put all those groceries?’ We didn’t have Frigidaires then you know, just iceboxes.”

As the riot wound down, a debate immediately began over whether to label the Harlem riot a “race riot.” As with the Los Angeles rioting, government officials in New York took great pains to deny that the Harlem riot was a race riot. In a radio address on 2 August, La Guardia stated:

I want to make it clear that this was not a race riot, for the thoughtless hoodlums had no one to fight with and gave vent to their activity by breaking windows of stores, looting many of those stores belonging to the people who live in Harlem… There was no need for all of this. It was just hoodlums – men, people with

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criminal intent – doing violence and stealing and stealing from their own group and injuring their own people.\textsuperscript{524}

La Guardia clung to the traditional definition of race riots as clashes between different racial groups. Officially denying the riots as race riots served two purposes. Firstly, as suggested earlier, New York desperately wanted to avoid the same type of race riots as those in Detroit, and labeling the Harlem riot a race riot would be a tacit admission of failure to prevent a similar riot. Secondly, defining the riot as a race riot legitimized the myriad complaints black Harlem residents had about systemic socioeconomic problems and acknowledged the failure of the city government to address those problems.

But La Guardia and the New York City government were not alone in denying that the riot was a race riot. Black labor leaders also denied it. Frank Crosswaith, general organizer for the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) and a member of the New York City Housing Authority, stated that the riot was not a riot, but could have devolved into one easily; he believed the restraint shown by NYPD kept the rioting in check.\textsuperscript{525} Ferdinand Smith and Charles Collins, chairman and executive secretary respectively of the Negro Labor Victory Committee of Greater New York, also denied that the Harlem riot was a race riot. “This outbreak was due to the underlying resentments of the negro people against the indignities to which they have been subjected – discrimination in job placement, segregation in the armed forces, lack of rent and price

\textsuperscript{524} Transcript of 2 August 1943 radio broadcast by La Guardia. Departmental Correspondence, Box [number illegible], Folder 11: Aug 1943 Harlem – 1943 Race Riots. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Municipal Archives, New York.

\textsuperscript{525} Statement from Frank R. Crosswaith (General Organizer of the ILGWU and only black member of the NYC Housing Authority), dated 4 August 1943. Departmental Correspondence, Box [number illegible], Folder 01: Aug 1943 Harlem – 1943 Race Riots [could be #11? Number smudged]. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Municipal Archives, New York.
control, inadequate playground facilities, [and] poor housing conditions.” These black leaders clearly shared the same definition of race riot as white authorities. In an 2 August *New York Post* article titled “Outbreak in Harlem Was NOT a Race Riot, Authorities Point Out,” the article cites the lack of white gang violence against blacks as proof of the impossibility of the Harlem riot being a race riot. The article also considered black targeting of white-owned property to be insufficient criterion for a race riot, but conceded that if there had been widespread violence against white people instead of white-owned property, the label of race riot would have been justified.527

Members of the black establishment tended to be the most likely to share La Guardia’s view that the riot was not a race riot, while more radical-leaning media and local grassroots activists more willingly accepted the label of race riot. The leftist daily newspaper *PM* pointed out that the incident and the underlying causes were racial, even if what happened in the riot did not fit the traditional definition of race riot. Stanley Isaacs, vice president of the Citywide Citizens Committee on Harlem, brought class into it as well. “You can’t continue to discriminate, humiliate, starve an underprivileged class without expecting a blowoff,” he argued in *PM*.528

While the arrest record did not support the claims that the riot was linked to juvenile delinquency, that link was trumpeted in the public discourse. It was bolstered by riot pictures, like one in the *New York Herald-Tribune* depicting three boys between the

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526 Statement from Ferdinand C. Smith (Chairman) and Charles A. Collins (Executive Secretary) of the Negro Labor Victory Committee of Greater New York, no date. Departmental Correspondence, Box [number illegible], Folder 01: Aug 1943 Harlem – 1943 Race Riots [could be #11? Number smudged]. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Municipal Archives, New York.


528 “Dewey Orders State Guard to Stand By; Riots Leave Harlem Stores in Shambles.” *PM*, 3 August 1943, 3.
ages of twelve to fourteen, dressed in suits from a store they had looted. Since juvenile delinquency had been such a hot-button national issue, and an issue so prominently tied to the Los Angeles rioting earlier in the summer, it continued to carry weight as a legitimate concern in future riot prevention. Labor sources as diverse as the Negro Labor Victory Committee of Greater New York and the head of Larick Manufacturing Company cited a need for more recreational space and supervision for Harlem youth.

An official from the City of New York Office posited that many of the younger rioters may have been southern transplants driven to rioting and delinquency by the jarring transition. She suggested an “orientation” in a suburban area for Harlem teens who were not in school and who lacked “proper and sufficient home guidance.”

The fallout from the 1943 riot was different in scope from the 1935 riot. La Guardia refused calls for an investigatory riot commission to research the causes of the riot; it was unnecessary. Any 1943 riot commission would have found that conditions in Harlem had changed very little since 1935, a fact La Guardia knew. If the black community had hope that the 1943 riot would engender immediate positive changes as the 1935 riot did – and thirty-three percent of Harlemites surveyed immediately after the 1943 riot were of that opinion – they were largely mistaken. The on-going trauma of war meant that the problems of Harlem would not be an immediate priority. While the Office

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529 *New York Herald-Tribune*, 3 August 1943.

530 Statement from Ferdinand C. Smith (Chairman) and Charles A. Collins (Executive Secretary) of the Negro Labor Victory Committee of Greater New York, no date. Departmental Correspondence, Box [number illegible], Folder 01: Aug 1943 Harlem – 1943 Race Riots [could be #1? Number smudged]. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Municipal Archives, New York. Letter from E. Larick (Larick Manufacturing Company), dated 2 August 1943. Box [number illegible], Folder 11: Aug 1943 Harlem – 1943 Race Riots. Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, Municipal Archives, New York.

of Price Administration finally relented and added New York to the list of cities subject to rent and price controls, other promises, such as increased housing projects for blacks, did not come to fruition until the war’s end.532

Harlem was the last major race riot of 1943, capping off a summer of record racial violence, with 242 explosive incidents spread over forty-seven American cities.533 While Detroit had been absolutely terrifying in its severity, Harlem was unsettling because of who rioted. In Harlem, blacks rioted to protest longstanding inequality. This raised the specter of a new front on the “race war,” one in which the historic victims of racial violence became the aggressors. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., described the Harlem riot as “the last open revolt of the black common man against a bastard democracy.”534 In reality, it would not be the last riot of its kind. The Harlem riot, and half of the Detroit riot, marked a shift in race rioting from a reinforcement of white hegemony to a protest against that hegemony. The United States would not see a riot like the 1943 Los Angeles riot again. Every riot subsequent to Harlem 1943 has been marked by minority rioting within minority neighborhoods, targeting white-owned properties there as symbols of systemic racism and oppression. Scholars of the 1960s riots have variously described the “Harlem model” of race riots as “commodity riots,” “urban rebellions,” and “ghetto revolts.” The Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943 reflected a growing frustration at the incapability of government and even black civic leaders adequately to address socioeconomic issues. These riots also showed an increasing sense of agency in the

532 Abu-Lughod, 151.
534 Takaki, 56.
black community to protest en masse, whether legally by picketing for equal employment opportunities or illegally by looting those stores that discriminated during rioting.

The Harlem riot illustrated the importance of including minority leaders in any discussions on how to ameliorate race relations in urban America. To ignore the concerns of minority communities was potentially to court a riot similar to Harlem. To this end, the creation of interracial committees, discussed further in the next chapter, was one of the most popular ways to attempt to mitigate racial discontent. The success of such committees depended on the amount of coordination and cooperation with government these organizations received; most committees remained largely and frustratingly symbolic. But such committees did help open dialogue between different groups and forge important ties between black civic leaders and sympathetic white community leaders.

A period of introspection followed the riots in Los Angeles, Detroit, and Harlem, when the nation seriously examined the origins of racial strife in the United States. The Los Angeles riot against Mexican-Americans brought a greater awareness of the multiracial reality of America to people outside the Southwest, who still viewed race as a black-white binary. The presence of riots in northern cities like Detroit forced Americans to question the long-held notion that racism was a problem of the South, not the North. And the riot in Harlem made the prospect of a full-blown race war a reality if more work was not done to address socioeconomic issues that left minorities perpetually marginalized. Private organizations, academics and educators, civil rights activists, and the government all worked to identify issues that fed racial tensions, ameliorate terrible living conditions for minorities, and educate people on issues of race.
The challenge for civil rights activists was to ensure that the period of introspection extended as far as possible. But maintaining the high awareness of America’s racial problems among the mainstream white population became increasingly difficult as the war came to a close. The American government became preoccupied with foreign relations as it became clear that the postwar peace would give way to a cold war between the two remaining world superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. The appeal to improve the treatment of minorities in an attempt to boost the American image to nonwhite foreign allies lost some of its urgency as the United States shifted away from a total war economy and mentality. And the shift away from a total war economy, coupled with the return home of millions of veterans, alleviated the driving need for labor that had helped minorities gain unprecedented industrial experience. Reconversion to peacetime industry meant millions of minority workers were displaced, and efforts to enshrine the equal employment principles of the FEPC in a permanent national law faltered as these workers were no longer a necessity to national security. The struggle to maintain a national dialogue on race and preserve the wartime gains of minorities resulted in a mixed legacy in the immediate postwar period, and as the urgency of discussing the issue of race faded from public consciousness, so too did the memories of the 1943 riots.
CHAPTER 4
“OUR ACCUMULATED NATIONAL POISONS”:
THE IMPACT OF WAR ON HOME FRONT DISCONTENT

“War compels a redefinition of our ideals and our goals. We see more clearly than ever the conflict between the democratic country that we say we are and that we wish to be and the very incomplete democratic country that we actually act.”

While the Los Angeles, Detroit, and Harlem riots were all disconcerting in their own rights, when combined with riots in other smaller cities like Mobile and Beaumont, many in the American public feared a full-blown “race war” on the home front. To have riots erupt in such disparate and vast geographic spaces – the West, East, and Gulf Coasts and the Midwest – and in cities as demographically and spatially different as New York City and Beaumont, Texas, and for reasons as varied as labor disputes, socioeconomic inequality, and reinforcement of white hegemony, meant that race could not be explained away as a local problem. The wave of riots in the summer of 1943 was proof that a long history of racism and racial violence – what Thomas Sancton referred to as “our accumulated national poisons” – served as the true origins of the riots, and such problems were not regional, but instead national in scope. Race had become even more visibly and violently “an American dilemma.”

In discussing how racial problems in America could be addressed, academics and bureaucrats stressed the importance of education and interracial dialogue. Interracial committees were touted as the best way to avoid the escalation of racial tensions into full-blown riots. For a more long-term solution, the public turned toward intercultural education to erase racism by emphasizing the commonalities of different races and

535 Robert Redfield. “Race Tensions, a University of Chicago Round Table,” radio broadcast from 4 July 1943 on NBC. Division of Review and Analysis: Reference File, 1941-1946, Box 419, untitled folder. Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
536 Sancton, 9.
cultures in hopes that the next generation of Americans would be less racist than its parents and grandparents. At the same time, employers and industries were also targeted with educational materials to promote increased minority hiring and integration of factories nationwide.

As the war came to a close and planning for the postwar period commenced, activists sought reforms to ensure that wartime gains for minorities continued in the postwar world. Activists believed that the only way to protect the welfare of minority communities was through equal economic opportunity, and until that could be secured, the struggle for political and social equality was an exercise in futility. Unions and civil rights groups pushed for a permanent FEPC on the federal and state levels to ensure an end to discriminatory hiring practices. Other groups pushed to abolish racially restrictive covenants in order to improve access to better housing for urban minorities, and advocated government involvement in postwar urban redevelopment projects to ensure that the needs of minorities were met. At the war’s end, the worst fears about reconversion were realized when scores of minority workers, the last to be hired and thus the first to be fired, suffered disproportionately in the economic downturn, and the failure of federal FEPC legislation meant a reversion to prewar hiring patterns that made long-term employment prospects for minority workers bleak. Americans’ awareness of their racial dilemma, and their willingness to discuss and address the problem, diminished as the urgency of war died and the nation turned to an uncertain future in a new nuclear age with a looming cold war.

Los Angeles, Detroit, and Harlem were the three biggest cities to experience rioting in the summer of 1943, but they were not the only places where race riots
occurred. The two smaller riots in the summer of 1943 that gained the most coverage were both in the South and on the Gulf Coast. Both cities were important as local industrial centers, mainly in shipbuilding, though their importance was dwarfed by larger war production centers like Detroit and Los Angeles. Like their larger northern and western counterparts, Beaumont, Texas, and Mobile, Alabama, had both seen population increases due to war work. Mobile’s population growth of sixty percent between 1940 and 1943 was the highest rate of any metropolitan county in the country, and the city had experienced housing and transportation problems from this rapid migration similar to those in Detroit.\footnote{John A. and Joy P. Davis, “Alabama Drydock” (Report dated 23 May 1945). Records of Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Joy P. Davis, Compliance Analyst, 1943-45, Box 404 Folder 8: Tension Data. Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.}

And, like Detroit, the growth of Mobile’s black population outstripped general growth, with a 106 percent increase in its black population.\footnote{“Internal Migration of Negroes, 1940-43” (Estimates by Social Science institute. Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of John A. Davis, Director, Box 360, folder titled “Migration – Negro.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.}

Beaumont-Port Arthur’s population growth was modest in comparison, at twenty-two percent, but it still doubled the rate of Detroit’s growth in the same time period.\footnote{U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, “Estimated Civilian Population of the United States, by Counties: November 1, 1943” (Population-Special Reports, Series P-44, No. 3, Feb 15, 1944). Records of Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Cornelius Golightly, Compliance Analyst, Box 399, folder labeled “Annual Report – Negro Worker 1890-1944.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.}

Mobile was a center for shipbuilding, and the riot there originated within the shipbuilding industry and took place at the shipyards devoted to production for the war effort. The details of the riot and the events leading up to it were thoroughly investigated by the FEPC, and its investigation file contains the most complete account of the riot. The Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company employed nearly thirty thousand
workers by May 1943, with nearly seven thousand blacks, working mostly in unskilled jobs. While the company was ordered by the FEPC to stop discriminatory hiring and promotion practices in November 1942, only four months later did the company finally begin upgrading black workers. In further compliance with FEPC regulations, on 24 May, the company upgraded twelve black workers to the position of welder.

The next day, white workers responded by rioting in the shipyards, hunting down black workers and beating them, though none of the black welders were on shift at the time of the riot. One black worker estimated the number of white rioters to be four thousand, wielding “pipes, clubs and everything…that was ‘killable.’” White workers threw bricks and pipes at fleeing black workers and beat the ones who could not run away fast enough. One worker reported hearing a white man shout “No nigger can put iron together here,” a reference to the newly upgraded black welders. Some white workers attempted to help their black coworkers – several warned them and urged them to flee, one hid a black coworker in a locker for safety, and a few physically intervened when their coworkers were being beaten. But the overall scene was one of chaos and white animosity. Fifty people were injured and there were no fatalities. The Mobile riot had confirmed the worst fears of war industry employers that employing and promoting more minority workers could not only lead to work stoppages and strikes but also to violence.

The Beaumont riot, which took place on 15 and 16 June, was the result of racial tensions engendered by the strains of wartime industry. Like Mobile, Beaumont’s largest industry was shipbuilding, with the Pennsylvania Shipyards being the biggest war

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540 “Field Investigation Report of the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company, dated June 8, 1943 (and covering a visit time period of May 27-31).” Division of Review and Analysis: Office Files of Consultant Wilfred C. Leland, Jr., 1943-1945, Box 386, folder titled “Negro Problems – Misc. Material.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
industry employer in town. The influx of war workers to Beaumont put a strain on its housing market, transportation infrastructure, and food supply, but the most significant transformation came in a blurring of the previously and very sharply defined physical and social boundaries between whites and blacks, as the sheer numbers of people made segregation impractical. Escalating episodes of violence on city buses forced the city to maintain separate bus services for blacks and whites. Whites soon began to fear that the black community would use the occasion of Juneteenth, a Texas holiday on 19 June that traditionally celebrated emancipation, to stage an armed revolt.\textsuperscript{541}

Following the familiar pattern of race riots from the nineteenth century, the Beaumont riot was triggered by allegations that black men had raped white women. In the first episode on 5 June, a black man suspected of raping a white teenager was shot trying to flee and died two days later; a lynch mob was convinced to disperse by the chief of police when he told the crowd that the suspect was dying already.\textsuperscript{542} Nearly two weeks later, on 15 June, the alleged rape of a white wife and mother by a black man prompted a mass walk off the job at the Pennsylvania Shipyards. A crowd of three thousand gathered at the city jail demanding the rape suspect, and when the police could not produce him – the police brought the alleged victim out to address the crowd and prove that they really did not have him in custody – the mob headed to the city’s black neighborhoods. The white rioters beat any blacks they could find, looted black homes and businesses, torched cars, and otherwise terrorized the black community until the Texas governor declared martial law and sent in the military. Three people were killed,

\textsuperscript{541} Marilynn S. Johnson, “Gender, Race, and Rumours: Re-examining the 1943 Race Riots.” \textit{Gender & History} Vol. 10 No. 2 (August 1998), 257.
\textsuperscript{542} James Albert Burran, III. “The Beaumont Race Riot, 1943.” An MA thesis in history, Texas Tech University (available electronically from http://hdl.handle.net/2346/13938), 57-60
two hundred injured, and two hundred buildings in black neighborhoods were destroyed. Nearly a tenth of Beaumont’s black population left in the following days. The Beaumont riot illustrated the horrible depth of racial prejudices and the violent perils black communities faced when segregation was challenged, whether by activists or by wartime realities and practicalities.

Riots taking place in such diverse locations and in such a brief period of time naturally begged the question: were the riots connected? National media at the time certainly believed so. As the summer progressed, newspapers and magazines ran editorials that warned of the contagion of racial violence; as discussed in Chapter 3, many civic leaders actively tried to prevent race riots from happening in their own cities as if race riots were something that could be inoculated against like a disease – Harlem clearly proved this was not successful. Editorial cartoons connected the riots, as in an editorial cartoon titled “The Shame of the Cities” that the *New York Post* (and later, the *New Republic*) ran with blood spatters on city maps marking the sites of race rioting. The *People’s Voice*, the newspaper backed by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., also illustrated the rioting by using a map motif, splashed across the front page, in which a swastika and the word “RIOTS” were superimposed onto the map. Editorial cartoons connected the riots via common causes. A Fisk University survey of editorials from 202 daily newspapers from twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia sought to identify the most common causes to which people attributed the Detroit riot, and the top four causes, including race prejudice, socioeconomic conditions, juvenile delinquency, and war tensions, were commonly cited in editorials on other race riots. Other less-commonly cited reasons for

543 Johnson, 258-259.
545 *The People’s Voice*, 26 June 1943, front page.
riotings, including hot weather and Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, also appeared in editorials on multiple riots.  

Many also linked the riots by arguing that a “Fifth Column” must be behind them if riots were happening in such a wide variety of cities. Fisk University reported that forty percent of editorials surveyed after the Detroit riot blamed subversive activities. But the tenor of this “Fifth Column” allegation differed in the mainstream and minority presses. For the mainstream press, the focus on a Fifth Column centered on the idea that the riots were instigated by secret Axis agents in a plot to weaken the American war effort and make the United States vulnerable to an eventual invasion. Pinning the instigation on foreign enemy agents removed the agency of the American citizens who rioted and absolved them of personal responsibility for the violence: they were simply misguided and used as pawns in an Axis plot. The minority press, on the other hand, argued that the instigators of the riot were homegrown fascist groups who, while not directly employed by the Axis, were sympathetic to Axis ideology and aims. They cited as examples white supremacy groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the Christian Front, an organization vehemently anti-communist and anti-Semitic with many Nazi sympathizers. This approach gave more agency to the white rioters than the mainstream media.

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approach, but they were still depicted as the (perhaps) unwitting pawns of the Axis. Investigations of the riots by various entities, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), found no evidence of direct Axis agent involvement in the riots, which lent greater credence to the minority press accounts of domestic extremist groups.

Despite the lack of an obvious “Fifth Column” plot, the Axis was still pleased with the discord that the riots generated and emphasized the riots in their propaganda targeting the United States’ nonwhite allies. Most Americans were keenly aware of the race problem as a failing of their democracy and an impediment to successful alliances with countries with large nonwhite populations, and were extremely sensitive to the Axis appropriation of the riots as a tool to point out American hypocrisy and weakness.

Editorials, and editorial cartoons, imagined how the Axis leaders must have received news of the riots with great glee. One New York Amsterdam News cartoon in July 1943 depicted a gloating Hitler reading news of the riots and remarking, “My greatest victory since Vichy!”

The race riots can be connected, as many scholars have already done, by highlighting the commonality of the affected cities’ wartime experiences and the impact the war had on their city infrastructures. The American government clearly took this approach. The FEPC maintained “tension files” cataloging areas of industrial conflict: one list compiled included Mobile, Detroit, and Los Angeles. Records from the Census Bureau and the Executive Office of the President suggested a preoccupation with

548 Bill Chase, editorial cartoon titled “My greatest victory since Vichy!” New York Amsterdam News, 3 July 1943, 10.
549 “Centers of Industrial Tension.” Records of Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Joy P. Davis, Compliance Analyst, 1943-45, Box 404 Folder 8: Tension Data. Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
the impact the war was having on internal migration to industrial centers and the accompanying social woes that factored into all of the riots. A special census in 1943 recorded the movement of the population since the 1940 census. Another special census, in 1944, specifically targeted the top ten congested production areas, which included Detroit, Los Angeles, and Mobile. A detailed report about population, taking into account labor, families, and housing, accompanied the 1944 special census. In April 1943, Executive Order 9327 founded the Committee for Congested Production Areas to study the problems of industrial centers and coordinate the responses of different federal agencies in an attempt to improve local conditions and ensure maximum efficiency of war production. The Committee for Congested Production Areas studied not just labor, but infrastructure and quality of life, assessing whether various factors like housing, fuel, food, transportation, and emergency services had improved or deteriorated over the course of the war. By identifying problem areas and working with the state

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551 “Total Population of Ten Congested Production Areas: 1944.” Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Marjorie M. Lawson, Box 442: Alabama-California, folder titled “Los Angeles Statistics.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.


553 War Department, Bulletin No. 8, dated 23 April 1943. Division of Review and Analysis: Office Files of Consultant Wilfred C. Leland, Jr., 1943-1945, Box 387, folder titled “Committee on Congested Production Areas.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

554 Letter from Corrington Gill, Director of the Committee for Congested Production Areas, to the Chairman [presumably the FEPC chairman] dated 10 May 1944. Division of Review and Analysis: Office Files of Consultant Wilfred C. Leland, Jr., 1943-1945, Box 387, folder titled “Committee on Congested Production Areas.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
and local authorities, the committee hoped to alleviate local tensions caused by congestion. Labor strikes and race riots meant losing crucial man-hours in the war production plants, which negatively affected the war effort. The Beaumont riot alone cost 210,000 man-hours of war production, and the Detroit riots resulted in one million man-hours lost.555

In the wake of the riots, cities and municipalities took every precaution to avoid race riots. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) published a pamphlet titled “How to Prevent a Race Riot in Your Hometown,” which contained the following helpful three-week, six-step program to prevent a race riot:

**Step One:** A Public Relations Committee consisting of influential people should check with your chief of police, your mayor, and your governor as to what arrangements have been worked out for bringing in extra police and militia in the event of a riot.

**Step Two:** Have your Public Relations Committee check with the chief of police on the policing of colored and mixed neighborhoods.

**Step Three:** Ask citizens to report all rumors about racial trouble to a center designated by your Citizen’s Committee.

**Step Four:** Provide jobs and war work for young people, both white and colored, some of whom might otherwise become participants in race riots.

**Step Five:** Set up an Information Committee which can be depended upon to provide reliable and authoritative information on local race relations.

**Step Six:** A final emergency measure is to call in the aid of the clergy and of church members.556

The ACLU also encouraged a frank assessment of race relations in each community and advocated setting up an interracial committee if one did not already exist. Along similar lines, the FEPC published a pamphlet titled “An Outline for Analysis of Racial

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555 Johnson, 259; Shogan and Craig, 89.
556 Pamphlet titled "How to Prevent a Race Riot in Your Home Town" by Winifred Raushenbush, published by the Committee on Race Discrimination, American Civil Liberties Union, October 1, 1943. Division of Review and Analysis: Reference File, 1941-1946, Box 417, untitled folder. Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
Conditions in Urban Areas,” which contained a questionnaire to help city officials take stock of racial problems and to determine the level of their severity. The questions included ones on the racial and class makeup of the community, the history of race relations in the city, whether the war had led to increased tensions, the relationship between the police and minority groups, patterns of war migration, black activist organizations, and the existence of interracial committees.557

Cities that identified police actions against minorities as a recurrent problem could turn to “The Police and Minority Groups,” a pamphlet published by the International City Managers’ Association. Published in 1944, the pamphlet argued that because it was “almost impossible to handle a riot ‘successfully,’” the energies of police departments should be spent in trying to prevent race riots by defusing tensions between white and nonwhite communities. The pamphlet identified the role of the police in race relations by illustrating the importance of good relationships between the police and minority communities. In all three of the major 1943 riots, the police were cited either as being complicit in white-on-minority violence, as was the case in Los Angeles and Detroit, or as having such a fraught history with the community as to discourage basic law and order, as in the case of Harlem. The racism-tinged performance of the police in those cities was contrasted with the police in cities like Washington, D.C., where the police force swiftly responded to riot rumors while working with the black community to ensure that a peaceful rally did not become the target of racial violence. The pamphlet

557 An Outline for Analysis of Racial Conditions in Urban Areas by the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, Division of Review and Analysis. Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of John A. Davis, Director, Box 363, folder titled “Outline Racial Conditions Hiring Minorities.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
also emphasized the importance of recruiting more minority policemen and in training all policemen to be nondiscriminatory and educated on civil rights laws.  

Popular surveys and academic roundtables dissected and worried over the topic of America’s race problem in the wake of the race riots. An NBC radio broadcast on 4 July 1943 of an University of Chicago roundtable discussion included Carey McWilliams, who had served as commissioner of immigration and housing in California until 1943 and remained a prominent activist for Mexican-Americans in California; E. Franklin Frazier, the respected sociologist from Howard University who had helmed the study of conditions which led to the 1935 Harlem riot; and Robert Redfield, a dean at the University of Chicago and an anthropologist who specialized in Latin American culture. The inclusion of McWilliams and Redfield guaranteed that “race” would be defined as “white and nonwhite” rather than “white and black.” McWilliams, Frazier, and Redfield argued that the United States was failing to live up to its democratic principles when it came to minorities, and advocated measures on the national level like civil rights legislation, improvement of housing, and a permanent FEPC. At the same time, they recognized that until racial attitudes could be changed, such sweeping reforms had little chance of success, and thus they promoted local activism and reforms to help influence and enforce existing national policies.

558 Pamphlet titled “The Police and Minority Groups: A Program to Prevent Disorder and to Improve Relations Between Different Racial, Religious, and National Groups”. By J.E. Weckler and Theo E. Hall, published by the International City Managers' Association, Chicago. Records of Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Cornelius Golightly, Compliance Analyst, Box 397, folder titled “Police and Minority Groups.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD

559 “Race Tensions, a University of Chicago Round Table,” radio broadcast from 4 July 1943 on NBC. Division of Review and Analysis: Reference File, 1941-1946, Box 419, untitled folder. Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
While the University of Chicago roundtable represented the academic discourse on the riots, an Office of War Information (OWI) survey sent to clergy, social workers, and businessmen across the nation in the wake of the Detroit riot showed a white American public deeply concerned about interracial violence and the potential for more race riots. Despite the fact that all of the survey respondents were white – and why the survey failed to include minority respondents remained unclear – these respondents overwhelmingly laid the blame for tension on whites. Even those respondents who complained about “aggressive” blacks, who they felt were encouraged by “extremists…and agitators” in their “unrealistic hopes” of greater equality and prosperity, were willing to grant that aggression was the result of white-driven discrimination against blacks in housing and employment.\(^560\) At the same time, they did not let those who agitated for equal rights off the hook for contributing to racial tensions, though they blamed white activists, like Eleanor Roosevelt, as well as black activists. As one New Jersey respondent wrote:

Much damage is done…by the sentimental exponents of racial equality among the white race who aggravate the situation not only by their efforts to force the issue but by failing to understand that the attitudes of many people, however unchristian or unsocial, may nevertheless be deeply seated…and are sometimes made more violent by this effort to move too fast.\(^561\)

\(^{560}\) Bureau of Special Services, Office of War Information, “Opinions about Inter-Racial Tension, Division of Research Report No. C 12,” report dated 25 August 1943. Records of Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Cornelius Golightly, Compliance Analyst, Box 398, folder titled “Tension.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD

\(^{561}\) Bureau of Special Services, Office of War Information, “Opinions about Inter-Racial Tension, Division of Research Report No. C 12,” report dated 25 August 1943. Records of Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Cornelius Golightly, Compliance Analyst, Box 398, folder titled “Tension.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
To nearly all of these respondents, the “race problem” belonged to whites discriminating against blacks, and the existence of other minority groups, like Hispanics and Asians, did not register at all in their consciousnesses. Despite the zoot suit riot in Los Angeles, which largely involved Mexican-Americans, the Los Angeles respondents seemed most concerned about blacks, saying “The rate at which Negroes have been pouring into Los Angeles produces serious conditions.” Indeed, the concern about a racial episode involving blacks in Los Angeles was registered by the FBI in an August 1943 memorandum that described discontent over the issue of transit through the black neighborhood of Central Avenue. When asked about minority groups other than blacks, only respondents from the West and Southwest discussed Hispanics and Asians; the overwhelming majority of respondents pointed to Jews as the second most discriminated-against group after blacks, and considered anti-Semitism a growing problem.

A growing awareness, at least in some areas of the country, of the many diverse groups that made up communities nationwide meant that cities became concerned about how best to promote peaceful relationships between different racial, ethnic, and religious groups and prevent the occurrence of riots. One idea that enjoyed great vogue involved the creation of a local interracial committee, composed of civic and religious leaders, to encourage dialogue between groups and to attempt to calm tense conditions. Such

562 Bureau of Special Services, Office of War Information, “Opinions about Inter-Racial Tension, Division of Research Report No. C 12,” report dated 25 August 1943. Records of Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Cornelius Golightly, Compliance Analyst, Box 398, folder titled “Tension.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
563 Memorandum for the Attorney General, dated 17 August 1943, from J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI. Division of Review and Analysis: Office Files of Consultant Wilfred C. Leland, Jr., 1943-1945, Box 389, folder titled “Tension Area Reports.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
committees could be formal and connected with the municipal government, or informal and independent. In the OWI survey, forming interracial committees was the number one recommendation for improving race relations, and cities that already had such committees reported quite positively on their function.\textsuperscript{564} Academics like those in the University of Chicago roundtable avidly promoted the interracial committee as the most effective means to improve race relations and conditions for minorities. The idea of interracial committees, especially in response to problems that could cause an eruption of riots, was not new. New York City had set one up in the wake of the 1935 Harlem riot, and that committee had been so well received that the Harlem community campaigned, ultimately unsuccessfully, to set up another committee after the 1943 riot. Between June and September 1943, Fisk University recorded 117 new interracial committees founded nationwide as people searched for solutions to racial problems.\textsuperscript{565}

The success of interracial committees depended largely on their ability to forge working relationships not just with the local government but also with different groups within each racial community. As Frazier warned in the University of Chicago roundtable, a key weakness of interracial committees was their tendency to nominate members from business or professional groups, which often had different interests and

\textsuperscript{564} Bureau of Special Services, Office of War Information, “Opinions about Inter-Racial Tension, Division of Research Report No. C 12,” report dated 25 August 1943. Records of Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Cornelius Golightly, Compliance Analyst, Box 398, folder titled “Tension.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD

\textsuperscript{565} “A Monthly Summary of Events and Trends in Race Relations,” October 1943 Vol. 1 No. 3, published by the Social Science Institute at Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee. Division of Review and Analysis: Office Files of Consultant Wilfred C. Leland, Jr., 1943-1945, Box 389, folder titled “Tension Area Reports.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
different experiences than the working classes. The relative failure of Detroit’s newly established committee illustrated the perils that could face an interracial committee. Mayor Jeffries had established the City of Detroit Interracial Committee to help foster communication and understanding between the various ethnic and racial groups in the city. Under the direction of the mayor, the committee was made up of representatives of five city departments and five leaders in the community. While individual aspects of the committee functioned adequately, the mayor’s interracial council as a whole was notably ineffective. The Detroit committee was a largely ceremonial organization with limited enforcement powers and monetary resources, unable to reform areas in major need of change and able to exert pressure for only limited, voluntary efforts in other areas like intercultural education. In addition, some members of the community saw the council as a thinly veiled attempt by Mayor Jeffries to save his political image and secure his reelection. Under funded and politically stigmatized, the council fought an uphill battle in the community, and in the end achieved limited results.

The race riots during the summer of 1943 spectacularly highlighted the issue of America’s race problem shortly before the publication in 1944 of a significant long-term study of black America titled *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. Funded by the Carnegie Foundation and featuring the research of a team of black sociologists led by the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, work on the project spanned six years and examined every facet of black life and the issue of race. *An

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566 “Race Tensions, a University of Chicago Round Table,” radio broadcast from 4 July 1943 on NBC. Division of Review and Analysis: Reference File, 1941-1946, Box 419, untitled folder. Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

567 “Committee on Interracial and Intercultural Understanding in the Schools Minutes, January 21, 1944.” UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 1, Folder 35, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
American Dilemma proved wildly popular and became hugely influential in the national
discourse on the status of race relations in America. Myrdal was specifically chosen to
give an outsider’s perspective on race in America, the twentieth century equivalent to
Alexis de Tocqueville and his Democracy in America in the nineteenth century. 568
Tocqueville had noted during his travels in the United States in 1831 that there were two
societies in America: white and nonwhite, separate and unequal. Tocqueville recognized
the culpability of whites in creating a society and legal system in which nonwhites were
oppressed, concluding that any future friction between races would stem from the anger
of nonwhites at being denied the same rights that whites enjoyed. 569 Similarly, Myrdal
concluded that the “Negro Problem” was actually a “White Man’s Problem”; that is, the
racial dichotomy noted a century earlier by Tocqueville was the result of white
prejudices:

From the point of view of the American Creed the status accorded to the Negro in
America represents nothing more and nothing less than a century-long lag of
public morals. In principle the Negro problem was settled long ago; in practice
the solution is not effectuated. The Negro in America has not yet been given the
elemental civil and political rights of formal democracy, including a fair
opportunity to earn his living, upon which a general accord was already won
when the American Creed was first taking form. And this anachronism
constitutes the contemporary “problem” both to Negroes and whites. 570

Myrdal concluded that the failure to apply the basic principles of American
democracy to blacks resulted in a cycle of prejudice: white prejudice caused denial of
equal rights to blacks, which contributed to the harsh conditions in the black community,

568 Paul Gordon Lauren, “Seen from the Outside: The International Perspective on America’s Dilemma.”
569 Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America (trans. Henry Reeve, New York: Edward Walker, 1847),
409.
570 Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (New York:
which further cemented white prejudices. The solution to America’s racial problem, Myrdal concluded, was education:

> Education has always been the great hope for both individual and society. In the American Creed it has been the main ground upon which “equality of opportunity for the individual” and “free outlet for ability” could be based. Education has also been considered as the best way – the way most compatible with American individualistic ideals – to improve society.\(^{571}\)

The idea that education could eradicate racial prejudice became increasingly popular during World War II, as evidenced in the drive by government agencies and civic groups to educate the public on race, from factory hiring managers to elementary school children. The proliferation of educational booklets and pamphlets fed a rabid hunger from civic and industrial leaders across the nation determined to maximize their contributions to the war effort and, after the riots, to avoid further episodes of racial violence in their communities and workplaces. As the Committee on Discrimination in Employment in New York had noted as early as 1943, the demand for information seemed almost insatiable.

Not everyone was happy with the drive to eradicate racial prejudice through education. White southern politicians threatened to revoke funding for the domestic branch of the OWI in June 1943 over the publication of pamphlets like “Negroes in the War,” which provided information about black contributions to industry and the war effort. Politicians like Representative A. Leonard Allen of Alabama alleged that promoting racial equality was damaging to the war effort:

> Elmer Davis [of the OWI], instead of helping the war effort domestically, is hurting it… His propaganda stuff has hurt the South. We in the South understand that problem and know best how to deal with it. We understand the psychology of the race problem. Davis had 2,500,000 copies of a certain pamphlet [“Negroes

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\(^{571}\) Myrdal, 882.
and the War”] printed and sent everywhere. This pamphlet undertook to glorify one race in the war. We in the South wish to encourage that race. We are the best friends of that race. But such propaganda raises a race issue, which ought to be kept down.  

The dispute over the “Negroes in the War” pamphlet illustrated a tension within the Democratic party between its northern and southern wings over the role government should play when it came to race. Through the establishment of the FEPC and the mandate that all government contractors were prohibited from discriminatory hiring practices, President Roosevelt had recognized the growing strength of a national black civil rights movement and the fact that racial discrimination was a national problem, not merely a southern one. But southern politicians were loathe to concede this, especially since doing so would wrest away their control over both the discourse on and future trajectory of race relations by inviting more liberal northern politicians into the conversation. For them, the pragmatism of employing the full population for the sake of the war effort was not as important as preserving the racial status quo. In the wake of the Detroit riots, the Senate saved the domestic branch of the OWI from complete elimination, but severely restricted its activities. With the OWI on a short-leash, the bulk of educational materials had to come from other federal agencies, state entities, and private organizations.

Academics differed in their ideas about how best to approach educating the public about race. Anthropologists like Margaret Mead advocated emphasizing culture over race, and using group events like “community festivals” to create an informal environment where people could mingle and talk about their different cultures; such events enabled people of different racial groups to engage in dialogues about topics other

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572 “Race an Issue in OWI Row,” PM, 23 June 1943.
than race. Others, like Ruth Benedict, argued that the best way to eradicate prejudice was to use science systematically to deconstruct popular stereotypes about race and illustrate biological commonality. This approach emphasized social environment and class as more important factors than race. What both approaches had in common was an inclination toward a “colorblind” view of race, an idea that gained much traction during and immediately after World War II. Race, in this view, had more to do with culture than skin color or biological differences.\textsuperscript{573}

The effort to educate industries on the benefits of employing minority workers has already been touched on to some extent in the previous chapters. Pamphlets like “Manpower: One Tenth of a Nation,” which touted black workers, and “Spanish Speaking Americans in the War: The Southwest,” which promoted Hispanic contributions to the war effort, were published by national government agencies.\textsuperscript{574} As discussed in Chapter 3, New York’s Committee on Discrimination in Employment put out “How Management Can Integrate Negroes in War Industry,” a popular pamphlet which provided guidelines for increasing black workers in war industry with minimal friction.\textsuperscript{575} More localized entities, like the Welfare Council of New York City, also published educational booklets on the merits of black workers to convince employers to

\textsuperscript{574} U.S. Government Printing Office, “Manpower: One Tenth of a Nation.” Division of Review and Analysis: Office Files of Consultant Wilfred C. Leland, Jr., 1943-1945, Box 390, folder titled “Negro Employment – Information and Policy.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD “Spanish Speaking Americans in the War: The Southwest.” Division of Review and Analysis: Reference File, 1941-1946, Box 409, folder titled “Mexican Workers.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
\textsuperscript{575} John A. Davis, “How Management Can Integrate Negroes in War Industries.” Published by the New York State War Council Committee on Discrimination in Employment, 1942. Research and Drafts Files for \textit{The Empire State at War: World War II}, 1944-1948, Box 1 Folder 16: Production for War Chapter 3. Records of the New York State War Council, New York State Archives.
hire them in greater numbers. Private entities and unions also made educational pamphlets available that promoted the value of minority labor. The Congress of Industrial Organizations’ Committee to Abolish Racial Discrimination published “Working and Fighting Together: Regardless of Race, Creed, Color, or National Origin,” while the National Urban League outlined “Employment Problems of the Negro.”576 The Public Affairs Committee, a nonprofit organization that promoted education, released a pamphlet titled “The Negro in the War,” as well as a later title that dealt with the impact of reconversion, “Will Negroes Get Jobs Now?”577 Industrial management had no shortage of resources to turn to on the question of the abilities of minority workers, their importance to the war effort, or how best to add them to company payrolls in increasing numbers, and both unions and state war councils reported a demand for these printed materials.

The desire for educational materials was not limited to industry; educators, many in cities that had received a large influx of minorities due to the war effort, were also eager for materials to use in the classroom. Especially after the 1943 riots, many saw school classrooms as the frontline in the war against prejudice. Young minds could be


more easily reformed to regard members of racial groups other than their own in a
different light. The influence of Mead and Benedict can be seen in publications
instructing educators about how to discuss the topic of race in their classrooms. Benedict
had the most direct impact on the discussion of race in American classrooms with the
publication of the 1943 pamphlet “The Races of Mankind.”\textsuperscript{578} The pamphlet was a
distillation of her 1939 book \textit{Race: Science and Politics}, and both works explained the
anthropology of race in lay-friendly terms. “The Races of Mankind” was coauthored
with Gene Weltfish – like Mead and Benedict, a female student of Frank Boas – and explained the social construct of race in simple language and cartoon illustrations. The
pamphlet was quite popular, selling 250,000 copies in 1944, and 750,000 copies in 1945,
after it encountered public controversy for being utilized in the education of American
troops. Southern white politicians found its arguments about inherent racial equality
unpalatable. The pamphlet was quickly adopted by the public school systems in both
New York City and Detroit.\textsuperscript{579}

Two examples of government publications designed as teaching resources were
“Education of Teachers for Improving Majority-Minority Relations,” published by the
United States Office of Education in 1944, and “One Nation Indivisible,” published by
the New York Committee on Discrimination in Employment.\textsuperscript{580} The Office of Education

\textsuperscript{578} Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish, “The Races of Mankind,” Public Affairs Pamphlet series, October 1943. Division of Review and Analysis: Reference File, 1941-1946, Box 407, folder titled “Discrimination Theory.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
\textsuperscript{579} Burkholder, 67-79.
\textsuperscript{580} United States Office of Education, “Education of Teachers for Improving Majority-Minority Relationships,” Bulletin 1944, No. 2. Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Marjorie M. Lawson, Box 369, folder titled “Education of Teachers for Improving Majority-Minority Relationships, Bulletin 1944, No. 2.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
pamphlet specifically identified the role of “growing tensions” in spurring the publication of the pamphlet promoting intercultural courses for teachers. It also cited the war effort as an important reason for promoting intercultural education and national unity:

> It is important to study our minority groups and thus promote national unity in our recent crisis as a protection against enemy propaganda. A tactic commonly employed by the enemy is to exaggerate differences, disadvantages, and misunderstandings with a view to creating suspicion, antagonism, and disunity. Anything that can be done to improve the attitudes of each group toward the other will help to reduce the causes of friction; bring about improved relationships; and cause our practices better to conform to our democratic ideals, thus minimizing the effects of enemy propaganda.\(^{581}\)

While the Office of Education pamphlet emphasized the availability of courses to educate teachers on different minority groups, “One Nation Indivisible” outlined curricula teachers could employ in the classroom. In addition to promoting tolerance and education about race, this pamphlet sought to educate children on “economic democracy.” While some of the ideas for activities fit into the desire to educate children on nondiscrimination in employment – like the suggested field trip to a factory and discussion on the criteria used for employment – other activities reflected Mead’s insistence on cultural experiences to facilitate inter-group contact, such as field trips to ethnic enclaves and cultural fairs where folkdances and traditional food and crafts from different groups were displayed.\(^{582}\)

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\(^{582}\) “One Nation Indivisible” Manual for Education. Governor’s Office Correspondence on War Issues 1940-45, Box 3 Folder 18: Discrimination in Employment. Records of the New York State War Council, New York State Archives.
This notion of overcoming prejudice through education was supported by city-sponsored community organizations in areas that had experienced race riots in 1943. The New York Board of Education created a course for teachers called “Negroes in American Life” to promote intercultural education. On Detroit’s interracial committee, two important subcommittees were tasked with tackling the issue of multicultural education: the Committee on Interracial and Intercultural Understanding in the Schools and the Administrative Committee on Intercultural Education. These two committees worked hand-in-hand to promote tolerance among Detroit’s youth, hoping that if schoolchildren were taught about different ethnicities and races, they would be less likely to participate in the sort of racially charged violent behavior exhibited by so many young men during the rioting. They believed that multicultural education would prevent the next generation of students from being racially ignorant and engaging in “hoodlumism.”

The ambitious plans of the Detroit committees entailed such efforts as educational radio programs, teacher workshops, round table forums, and unit studies emphasizing the understanding of different cultures. One innovative concept introduced was “trouble shooting,” in which instances of unrest were addressed by dispatching a team composed of both black and white individuals to defuse the situation. The program saw some successes by the spring of 1945, but still had some major unmet goals. Despite being in...
existence for nearly two years, the Committee on Intercultural Education had been unable to solidify support for its programs at the neighborhood and even school levels. Broader community involvement, through initiatives like adult education, and one of the most promising early proposals, “teacher exchange,” had yet to materialize. Uneven acceptance of the program by administrators and the general lack of funding hampered adoption of these multicultural education measures.  

As the war drew to a close, various groups, including the NAACP, sought ways to preserve minorities’ wartime equal access to employment for peacetime. One strategy the groups pursued was to make the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) permanent. Such a measure would help secure wartime employment gains among minorities, at least in theory, by continuing government enforcement of nondiscriminatory hiring practices. The NAACP was particularly vocal in support of a permanent FEPC. It lobbied for both state and federal versions of the FEPC to provide maximum coverage for minority workers. While FEPC legislation would prove successful in some states, efforts to pass the legislation at a national level failed at first.

By mid-April 1945, a state FEPC bill was law in New York, and pending in Michigan and seventeen other states. New York’s Committee on Discrimination in Employment, which had been the first state-level antidiscrimination entity and which had preceded the federal-level FEPC, enjoyed tremendous political support and was not seriously challenged when legislation was introduced to make a version of the committee permanent. The passage of a permanent state FEPC in New York did much to bolster black hopes that the issue of discrimination in employment was finally beginning to be

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587 “Progress Report on Intercultural Education in the Detroit Public Schools 1944-1945.” UAW Fair Practices Department, Box 1, Folder 35, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
resolved. The wartime Committee on Discrimination in Employment did much to help blacks in New York City. Most of the committee’s investigations came from New York City – by 1944, more than fifty percent - and Rochester ran a very distant second with more than sixty percent fewer cases of discriminatory hiring and promotion practices.\footnote{588 “Committee on Discrimination in Employment Report.” War Information Publications File, 1941-1945, Box 3 Folder 39: Discrimination Committee: Report March 1941-July 1944. Records of the New York State War Council, New York State Archives. “Discrimination Committee: Report Year Ending 31 December 1944.” War Information Publications File, 1941-1945, Box 3 Folder 41: Discrimination Committee: Report March 1941-July 1944. Records of the New York State War Council, New York State Archives.} When New York made non-discrimination in employment the law in 1945, it ensured that, at least on paper, employment discrimination would be eradicated. But as the number of investigations during the war showed, the process of ensuring that businesses and industries were compliant would be a long one that required constant vigilance.

The many labor issues in Detroit demonstrated a need for a permanent state-level FEPC in Michigan, but legislation there did not enjoy the same smooth passage as in New York; the fate of the Michigan legislation was a case study for widespread resistance to antidiscrimination legislation throughout the United States during World War II. Initial support for the pending legislation was strengthened by the existence of the wartime program, which demonstrated both the necessity of such a law and the practicality of enforcing it. Also giving the legislation serious clout was its support from labor unions, especially the CIO, which had long resisted discrimination in employment. The most vocal attacks arose over the notion of whether or not “morals” could be legislated. Opponents argued that education, not legislation, should be the path toward employment without discrimination. Supporters of the state FEPC legislation countered that while educational efforts, like that of Detroit’s Interracial Committee, were in place,
relying on education alone would result in a much longer process than one established by legislation.\textsuperscript{589}

The NAACP consciously patterned its efforts to lobby for an FEPC bill in Michigan after the successful New York campaign and urged the community to take action in support of the legislation. NAACP leaders urged local branches to recruit as many organizations as possible to flood the state senate’s offices with telegrams and letters in support of the bill. They also advised sending delegations to visit their representatives and personally appealing to them for passage of legislation to create a state-level FEPC.\textsuperscript{590} The measure that gained the most success was enlisting citizens to make statements at hearings on the bill.

The mix of community organizations, religious groups, sociologists, labor representatives, and wartime FEPC administrators who testified all agreed that Michigan, and the United States as a whole, badly needed a permanent FEPC to guarantee nondiscrimination in employment, and that such a program was feasible. “When an employer says to me: ‘You can’t employ without discrimination so far as race, color, creed, or sex is concerned,’ I know he is wrong, because I’ve done it,” former industrial manager Franklin Wallin stated. Others invoked the experiences of veterans from earlier conflicts who were decorated for their valor on the battlefield and yet denied a job at home, as in the case of a Jewish Medal of Honor recipient in World War I.\textsuperscript{591}

\textsuperscript{590} “FEPC Bulletin #6: FEPC Bill Still in Committee,” issued by the state branch of the NAACP, 14 April 1945. Copy obtained from the NAACP and Labor collection, FEPC file.
\textsuperscript{591} Statement of Harry J. Schaeffer, Michigan Commander, Jewish War Veterans [name of Medal of Honor recipient is not mentioned]. From “Excerpts From Statements in Support of Senate Bill 134.” Copy obtained from the NAACP and Labor collection, FEPC file.
Many people testified that guaranteeing fair employment was a religious and moral obligation, and that a denial of equal opportunities could lead to domestic discontent and crisis. “The roots of race riots and similar disturbances are economic; no person can be expected to be a good citizen who, despite his qualifications, has to accept low-rate or service industry jobs,” President John Gibson of the Michigan CIO testified. William Valentine of the Detroit Urban League asserted the need to legislate nondiscrimination in employment, pointing out that twenty-seven years of educational efforts to improve black employment had proved “fruitless” in Detroit and that “only legislation can destroy the continuing patterns of discrimination.”

When appeals to common sense and morality failed, citizens were not afraid to exert political pressure, as exhibited by Gerson Chertoff of the Jewish Community Council of Detroit, who reminded Republicans of their calls for a permanent FEPC on their party’s campaign platform:

> The Republican Party in the State of Michigan stated in its platform of last summer: ‘We pledge the establishment of State and Federal legislation of a Permanent Fair Employment Practice Commission.’ ... Michigan’s Senior Senator, Arthur Vandenburg, said in a recent letter: ‘I think the greatest field for progress… is in State legislation, through State laws, as is being done, for example, in New York State.’ ... Governor Dewey kept the Republican Party pledge in New York. Michigan voters expect Michigan Republicans to keep their pledge.

The Michigan FEPC legislation, despite all the political pressure, grassroots campaigning, and testimony, remained embattled and did not pass for another decade.

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592 “Excerpts From Statements in Support of Senate Bill 134.” Copy obtained from the NAACP and Labor collection, FEPC file.
593 “Excerpts From Statements in Support of Senate Bill 134.” Copy obtained from the NAACP and Labor collection, FEPC file.
Efforts to enact a permanent, federal-level FEPC were complicated by regional politics. The FEPC had endured attacks from southern politicians almost since its inception. Resistance to the FEPC became more pronounced in late 1943. Representative John Rankin of Mississippi stated in December 1943 that the FEPC seemed to be “doing everything they possibly can . . . to force [whites] to accept Negroes on terms of social equality.” He believed that if successful in its efforts, the FEPC would bring “race trouble” like the riots in Detroit and Harlem.\textsuperscript{595} The same month, Representative Howard Smith of Virginia began an investigation of the FEPC in an effort to eliminate it. His investigation failed to have a direct impact, but in the spirit of his efforts a coalition led by southern congressmen launched a series of attempts in 1944 and 1945 to deprive the FEPC of funding and thus kill it. In June 1945, the House Appropriations Committee denied the request for $599,000 in funding for the FEPC in the upcoming budget, citing pending efforts to establish a permanent FEPC that would render the wartime FEPC, and its budget, unnecessary.\textsuperscript{596} A last minute reprieve was given, but the reduced budget of $250,000 forced the FEPC to close several field offices and slash its staff by more than half, further hampering its ability to deal with a backlog of 2,600 cases.\textsuperscript{597}

The first attempt to legislate a permanent FEPC came in January 1944, with the Dawson-Scanlon-LaFollette bills. Testimony from labor, religious, and civic leaders was

\textsuperscript{595} Andrew E. Kersten, \textit{Race, Jobs, and the War: The FEPC in the Midwest, 1941-46} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 126.


\textsuperscript{597} Press release form the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice, July 27, 1945. Records of the Information Office, Press Releases August 1941-November 1945, Box 511, folder titled “Release on Reduction in Force, July 27, 1945.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
heard, and the FEPC published a pamphlet outlining the work of its organization in an attempt to address the need for a permanent FEPC. Congress held hearings on the bills, but was unable to complete discussion of the bills by the year’s end. Two pieces of legislation introduced in February 1945 continued the efforts to establish a permanent FEPC. In the Senate, Robert Taft, a Republican from Ohio, proposed a permanent FEPC that lacked enforcement powers, rendering it toothless and symbolic. His legislation was met with derision by labor leaders, who argued that the early years of the FEPC, before the second executive order had strengthened its enforcement powers, had proved that businesses did not take the FEPC seriously when there was no power behind its orders and recommendations. The legislation that supporters of the FEPC favored originated in the House Labor Committee and ensured that a permanent FEPC would have enforcement powers.

Testimony on behalf of the bill demonstrated how many people connected discrimination in employment with the specter of racial violence. William Kohn, former president of the Upholsterers International Union, which was affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), testified:

> Any employer or trade-union official who discriminates against workers on account of race, creed, color, or national origin in employment… is paving the way for sharp racial conflicts in the U.S., compared to which the Detroit race riot would look like a street brawl.

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598 Committee on Fair Employment Practice, Division of Review and Analysis, pamphlet titled “FEPC: How it Operates,” published in 1944. Division of Review and Analysis: Reference File, 1941-1946, Box 407, folder titled “Discrimination Theory.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
599 National Council for a Permanent FEPC, pamphlet titled “A Permanent Fair Employment Practice Commission.” Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of John A. Davis, Director, Box 362, folder titled “National Council for a Permanent FEPC.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
600 William Kohn, as quoted in National Council for a Permanent FEPC, pamphlet titled “A Permanent Fair Employment Practice Commission.” Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of John A. Davis, Director, Box 362, folder titled “National Council for a Permanent FEPC.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
Others who testified in favor of making the FEPC permanent cited “freedom to work” as rooted in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence; one rabbi called discrimination in employment “a denial of democracy.” Discrimination in employment denied minorities an equal chance, and relegated their communities to higher levels of poverty.\textsuperscript{601}

The FEPC was kept afloat by the strong support of President Roosevelt, but with his death in April 1945, the committee’s future seemed uncertain. Though President Harry Truman continued to support the FEPC, he could not save it. Led by Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi, southern political leaders mounted an all-out effort to break up the FEPC, and it was formally dismantled in June 1946.\textsuperscript{602} Federal antidiscrimination legislation did not pass Congress until 1964, as part of the Civil Rights Act, which established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to fulfill the same functions that the FEPC had twenty years earlier.

Mexican-Americans had a bleak outlook for their economic future in a postwar America without an FEPC. The director of the FEPC region that included Los Angeles testified before Congress that Mexican-Americans were only being hired due to the manpower shortage, and in war industries where they would suffer the most layoffs.\textsuperscript{603}

\textsuperscript{601} National Council for a Permanent FEPC, pamphlet titled “A Permanent Fair Employment Practice Commission.” Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of John A. Davis, Director, Box 362, folder titled “National Council for a Permanent FEPC.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

\textsuperscript{602} Kersten, 127-134.

\textsuperscript{603} Statement of Dr. Carlos E. Castaneda, Specialist on Latin-American Problems and Regional Director, FEPC, Region X and XI, before the Senate Committee on Labor and Education in the Hearings held March 13, 1945, on Bills S 101 and S 459, to Prohibit Discrimination because of Race, Creed, Color, National Origin or Ancestry. Records of Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Cornelius Golightly, Compliance Analyst, Box 397, folder titled “Mexican-Americans.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park.
San Antonio lawyer, Alonso Perales, testified on the necessity of the FEPC in maintaining Mexican-American rights:

We, American citizens of Mexican extraction… some three million in Texas and the Southwest, find that our efforts to eliminate discrimination by mutual cooperation and education, have accomplished nothing. We are discriminated against more widely today than 25 years ago, socially, politically, economically, and educationally. We are convinced that legislation is the only solution to the problem today, legislation with effective powers of enforcement and not merely a pronouncement of pious good intentions.\textsuperscript{604}

Like the black community in Harlem, the Mexican-American community in Los Angeles increasingly came to believe that equality in employment opportunity paved the way for greater civil and social equality. Therefore, discrimination in employment perpetuated repressive socioeconomic conditions in the community and worsened the outlook for the overall civic health of the community. The chairman of the FEPC shared this view. “The only way Mexican-Americans' ambition to be skilled workers can eventually be satisfied will be to meet the issue head on. Otherwise, we shall forever exercise a choice to keep three million Mexican-Americans as a peon people. At the present we are buying that false placidity at the cost of denying them admittance to our industrial civilization.”\textsuperscript{605}

The social and economic status of Mexican-Americans in the United States also had potential foreign relations complications. As discussed in Chapter 1, the Mexican

\textsuperscript{604} Statement of Alonso S. Perales, Lawyer, San Antonio, Texas, before the Senate Committee on Labor and Education in the Hearings held March 13, 1945, on Bills S 101 and S459, to Prohibit Discrimination because of Race, Creed, Color, National Origin or Ancestry. Records of Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Cornelius Golightly, Compliance Analyst, Box 397, folder titled “Mexican-Americans.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD

\textsuperscript{605} Fifth Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion, Racial Tensions in Industry by Malcolm Ross, Chairman, Fair Employment Practice Committee. Records of Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Cornelius Golightly, Compliance Analyst, Box 398, folder titled “Tension.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
government kept close ties to Mexican-American communities through their consulates in American cities like Los Angeles, and Mexican citizenship laws meant that Mexico regarded it as a duty to ensure the welfare of first-generation Mexican-Americans as well as their Mexican-born parents. The State Department had already been concerned with the impact events like the zoot suit riot had on the wartime alliance between the United States and Mexico. But as the war came to a close, a new diplomatic fear arose: that Mexico and Latin America would be on the side of the Soviets in the emerging Cold War.

During the series of international conferences held to discuss peace in the postwar period, the Soviet Union made allusions to racial discrimination, asserting that ending such discrimination was a key Soviet belief and should be a major platform in postwar peace. Such maneuvering was an attempt to curry favor with Asia, Latin America, and, eventually, the new countries created in Africa as a result of decolonization. It was also a deliberate jab at the United States, and its segregation and long history of racial discrimination left it vulnerable to such criticisms. The influence of the Communist party on the black civil rights movement suggested that the Soviet message of nondiscrimination could be very attractive to nonwhite Americans. The United States feared that its dismal wartime record with Mexican-Americans would essentially push Mexico and other Latin American countries to align with the Soviets. A 1944 Harper’s Magazine article titled “The Soviet Wooing of Latin America” quoted a senior Mexican government official saying that racial discrimination – as evidenced by the zoot suit riot, the problems faced by bracero workers, and continued Jim Crow laws – and the American support of dictatorships had caused the United States to lose “moral and
political leadership” in Latin America and would result in more countries being open to a Soviet alliance.  

The threat of an alliance with the Soviet Union was in many ways a clever diplomatic strategy. Mexico hoped to gain leverage not only for a better and more equal relationship between governments, but also for better treatment for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the United States. The black civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s similarly used the cold war to further its aims, citing foreign policy goals as a valid reason for improving civil and legal status for American minorities. African nations similarly pitted the United States against the Soviet Union and, like Mexico, cited the history of racial discrimination as a moral failing. Thus, Mexico began a tradition of foreign states exploiting the United States’ weakness when it came to race to further their own diplomatic agenda and maintain some leverage against the two superpowers during the cold war. It was not always an infallible strategy, and Mexican-Americans did not always reap the benefits from the diplomatic maneuvering of their ancestral homeland, but this strategy did demonstrate continued strong ties between Mexico and its American diaspora.

While the Mexican government was trying to improve the lives of the Mexican-American community by engaging in cold war politics, the black civil rights movement continued to adhere to the “Double V for Victory” campaign to try to improve the lives of blacks on the home front. Activists lobbied hard for permanent and federal FEPC agencies to enshrine anti-discrimination language into law and protect the rights of blacks.

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606 Excerpt from Carleton Beals' Article, “The Soviet Wooing of Latin America,” as it appeared in the August 1944 issue of Harper's Magazine, Page 212. Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Marjorie M. Lawson, Box 371, folder titled “Mexican-Soviet Relations.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD

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workers, especially those among the ranks of factory workers. The fastest-growing segment of workers in the black community during the war, factory workers and their skill sets and pay levels represented a lucrative new employment option. But this was only possible if activists were successful in keeping the factory doors open to blacks during peacetime by legally prohibiting discriminatory hiring practices that had confined black workers to the lowest-paying and most dangerous factory jobs before the war. Activists also continued to apply pressure on the American armed forces to completely desegregate. Activism combined with wartime expediency had resulted in more opportunities for blacks in the armed forces, including in combat troops, fighter squadrons, and in branches previously closed to them such as the Marines. Continued pressure to entirely desegregate the armed forces eventually resulted in President Truman doing so in 1948. Sustained activism for equal employment opportunities, whether civilian or military, demonstrated the belief that economic opportunity under girded the overall well being of blacks. But economics alone could not raise the standard of living. In addition to jobs, equal economic opportunity, and greater civil rights, a pressing issue for minorities was housing.

Many federal, state, and city-funded housing projects for war workers had been built by 1943, but the riots that year and the scrutiny they brought to deteriorating race relations shone a new light on the relative lack of housing for minority workers. By 1944, the Federal Housing Administration had built more than 360,000 units, but nonwhites occupied fewer than one percent of those units.\footnote{Booklet titled "Racial Problems in Housing," Bulletin No. 2 published by the Urban League (Fall 1944, second printing). Division of Review and Analysis: Office Files of Consultant Wilfred C. Leland, Jr., 1943-1945, Box 383, folder titled “Housing.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD} The situation regarding
housing projects in Detroit was a prime example of the problems faced by civil authorities in constructing more projects slated for minority occupation. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Sojourner Truth housing project had gone through a long and contentious process even to be slated for black occupancy, and the move-in of black families had been met with violence. A December 1944 report by the Special Committee on Housing for Metropolitan Detroit illustrated the continued severity of the housing problem for blacks, and implied that the housing crisis was hampering war production. While the vacancy rate of just one percent was problematic for whites, the black vacancy rate stood at zero. The records of the Detroit Housing Commission showed that it had received 14,466 applications for black housing between November 1943 and November 1944 and had been able to accommodate only 1,731, or twelve percent, of the requests. The unsuccessful applicants were forced to continue living in overcrowded and substandard housing. To alleviate the problem, the committee advocated the construction of more housing units and the cooperation and support of all Detroit area communities in locating federal projects within their borders. Dearborn, a major production center for Ford and a natural location for housing projects, was singled out as having shirked its responsibilities, since 13,600 blacks worked at Dearborn plants and only eighty-nine lived in the area at the time of the study as the result of restrictive residential covenants.608

The location of black housing continued to be a point of contention as the federal government attempted to build more housing projects in Detroit. White residents of Dearborn steadfastly resisted the construction of federal projects within the community.

608 “Special Committee on Housing for Metropolitan Detroit Release, 8 December 1944.” UAW Research Department Collection, Box 15, Housing – Detroit Area Folder, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
White residents in other areas proved similarly resistant. In March 1945, local housing authorities soundly rejected a proposal to construct one thousand units for black occupation in southwestern Detroit. At the same time, another conflict arose in nearby Oakwood when the city attempted to zone the neighborhood for interracial occupation and make room for more black housing after some black families had moved into the surrounding area. Similar controversy erupted in July 1945, over the attempt to designate an existing housing project in Hamtramck biracial. Everyone acknowledged the housing crisis, but no one wanted to help fix it by locating black housing in their all-white communities. Racially restrictive covenants and the lack of housing agencies in the suburbs meant that blacks who were able to get federal support lived in housing projects in limited areas in the city and did not have the option to live in the suburbs on loans like their white counterparts.

White citizens of Detroit nursed a growing resentment of the federal government, blaming it for their housing woes. Edward Thal, secretary of the Building Trades Council, represented the business community and voiced the concerns of white Detroit citizens in a March 1945 interview. “The [housing] problem is acute – there’s no question of that,” Thal admitted. “Much of the problem, however, can be traced directly to the damnable actions of the War Manpower Commission in blatantly running around the country recruiting labor for Detroit as a ‘critical’ area.” Thal denied that there was a critical need to bring more workers into Detroit, maintaining that the city had a sufficient

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supply of workers to meet increased demand. According to most white citizens, successful recruitment of labor for the war industry had caused Detroit’s housing crunch, and the people of Detroit were not afraid to complain about government interference in the life of their city.

The housing problem was not confined to Detroit but was national in scale. The National Urban League in 1944 estimated that more than one-third of blacks nationwide lived in sub-standard dwellings. Homeownership was out of the reach of many minorities due to limited employment prospects and racially restrictive covenants that dictated a finite area where they could live. Most of the housing stock available for purchase by minorities was older, in less-than-ideal condition, and sold at a premium. Areas without formal racially restrictive covenants excluded through the threat of violence most black families, keeping them from neighborhoods with better housing stock, which tended to be white; the case of Dr. Ossian Sweet, discussed in Chapter 2, continued to be referenced as a cautionary tale in discussions of housing problems during the war. The high rental rate and the typically low vacancy rate combined to trap many in cramped and unsafe quarters. And landlords sometimes used minority families as a means to drive up rents. According to a special report on housing by the Urban League:

Before the war-created housing shortage, landlords frequently created competitive markets by permitting a few Negro families to move into white districts as ‘threats’ of impending ‘mass invasions.’ Six-room apartments which had earned a single rental of $45 from one white family, would then either be rented for an excessive price or be converted into six separate ‘kitchenette’ units, each renting as a family dwelling and accruing a separate rental ranging from $25 to $30 a

613 Booklet titled "Racial Problems in Housing," Bulletin No. 2 published by the Urban League (Fall 1944, second printing). Division of Review and Analysis: Office Files of Consultant Wilfred C. Leland, Jr., 1943-1945, Box 383, folder titled “Housing.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
Thus three things were achieved: a high profit return, the creation of congested and blight conditions associated with Negro tenants, and the intensification of anti-Negro prejudice.\textsuperscript{614}

The war illustrated the pitiful state of urban housing in general and minority housing in particular. As the war came to a close, many cities looked to the postwar era with an eye to redevelopment and city planning. Housing was a key component of any redevelopment plan, but those wielding control over the redevelopment process would dictate what gains, if any, minority families would see. A process where the government obtained land through purchase or eminent domain and then sold it to a private corporation for development, would not guarantee equality in any housing constructed, as black New Yorkers could attest with the Stuyvesant Town project. Private ownership and development of housing also meant the specter of racially restrictive covenants, when in contrast, the government was prohibited from enacting those on housing it built and controlled. The process of urban redevelopment also meant the relocation of urban populations, as slum areas – most often occupied by minorities – were the first areas slated for redevelopment. One report on racial issues in postwar housing pointed out that those forced out by urban redevelopment were not guaranteed a place in the newly-redeveloped area, and instead the usual result of redevelopment was the transfer of populations from one slum to another and the worsening of conditions.\textsuperscript{615} Harlem had certainly seen that effect after the 1935 riot, when hundreds of old tenements were

\textsuperscript{614} Booklet titled “Racial Problems in Housing,” Bulletin No. 2 published by the Urban League (Fall 1944, second printing). Division of Review and Analysis: Office Files of Consultant Wilfred C. Leland, Jr., 1943-1945, Box 383, folder titled “Housing.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD

\textsuperscript{615} 1944 Annual Conference of FPHA Racial Relations Advisers, Group I: Urban Redevelopment and Post-War Planning (National Housing Agency, Federal Public Housing Authority). Division of Review and Analysis: Office Files of Consultant Wilfred C. Leland, Jr., 1943-1945, Box 383, folder titled “Housing.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
knocked down, and when construction of new housing proved slow and caused a worsening of the rental market and housing conditions. There was also no guarantee that minority-occupied property bought or seized for urban redevelopment would be used for the construction of housing, as many minority urban neighborhoods were torn down in the 1950s and 1960s to make way for the interstate highway systems’ urban routes.

Since city planning and urban redevelopment in the postwar period looked dubious as a means to improve minority housing, many advocated ending racially restrictive covenants as a way to gain better housing through improved residential mobility. Such covenants forced a codified residential segregation where previously an informal segregation had existed, and had come into practice nationwide after World War I. Organizations like the National Urban League and the NAACP had been agitating for an end to these covenants for decades and had been working through the legal system to try finally to strike them down. The covenants “hemmed in” minorities to small sections of the city, and the perils of such segregation could be seen in dismal housing conditions and overcrowding in areas like Detroit’s Paradise Valley. Organizations like the American Council on Race Relations argued that until racially restrictive covenants could be eradicated, a better solution would be earmarked construction of low-income housing with occupancy standards in areas not traditionally home to minorities, to prevent complaints about the negative impact minorities would have on property values by ensuring building quality and lower population density.616 Until racially restrictive

616 Pamphlet titled “Hemmed In: ABC’s of Race Restrictive Housing Covenants” by Robert C. Weaver. Published by the American Council on Race Relations, 1945. Division of Review and Analysis: Reference File, 1941-1946, Box 419, untitled folder. Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
covenants were overturned by legal challenge or legislation, little could be done to compel neighborhoods to do so voluntarily.

As the war was coming to a close, government and industry began to focus on the process of demobilization and reconversion to peacetime industry and braced for the worst. There were valid reasons for trepidation. The only prior experience the United States had had with demobilization of a total war economy was World War I. Many feared a repeat of the bloody riots of 1919, and those fears were only bolstered by statistics. The 1943 riots remained in the public consciousness and illustrated that a further deterioration of racial conditions could realistically result in race riots. The mass migration spurred by the war had resulted in significant increases in black population in thirty cities, and officials feared that the accompanying increase in racial friction during the war would be worsened by a postwar economic dive and a subsequent rise in unemployment brought on by reconversion. The FEPC identified sixteen cities, including Detroit, that had a history of wartime racial tension and were projected to have high unemployment in peacetime.617

Serious concerns were raised about the seniority of women and minority workers. These workers were afraid of losing all the gains they had made in winning better jobs and better terms of employment at the end of the war because, based on the traditional system of seniority supported by the unions, their wartime employment was often shorter than the tenure of returning troops who had been workers before the war. Also, there was great public pressure to make the transition into civilian life as smooth as possible for

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617 Committee on Fair Employment Practice, “Impact of Reconversion on Minority Workers.” Division of Review and Analysis: Reference File, 1941-1946, Box 426, folder titled “Impact of Reconversion on Minority Workers.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
these soldiers and sailors by offering them their jobs back, even if they had only had minimal experience before the war. A full fifty-two percent of white Americans in a poll conducted about job opportunities for blacks argued that whites should have the first chance for jobs. This poll illustrated a rapid shift back to pre-war attitudes on minority employment. The war made the threat of black economic competition even more concrete than it had previously been, due to increased black participation in the industrial workforce during the war and in skilled positions that had formerly been the preserve of white workers. Inevitably, the reconversion of industry to peacetime production also meant the downsizing of the workforce, and the odds were not in minority workers’ favor in an environment where the majority of Americans were pessimistic about the availability of jobs in the postwar period. White workers appealed to industries to hire based on racial solidarity and not, as they feared, on the companies’ bottom lines, since many businesses had previously used minority workers as a source of cheaper labor to weaken white unions. Union support of anti-discrimination policies during the war resulted in an increasing minority membership, meaning the only advantages that white workers had were seniority and a society that continued to privilege them.

The hiring preference for (white) soldiers and the downsizing of reconversion were the twin specters haunting minority workers. These workers were far likelier to be clustered in the wartime boom industries that would face the greatest shrinkage during

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618 National Opinion Research Center, “Job Opportunities for Negroes (Survey of Opinion Among White Americans),” *PM*, 23 October 1944. Division of Review and Analysis: Office Files of Consultant Wilfred C. Leland, Jr., 1943-1945, Box 376, folder titled “Attitude Studies.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD

reconversion to peacetime industry. By 1944, blacks made up 7.5 percent of war industry
employees nationwide, more than double their percentage of the workforce in 1942.620
The numbers of minority workers in industry increased rapidly during the duration of the
war and grew most exponentially after the strengthening of FEPC enforcement in 1943,
meaning that the majority of minority workers had less than two years’ work experience
by the war’s end. Worse, the three industries projected by the Department of Labor to
have the greatest job losses during peacetime reconversion – machinery, aircraft, and
shipbuilding – tended to have the highest concentration of minority workers.621 The job
outlook for minorities after the war was tenuous, as illustrated in concerns over the long-
term employment prospects of Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles and blacks
nationwide.

The director of FEPC region that included Los Angeles testified before Congress
in 1945 in support of permanent FEPC legislation because he feared that in peacetime
Mexican-Americans would not be able to get new jobs that fully utilized the industrial
skills they learned in war plants.622 He was right to worry about the impact reconversion
would have on minority workers in Los Angeles, as they were disproportionately

620 Macolm Ross (Chairman, Fair Employment Practice Committee), “Fifth Conference on Science,
Philosophy, Religion, Racial Tensions in Industry.” Records of the Division of Review and Analysis,
Office Files of Cornelius Golightly, Compliance Analyst, Box 398, folder titled “Tension.” Records of the
Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College
Park, College Park, MD.
report dated June 1944. Division of Review and Analysis: Office Files of Consultant Wilfred C. Leland,
Jr., 1943-1945, Box 386, Folder titled “Mobile.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice,
1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
622 “Statement of Carlos E. Castaneda, Specialist on Latin-American Problems and Regional Director,
FEPC, Region X and XI, before the Senate Committee on Labor and Education in the Hearings held March
13, 1945, on Bills S 101 and S 459, to Prohibit Discrimination because of Race, Creed, Color, National
Origin or Ancestry.” Records of the Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Cornelius Golightly,
Compliance Analyst Box 397, folder titled “Mexican-Americans.” Records of the Committee on Fair
Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
represented in war work, making up eighteen percent of the war industry workforce when they represented less than five percent of the total population in Los Angeles County.623 By 1945, Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles had made the most employment gains in the aircraft and shipbuilding industry, including in semi-skilled and skilled positions previously closed to them; blacks in Los Angeles had made similar gains in shipbuilding and munitions, occupying almost ten percent of the shipbuilding workforce.624

The outlook for black workers was similarly grim. An August 1945 report by the FEPC warned that the historic trend of black employment had shown an increase in employment discrimination, with fewer black workers employed in industry in 1940 than in 1910. Reversion to prewar hiring patterns would be disastrous for the black community. Since eighty percent of the cases handled by the FEPC during the war involved racial discrimination, the prospect of an industrial world without an FEPC meant a return to traditional patterns of discrimination.625

Research both by the FEPC and civil rights organizations supported the notion that reconversion would lead to reversion to prewar hiring patterns. The National Negro

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623 War Manpower Commission, “Non-White Employment – Southern California,” report dated 20 April 1945. Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of John A. Davis, Director, Box 365, folder titled “Utilization of Minority Group Workers Conferences...WMC (So. California).” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

624 “Wartime Employment of Mexican-Americans.” Records of the Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of Cornelius Golightly, Compliance Analyst, Box 397, folder titled “Mexican-Americans.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

“Cutbacks as Related to Communities.” Division of Review and Analysis, Office Files of John A. Davis, Director, Box 363, folder titled “Postwar Minority Employment.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

625 Division of Review and Analysis, Committee on Fair Employment Practice, “Problems of Economic Discrimination Facing Minority Group Workers in the Immediate Postwar Period,” report dated 22 August 1945. Division of Review and Analysis: Reference File, 1941-1946, Box 426, Folder titled “Problems of Economic Discrimination Facing Minority Group Workers in the Immediate Postwar Period.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
Congress conducted a survey of various plants about what would happen to the number of black workers given the seniority rule and a potential fifty percent layoff rate of all company workers. At one plant of the Sperry Gyroscope Company in Brooklyn, which had only hired blacks after FEPC involvement, the three departments which employed the most black workers during the war would experience a sharp drop, with two of the three departments having one or no black workers remaining after a potential fifty percent layoff with the existing seniority system in place.\textsuperscript{626} An FEPC report on reconversion drafted for President Truman in late 1945 warned that minority workers were in “grave danger” of losing gains made in wartime industry, in which they had managed an impressive jump from two percent of the war production workforce in 1942 to 8.39 percent by 1944, with the number of blacks in skilled jobs doubling during that time period. It projected that by the end of 1945, eighty-eight percent of black workers in aircraft industry, sixty-six percent in shipbuilding, and ninety-four percent in munitions would be laid off from their jobs – and the report actually called those numbers “too optimistic” because the numbers assumed that black workers would be laid off at the same projected rate as all workers. In the month following the surrender of Japan alone, industry shrank 4.5 percent overall, but minority jobs shrank at a rate nearly twice that rate.\textsuperscript{627}

Without government support in the form of the FEPC, minority workers hoped that unions would be able to fill the void and represent their best interests, but the unions’

\textsuperscript{626} National Negro Congress, “Negro Workers After the War,” pamphlet published April 1945. Division of Review and Analysis: Reference File, 1941-1946, Box 419, untitled folder. Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD

\textsuperscript{627} Committee on Fair Employment Practice, “Impact of Reconversion on Minority Workers.” Division of Review and Analysis: Reference File, 1941-1946, Box 426, folder titled “Impact of Reconversion on Minority Workers.” Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD
traditional policy of seniority did not favor them. The system of seniority that had been in place since the founding of unions mandated that workers who were “the first to be hired” were “the last to be fired” or laid off. The system was designed to reward longtime workers with a measure of job security in times of fluctuating market conditions, and to combat the high turnover rate that plagued industry. During the war, the FEPC changed hiring and promotion practices and enabled minority workers to take advantage of expanded employment opportunities. With the economy in full swing due to the war effort, low standing in the seniority system was not a problem for most newcomers.

As the end of the war loomed, however, it became evident that the current seniority system would not work to the advantage of minority workers. Reconversion meant both a short-term reduction in industry jobs and the return of large numbers of veterans, some of whom were former industrial workers who had more seniority than the recently hired minority workers. With the future of the FEPC legislation unclear after Roosevelt’s death, employment was likely to revert to prewar hiring patterns – that is, to an all-white workforce in the highly skilled positions. Despite the large numbers of minority workers who had acquired the training for these jobs during the war, when it came down to hiring, most company managers still preferred a largely white workforce, due either to their own racial views or to the desire to avoid white worker discontent of the kind that prompted hate strikes during the war.

To prevent this backslide into prewar hiring and retention practices, civil rights activists suggested a modified system of seniority, dubbed “proportional seniority.” Under this proposed system, the racial balance of the workforce during the war would be
maintained in peacetime by favoring black workers over white workers with more seniority because more black workers needed to be retained to keep wartime ratios. These white workers would essentially be denied the job security they were promised in the name of equal employment. Unions like the UAW did not support this system because it violated the basic principles of the UAW’s seniority policy, and instead preferred to continue lobbying for FEPC legislation as a better method to fix the skewed racial representation in industry.\(^{628}\)

As it became clear that the seniority system was not going to alter and that minority workers were going to wind up demoted or jobless, the National Urban League studied the impact of reconversion on minority workers throughout the nation. In the study presented to President Truman on 27 August 1945, the league highlighted the universality of some problems and the unique dilemmas facing major industrial centers like Detroit. Overcrowded black housing was a shared concern among northern cities, but the league noted that Detroit’s strict residential segregation policies made the housing problem especially severe. Dismal reemployment prospects haunted these same communities, but again Detroit seemed to be the most severe case because of the concentration of black skilled workers in plants built specifically for the war. The Urban League study expressed optimism over the inclusive policies of the CIO and other unions, but did not expect these unions to change their seniority policies and backed the union line of supporting FEPC legislation. The league urged action by the government to prevent postwar conditions that would lead to conflict and race riots like those that followed World War I. It ended the study with a list of recommendations to improve the

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\(^{628}\) R.J. Thomas, “Negroes and the Seniority Question,” pamphlet prepared by the UAW-CIO Education Department. UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 2, Folder 48, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
reconversion process for minorities. It was an ambitious wish list, but in the end many of these suggestions were ignored.\footnote{National Urban League, “Racial Aspects of Reconversion: A Memorandum Prepared for the President of the United States.” August 27, 1945. UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 2, Folder 32, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.}

As soon as the war ended, industry started the process of reconversion, laying off workers in high numbers. The largest union in Detroit, the UAW, was unwavering in support of the traditional seniority system but was still concerned about the plight of the city’s minority workers. The union kept close tabs on the numbers and types of workers being released from employment. In one study conducted by the UAW’s Research Department in August 1945, the total number of workers laid off since the surrender of Japan – a period of only eleven days – was carefully calculated with special attention to the numbers of blacks and women laid off. The study concluded that forty-four percent of workers at the plants surveyed had been laid off, and blacks represented twenty percent of that total (women represented forty-two percent). However, those numbers may be deceptively low, since the study failed to note how many blacks worked at the plants before the layoffs. Also, the plants that laid off the most blacks also had the most uncertain reemployment prospects – a chief example was the Chrysler Bomber plant, built specifically for the war and slated for total closure. It had the second highest black layoffs in the study.\footnote{“Layoffs in Representative UAW-CIO Plants-Detroit Area Since the Surrender of Japan.” UAW-CIO Research Department, 24 August 1945. UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 2, Folder 51, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.} Just as minority workers feared, they were victims of the rigid seniority system and were among the first cut.

While displaced workers were left to find other jobs or wait on the chance that they would be rehired to their old jobs, those still employed felt it was time to address
wartime grievances and reassert the power of their unions. The ending of hostilities with Germany began a yearlong wave of strikes across the nation as workers struggled to maintain their wartime gains and status during reconversion. After victory over Japan in August 1945, strikes escalated; between August 1945 and January 1946, twenty-eight million man-days of labor were lost, double the number of man-days lost in all of 1943.\(^{631}\) Workers struck primarily for wage increases and the preservation of union power as the reconversion process continued to layoff workers in large numbers. The Detroit area alone saw the layoff of more than 300,000 workers in the weeks after the Japanese defeat.\(^{632}\)

The larger process of reconversion meant a drastic reduction in the industrial labor force, and union membership plummeted to less than half the wartime number. The government’s role in peacetime labor relations was uncertain, and unions like the UAW wanted to capitalize on this uncertainty by asserting the union’s dominance. The wildcat strike at Kelsey-Hayes Wheel Company in Detroit from August to October 1945, which incapacitated production at the plants citywide that it supplied, exposed problems within the union, including the tensions between local and national leadership and their at times differing goals. UAW leaders like Walter Reuther knew that the union needed an opportunity to take a strong stand and demonstrate that it could remain powerful and relevant in the postwar era. With this in mind, Reuther decided to target one of the major auto companies, General Motors (GM), to test the union’s power and position.

The General Motors strike was one of the largest and longest postwar strikes. Stretching over several months, from November 1945 to March 1946, the GM strike was


born out of workers’ job concerns and the union’s desire to maintain wartime gains. To counteract the impending inflation when wartime price controls were lifted, the UAW requested that GM negotiate a new contract in which workers received a thirty percent salary increase with no increase in product price, to preserve their buying power. A key element in winning such a concession was to prove that GM had the funds, so Walter Reuther requested that the company open its accounting records for inspection, a radical and inventive tactic. The company refused but offered a ten percent increase in wages. With the bulk of workers behind him, Reuther insisted on the full thirty percent raise and called a strike.633

The strike’s timing and tactics were political in nature. The GM strike gave workers a UAW-sanctioned outlet for their grievances that was more useful and less embarrassing to union leaders than wildcat strikes. This was a tactic to prove to workers that the union was still powerful and relevant. Labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein convincingly argues that the “opening the books” tactic was Reuther’s way of challenging the way the capitalist system distributed profits.634 Whatever Reuther’s reasoning, workers rallied behind the union leader and his demands. The strike was finally settled in March 1946 when the UAW and Reuther, nudged by the findings of President Truman’s fact-finding board, agreed upon an 18.5 cents per hour wage increase, a decent settlement.635

While the GM strike won workers an increase in wages, the more idealistic aim of the strike was short-lived. Reuther’s goal of sharing more of the profits with workers by

635 Zieger, 225.
obtaining wage increases without a rise in product prices seemed within reach initially, but as the reconversion period ended and the government lifted price controls, GM and other companies increased their product prices. The GM strike is important for being one of the first and longest of the immediate postwar strikes and for Reuther’s innovative tactics, but his struggle to challenge the capitalist system’s distribution of profits illustrated the limits of union power in the postwar period.636 The decreasing power of the unions, which had been among the strongest advocates for equality in employment during the war, and the lack of a national FEPC, left minority workers increasingly exposed to employment discrimination.

The legacies of the 1943 race riots were a greater awareness of racial problems, and a frank discussion about the causes of racial tension and the perpetually repressed socioeconomic status of urban minorities. But this introspection proved short-lived. The end of the war meant a social reconversion as well as an industrial one. Just as the initial groundswell of support for anti-lynching legislation after the 1919 riots faded away quickly as society returned to business as usual, the problems of American minorities receded to the background of public consciousness as soon as America no longer had a total war economy that demanded total unity. Businesses reverted to prewar hiring practices that favored whites and left minorities, despite increased experience in skilled jobs, at a distinct disadvantage. Public officials paid only lip service to minority concerns as the focus shifted to reestablishing normalcy on the home front and achieving American foreign policy goals in the face of the burgeoning cold war. Social boundaries between races in workplaces and public spaces that had become blurred during the war became

rigid once again as segregation was fiercely re-imposed on factory floors, transportation, and public accommodations.

Once the war was over, there was no longer an immediate urgency to address domestic race issues to retain nonwhite allies abroad. Instead, this discourse faded to a murmur, outside of activist circles, for the next decade. A confluence of factors helped to bring renewed focus to the impact of America’s race problem on foreign relations in the 1950s. The cold war between the two remaining superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, slowly escalated at the same time that the process of decolonization rapidly progressed. From the late-1940s to the mid-1960s, European colonial nations like Great Britain and France shed colonies in Asia and Africa, either granting independence peacefully or being overthrown violently by indigenous independence movements. Both the United States and the Soviet Union courted these newly independent countries as allies. For the United States, the wooing of African and Asian countries came at a time when the Jim Crow system was making international headlines thanks to the 1954 Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* and the increased civil rights protesting in the South under rising national civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. The existence of the Jim Crow system also caused headaches for African diplomats, as Washington, D.C., was located below the Mason-Dixon line and the diplomats had a difficult time securing lodging, services, and transportation, especially between the American capital and the United Nations headquarters in New York City. Cold war politics thus brought racial issues back to prominence in the national discourse, and prompted attempts to improve conditions for American minorities in order to attain crucial allies among the newly emerged nations in Africa and Asia.
While it took a decade after World War II before the topic of race in America was fully taken up in public discourse with the 1954 Supreme Court case of Brown v. Board of Education and the desire to win the support of newly decolonized nations in the cold war against the Soviet Union, it took another two decades after the war for the socioeconomic status of minorities to gain centrality in the discourse on race. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s focused on increased civil and legal rights for minorities, such as the ability to vote, equal access to education and public accommodations, and increased protections from hate crimes. By the mid-1960s, radical activists and more grassroots organizations began to focus on the horrid socioeconomic conditions faced by minorities, particularly in northern urban areas. This demonstrated a return to the focus of activists during the Great Depression in cities such as New York. Poor socioeconomic conditions caused by systemic racism were not as easily eradicated via legislative means; the result was a contentious discourse over the role of government in ameliorating conditions like poverty and substandard living conditions among urban minorities. This resulted in frustration among urban residents at the difficulties of their situation and the inability of both the government and society to exact quick and lasting changes to improve conditions for minorities. And much as the frustrations over deteriorating conditions had led to rioting in 1943 in Detroit and Harlem, during the 1960s inner cities across the country burned in the wake of more rioting. These riots throughout the 1960s proved that very few cities had learned from the 1943 riots; the warning signs for riots that had been identified not only in riot reports from 1943, but also in countless publications designed to prevent riots, had been forgotten. “Our
accumulated national poisons” had continued to fester until they resulted in a renewed wave of urban explosions.
In 1969, Sam Greenlee published the novel *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*; four years later, it was made into a film directed by black actor/director Ivan Dixon. In the story, a white senator, hungry for the black vote to support his reelection bid, urged the CIA to recruit their first-ever black field agent. The only successful candidate to make it through CIA training was the protagonist, Dan Freeman, who spent several years first as a “top secret reproduction section chief” (copy boy) and later as a general’s assistant. Freeman served as the agency’s token black member, designed to improve the public image of the CIA, and he played the part of a subservient “Uncle Tom.” When Freeman announced that he was leaving the CIA to go back to his hometown of Chicago and take a job as a social worker among Chicago’s youth gangs, his white superiors lauded him as a dedicated proponent of racial uplift.

But Freeman’s idea of “racial uplift” involved not education and conformity to white ideals, but revolution. Freeman utilized his CIA training in self-defense, weaponry, propaganda, revolutionary insurgencies, and urban guerrilla warfare to mold Chicago’s youth gangs into an underground insurgent group. Patterning his tactics after independence movements in Africa and Asia, Freeman created a sophisticated national

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network of well-trained revolutionaries. By the end of the story, a riot in Chicago, set off by the police shooting of a black teenager, provided Freeman with the opportunity to launch his overthrow of the white hegemonic power structure that had perpetually impoverished blacks. Freeman made it clear to his followers what the underlying motivation for their revolution was: “This is not about ‘hate white folks.’ It’s about loving freedom enough to die or kill for it if necessary.” At the end of the story, urban America was aflame with revolution as the ghetto revolted. “They turn[ed] the American dream into an American nightmare,” the film trailer intoned.

At the time Greenlee was writing *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, the idea of dismal race relations devolving into a full-blown “race war” where the ghetto exploded against white hegemony was not implausible. The 1960s marked a period of urban rioting unprecedented in scope and scale in American history. And unlike the 1943 riots, there were no more instances of whites rioting to police minority communities. Instead, urban blacks across the nation erupted in anger over social injustice and systemic racism that kept them perpetually downtrodden. The climate of the cold war, coupled with decolonization movements that peaked in the mid-1960s, meant an increased white paranoia over the threat of a full-scale racial revolution. Dan Freeman in *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* represented every white person’s worst fear: a black radical who identified with armed colonial independence movements, was educated in their tactics, and was unafraid to use violence to further his goals of black equality and empowerment. This stood in stark contrast to the more conservative parts of the civil rights movement that advocated integration and nonviolent protest to achieve that integration. And just as during World War II Americans feared that a “race war” might diminish their chances of
an Allied victory, American society feared that a “race war” during the 1960s might jeopardize its efforts in Vietnam and its policy of containment against the Soviet Union.

Urban minority communities were ripe for rioting during the 1960s in part because of the tremendous political and economic change in the twenty-year span between the 1940s and 1960s riots. The contours of the riots were dictated by the profound change in demographic and spatial geography in American cities in the postwar period. The riots were temporally spread across the 1960s, with the last major wave following the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The riots were also geographically spread, with major riots in Harlem, Watts, Detroit, and Washington, D.C., among other places. While the immediate impetus for most riots was highly localized, like the 1943 riots, the commonalities indicated a national problem that had its roots in the preceding decades.

The biggest transformation in the postwar United States that concerned urban minorities was in the industrial economy of American cities. After a temporary slump due to reconversion in 1945 and 1946, the American economy began to boom in the late 1940s. Auto manufacturers had capitalized on pent-up consumer demand and cranked out more vehicles than ever. War work had brought prosperity for many Americans after a long period of austerity during the depression, but wartime rationing and economic conversion to war production had prevented them from participating in the consumer economy. The savings from the war fueled a postwar buying boom of all kinds of consumer goods. Prospects for workers had rarely seemed better. But even though industries were humming, the strength of the industrial cities in the Northeast and
Midwest ebbed. By the late 1960s, these once-mighty industrial centers became the “Rust Belt” of declining production and decaying infrastructure.

The process of deindustrialization began in the 1950s with astonishing speed. The very same technological innovation that had made cities like Detroit a haven for workers in the early twentieth century now contributed to its undoing. Automation resulted in the reduction of jobs, the closure of outdated plants, and the end of smaller independent manufacturers like Packard and Studebaker. Many companies chose to build their new plants farther south, where the land and labor were cheaper. The exodus of major companies negatively affected the economic well being of smaller supply companies, resulting in a skyrocketing unemployment rate and a deepening depression in industrial cities. In addition to overall job losses due to automation and plant relocation, deindustrialization also resulted in fewer new entry-level jobs, which deprived young men and women of industrial work experience. This lack of job opportunities worsened conditions in inner cities and resulted in widespread poverty.639 In a little over a decade, even the mighty industrial city of Detroit, America’s “arsenal of democracy” during the war, had become a “ghost arsenal.”640

Deindustrialization was even more disastrous for black workers than for the general population. Blacks suffered losses in employment due to reconversion, but had gained experience in highly skilled positions during the war and theoretically had much better job prospects. Hiring policies remained too uneven, however, and with no federal antidiscrimination legislation employers were able to hire – or shut out – whomever they chose, unless they operated in one of the few states, like New York, that had passed

640 Sugrue, The Origins of the Urban Crisis, 125-152.
antidiscrimination legislation at the state level. Major companies still left hiring
decisions to individual plant managers, which resulted in widely varying policies even
within the same company. Plant employment offices were not required to follow the
union’s antidiscrimination policies, and regularly turned away black workers seeking
employment, claiming that there were no positions available. In his book on
deindustrialization in Detroit, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, historian Thomas Sugrue
relates the story of a typical black worker, Joseph Mays, who had extensive experience as
a welder thanks to defense work during the war. Laid off due to downsizing at Fruehauf
Trailer Company, Mays sought employment at the prosperous Dodge Main plant in 1948,
but was repeatedly turned away and told there were no openings; white workers in line
behind him were given applications and interviews for the supposedly “closed”
positions.641 Smaller industrial companies continued to use the reference system to hire
workers, which effectively shut out black workers due to the limited social contacts
between the white and black communities.

Along with deindustrialization, profound changes in spatial geography reshaped
the demographic and social landscape of urban areas. The automobile had already altered
Americans’ daily geographic range, and the construction of the interstate highway system
in the 1950s and 1960s, coupled with skyrocketing car ownership rates, greatly expanded
it. Americans no longer had to live within walking or public transit distance of their jobs
– if they had a car and the financial means, they could move farther away, to better
neighborhoods. This trend of upward social mobility and outward residential mobility
was endemic in New York before World War II. As discussed in Chapter 3, the exodus
of European immigrants to Queens and the Bronx made it possible for the establishment

of a black community in Harlem, which was itself an upwardly mobile exodus from lower Manhattan. The greater residential mobility in New York at a comparatively early time period was primarily made possible by the expansion of public transit and the lack of legal residential segregation. For cities without a comprehensive public transit infrastructure, greater car ownership and the increasing popularity in the postwar period of new suburbs such as Levittown meant that the population shifted out of an urban center to multiple suburbs on the urban periphery, greatly affecting population density.

The distribution of urban populations was also shaped by the 1948 Supreme Court case of *Shelley v. Kraemer*, which challenged the legality of racially restrictive housing covenants. While the *Shelley v. Kraemer* case originated in St. Louis, one of its supporting cases had its origins in Detroit. In May 1945, a Wayne County, Michigan, court heard *Sipes v. McGhee*. The suit was brought by members of the Northwest Civic Association, a homeowner’s association, against the McGhees, a black family that had moved to a white neighborhood. Despite rulings for the neighborhood association at the Wayne County and Michigan Supreme courts, the NAACP appealed the decision to the United States Supreme Court.642

*Sipes v. McGhee* and *Shelley v. Kraemer* were not the first cases to challenge racially restrictive housing covenants. According to legal scholar David Delaney, the first known case, *Gandolfo v. Hartman*, came out of California in 1892 and concerned covenants restricting occupation by “Chinamen.”643 While that case, as well as *Buchanan v. Warley* in 1917, found racially restrictive covenants against the Fourteenth

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Amendment, *Corrigan v. Buckley* in 1926 changed the court’s ruling on such matters.\textsuperscript{644} Stemming from a case in Washington, D.C., *Corrigan* was actually dismissed as being outside the Supreme Court’s jurisdiction. But the justices noted that the Constitutional amendments in question (Fifth, Thirteenth, and Fourteenth) applied to the actions of the government, not private individuals. By the court’s reasoning, defendants could only claim an “unconstitutional” argument if the government were the discriminatory power in the case; the actions of private individuals could not be so construed.\textsuperscript{645} The *Corrigan* decision became the de facto policy for the next twenty years for restrictive covenant cases.

In an attempt to challenge *Corrigan*, the NAACP and other civil rights organizations switched from labeling these covenants “unconstitutional” to arguing that changes in the neighborhoods in question proved the invalidity of restrictive covenants, also known as “changed conditions.” Under this argument, if a neighborhood’s racial composition had significantly changed since the covenants were first in place, then there would be possible grounds for overturning the restrictive covenants.\textsuperscript{646} This line of reasoning was tried in numerous cases, including *Clark v. Vaughn* (1930), *Grady v. Garland* (1937), *Hundley v. Gorewitz* (1942), *Fairchild v. Raines* (1944), and *Mays v. Burgess* (1945).\textsuperscript{647} The term “changed conditions” was problematically nebulous; there were no hard population percentages or other qualifiers empirically to identify a sufficient level of change. The *Hundley* case attempted to establish some guidelines for

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{644} Delaney, 150-151.
\textsuperscript{645} *Corrigan v. Buckley*, 271 U.S. 323 (1926).
\textsuperscript{646} Delaney, 155-157.
\textsuperscript{647} Delaney, 161-168.
\end{footnotesize}
“changed conditions,” called the “Hundley rule,” but it was open to wide interpretation.648

In 1948, the Supreme Court heard arguments for Shelley, along with Sipes v. McGhee and Hurd v. Hodge, a Washington, D.C. case. By this time, several factors combined to influence the court’s decision against racially restrictive covenants. Due to the wide geographic spread of the cases, the judges shifted from the purely regional focus of previous decisions to a broader, national focus. Also influential was the 1944 publication of Gunnar Myrdal’s An American Dilemma, which among other materials contained widely read statistics on black housing nationwide.649 The Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Frederick Vinson, contained liberally-inclined judges such as Frank Murphy, the very same judge who had presided over the Ossian Sweet case in Detroit two decades earlier. Leading the defense was the NAACP’s pre-eminent lawyer – and future Supreme Court justice – Thurgood Marshall.650

In the final opinion, written by Chief Justice Vinson, the court stated that “in granting judicial enforcement of the restrictive agreements in these cases, the States have denied petitioners the equal protection of the laws and that, therefore, the action of the state courts cannot stand.”651 The unanimous ruling thus found racially restrictive covenants unjust and unenforceable by the state.652 The Shelley v. Kraemer verdict smashed existing racial boundaries nationwide. The decision gave minority communities

648 Delaney, 167-68.
649 Delaney, 176.
mobility and much-needed access to better housing outside of traditional minority neighborhoods, many of which had become ghettos in the wake of economic recessions.

As minorities expanded into new urban neighborhoods, whites responded by packing up and moving to the new suburbs, encouraged by their own prejudices and the alarmist rhetoric of realtors, who capitalized on racial fears to turn tidy profits in the changing real estate market. So called “blockbusters” sold one house on a block to a minority family, then used their presence to get the white neighbors to sell for low prices. The realtors then charged other minority families top dollar for these homes. Blockbusting left both white homeowners and minority buyers at a disadvantage and drove home prices upward for minorities looking to live outside crowded minority neighborhoods. These homes were still less expensive than those in the suburbs, which remained out of financial reach for most minorities.

In addition to suburban housing being priced higher than urban housing, another major barrier to minorities pursuing the dream of home ownership was the practice of “redlining.” This practice came out of the policies of the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), a federal entity that determined a residential area’s “risk” and thus how much loan money applicants received. The four-tiered rating system gave preference to new construction and areas of homogenous, white populations. Older areas with a dense, lower-class or mixed racial population were given the lowest rating, known as Fourth Tier and color-coded red on maps. HOLC also considered home property values in their calculations, further enforcing the racial patterns of redlining since local real estate evaluators tended to undervalue properties occupied by minorities. Consumers in redlined areas received less loan money than those in better-rated neighborhoods.

653 Sugrue, The Origins of the Urban Crisis, 194-197.
Although federal measures like the G.I. Bill (1944) ostensibly provided loans to veterans of all colors, the HOLC continued to grant loans based on racially based “risk” areas, effectively canceling out the G.I. Bill’s potentially progressive nature.654

“White flight” and “redlining” resulted in a distinctive population shift in many cities. In Detroit, the 1960 census indicated that the numbers of both immigrant and native white populations had dropped significantly in the city since the previous census, with a twenty-seven percent decrease in immigrant population and a nearly twenty-three percent decrease in native white population, which dipped to pre-1930 levels. The city’s black population increased sixty percent in the same time period.655 By the 1960s, blacks inhabited the core of Detroit while whites occupied the outer suburbs, a pattern that largely still exists today. In New York, the postwar period brought decentralization of the city’s black population, as blacks moved to areas like the South Bronx and the Bedford area of Brooklyn in search of more space and cheaper rents than Harlem could offer.656 Harlem no longer served as the mecca for black migrants to the city; Harlem’s black population grew only fourteen percent during World War II, compared to its thirty-seven percent rate of growth during the Great Depression.657 At the same time, Puerto Rican immigrants flocked to the city in droves, often settling in the same areas as the existing black population.

While the urban North saw an increase in minority populations as the white population shifted to the suburbs and rural minorities and immigrants from other countries continued to move to the city center, the national focus on civil rights was

654 Jackson, 195-203.
655 Donald R. Deskins, Jr., Residential Mobility of Negroes in Detroit 1837-1965 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Department of Geography, 1972), 264.
656 Gross, 45.
657 Gross, 37.
shifting southward. The rise of nationally embraced leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., coupled with the medium of television, brought the civil rights movement to national prominence. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were based in the South and dedicated to the elimination of Jim Crow laws. Their nonviolent protests brought greater attention to the brutality of the southern Jim Crow compared to its less visible northern counterpart. Activists nationwide, from organizations like the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), came to the South to join in protest marches and “freedom rides.” The plight of blacks in the North was left to local grassroots activists as the center of national civil rights leadership shifted from New York City to Alabama. The white mainstream preferred to work with less-threatening movement leaders like King instead of more “radical” leaders like Malcolm X, ensuring that the press privileged coverage of civil rights in the South. The drive to end the southern Jim Crow system and ensure access to basic voting rights dominated the civil rights narrative into the mid-1960s.

The acceleration of the civil rights movement in the 1950s played a part in changing the attitudes and expectations of minority populations while at the same time exposing the limits of the movement. With 1948’s *Shelley v. Kraemer* and 1954’s *Brown v. Board of Education*, the legal challenge strategy put into motion by the NAACP in the 1920s began to achieve success, dismantling segregation in housing and schools. When civil rights legislation, including provisions protecting the black right and access to vote, passed Congress in 1964 and 1965, the narrowness of the focus on legal and political rights became more apparent. Socioeconomic inequality, including poverty, was much more pervasive and harder to remedy with simple legislation, as the problems were due to
wide reaching systemic racism. Differing opinions and strategies on how to grapple with socioeconomic issues fractured any unity that had existed in the civil rights movement, and the inability easily to change a socioeconomic system that stacked the odds against minorities angered those who resided at the very bottom of the system. Like Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s, urban blacks in the 1960s had seen how powerful group organization had been in bringing awareness to grievances and affecting change. When bereft of legal and peaceful channels to address their problems effectively, they sought any means necessary to bring attention to their plight and to try to force the system to change in their favor.

While the 1965 Watts riot in Los Angeles has generally been considered the beginning of the wave of urban riots in the 1960s that exploded in over one hundred American cities, the true harbinger was the 1964 Harlem/Bedford-Stuyvesant riots. These riots have received little scholarly treatment. Beyond an occasional journal article from the 1970s, the most complete accounting and analysis of the riot currently appears in Janet Abu-Lughod’s Race, Space, and Riots. The Harlem/Bedford-Stuyvesant riots shared key commonalities with later 1960s riots such as Watts and Detroit, including the role of police in instigating and prolonging the rioting, the absence of civil leadership, and the frustration of an urban population that felt increasingly constrained physically, socially, and economically.

The demographic change wrought by urban redevelopment and immigration in the postwar period helped to create new “pockets” of concentrated minority populations in New York City boroughs other than Manhattan. The city’s aggressive urban redevelopment program created over 100,000 individual units of public housing between
1940 and 1960. Minority populations were relocated due to slum clearance, which resulted in their concentration in other already-existing minority neighborhoods. At the same time, the location of new public housing projects in all of the city boroughs meant the creation of new areas of minority concentration in boroughs with an otherwise overwhelming white majority, as blacks and the newest minority group in New York, Puerto Ricans, occupied public housing in increasing numbers. Bedford-Stuyvesant was a key example of this redistribution of the minority population. The Bedford area of Brooklyn had been home to a small black population in the early twentieth century, but the economic collapse wrought by the depression allowed for the expansion of the black population into the neighboring Stuyvesant Heights area. Bedford-Stuyvesant deteriorated into slum conditions as its minority population climbed, from fifty percent of the population by 1950 to eighty-five percent of the population by 1960. The concentration of a minority population in the area prompted the city to locate new housing projects there, which drew more minority settlement into the area and cemented its status as a ghetto.

The influx of Puerto Ricans in the 1940s and 1950s created a large new Hispanic subclass in the city. The impact Puerto Ricans had on the racial makeup of the city has been largely perceived as ambiguous due to the differing definition of racial identifications among Puerto Ricans – many of them identified as Hispanic rather than black or mixed race in official records, or “passed” as white to gain better job opportunities. They remained a distinctly separate group from blacks, though they were often discussed together due to their shared socioeconomic status. The newly arrived

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658 Abu-Lughod, 168.
659 Abu-Lughod, 161.
Puerto Ricans tended to occupy an even lower rung on the socioeconomic ladder than New York’s blacks, and they tended to be the most affected by slum clearance and forced moves to other areas. Puerto Ricans faced the same kind of discrimination in employment as blacks did, and occupied public housing at much the same rate. Though they considered themselves distinct from the black community, Puerto Ricans were sympathetic to blacks and often joined with them in protests.

The Harlem/Bedford-Stuyvesant riots were instigated by the shooting of a black youth named James Powell by an off-duty police officer on 16 July 1964. Powell, from a housing project in the Bronx, had been attending a remedial reading program on Manhattan’s Upper East Side when a scuffle broke out between the superintendent of a nearby apartment building and some students. Powell was shot when the responding off-duty officer thought he was brandishing a knife, a notion hotly disputed by eyewitnesses. The black community was outraged at the killing of an unarmed teenager and the subsequent lack of punishment of the officer for using unnecessary force. The death of Powell was the latest in a long string of instances of police brutality against the black community. Peaceful protests over the chronic mistreatment of the black community by the police followed Powell’s death and funeral. Police officers often used excessive force, including beating blacks while in custody, largely ignored black-on-black crime, and continued to grant preferential treatment to white citizens.

When the protests moved to the nearby police precinct after Powell’s funeral on 18 July – the Harlem community feared, correctly, that the officer who shot Powell would escape without any formal censure – the police mishandling of the growing crowd resulted in the scene devolving into rioting. Bottles and other projectiles rained down on
police from the rooftops, a Molotov cocktail set a police car on fire, and looting began as police officers tried to seal off Harlem to contain the rioting. The police resorted to using guns to try to maintain law and order. The police commissioner attempted to appeal to the Harlem residents to cease rioting, but his message reeked of condemnation instead of conciliation and only fueled further rioting that lasted nearly a week. The rioting was also prolonged by the absence of civil authority, as both the mayor and governor were traveling and not immediately available to address the crisis. By 20 July, the rioting had spread to Bedford-Stuyvesant and continued there until 23 July. Nearly five hundred people were arrested, one man died, and the riots caused the city millions in civil damage suits and payment for extra police coverage.  

Perhaps the most infamous of the 1960s riots took place in the Watts area of Los Angeles in 1965. While the Watts riot shares much in common with the Harlem/Bedford-Stuyvesant riot from the previous year, its stark contrast to the previous Los Angeles riot, the 1943 zoot suit riot, illustrated the vast changes that had taken place in the city since World War II. Mexican-Americans had occupied Watts and the neighboring South Central area, and blacks who migrated to Los Angeles during the war were drawn to those areas because of their central location to nearby industrial districts and easy mass transit access into downtown Los Angeles. Given the explosive growth of the black community and both formal and informal forms of residential segregation, both Watts and South Central became increasingly black after World War II as they were the only areas open to black migrants. Mexican-Americans gradually relocated to East Los Angeles as the black community grew, resulting in a shift from an equal distribution of Mexican-Americans and blacks in Watts and South Central on the eve of World War II to

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660 Abu-Lughod 175, 178.
eighty-seven percent of Watts residents classified as black in 1965. During that same time period, the black population in Los Angeles County increased by 766 percent.\textsuperscript{661} Watts and South Central degenerated into ghettos in the postwar period when the nearby factories relocated and the mass transit system collapsed, replaced by freeways that cut the population of those neighborhoods off from the rest of Los Angeles and the industrial jobs on which they depended.

As socioeconomic conditions in Watts and South Central deteriorated, resentment grew. The city actively bypassed the areas for planned developments, such as freeways, and did not offer the same level of city services available in other areas. And, unlike New York, which aggressively built housing projects in an attempt to alleviate slum conditions, the city of Los Angeles actively rejected federal offers of assistance to build housing projects, arguing that the city did not have slums in the traditional sense and that such projects were not necessary. Poverty and unemployment rates in Watts and South Central rose over time. Many of the merchants in Watts and South Central were white and Jewish, and maintained their businesses but went home to other areas of the city every night. The low rate of employment for black workers in these businesses rankled the community. The relationship between the black community and the police was also fraught.

The Watts riot began with a routine traffic stop on 11 August 1965, and quickly spiraled out of hand due to police mishandling. Marquette Frye was pulled over on suspicion of driving under the influence, and when the police officer refused to let Frye’s passenger, his stepbrother Ronald Frye, drive the car the two blocks to their mother’s home instead of having it towed, a crowd began to form. When Rena Frye, their mother,\textsuperscript{661} Abu-Lughod, 200.
arrived on the scene, Marquette Frye grew resistant and struggled with officers, and his mother came to his defense. By this time more police and highway patrol officers had arrived, and they arrested all three Fryes while the crowd continued to swell to hundreds of people. Someone in the crowd spat on a police officer as law enforcement began to leave, and officers pulled a woman suspect out of the crowd and arrested her on the spot. The police left, but the angry crowd began stoning passing cars, beating white motorists, and menacing police who ventured into the area. Sporadic looting and vandalism began.

The situation exploded into a full-blown riot the following day. A community meeting at Athens Park, held by leaders of the black community, failed to “cool off” the angry community; airing black grievances further riled the community. Late in the day of 12 August, an estimated eight thousand rioters were in the streets. As with the Harlem/Bedford-Stuyvesant riots, no key civic authorities stepped forward, and confusion reigned over who had the authority to call up reinforcements to quell the rioting. The police chief was not available until after the failed Allen Park meeting, and both the governor and the lieutenant governor were traveling and not immediately available to give an official order to call in the California National Guard – in fact, the governor could not legally give the order unless he was in California, and he was on a visit to Greece. The troops were finally deployed late on 13 August, but by then the riot had spread out of Watts to Southeast Los Angeles and covered an area of over forty-six square miles. The number of rioters looting and setting fire to property had skyrocketed. By the end of the day on 14 August, nearly fourteen thousand national guardsmen policed a “curfew zone” and arrested any person on the street past 8:00 p.m., bringing the riot to a

halt.\textsuperscript{663} By the time the curfew was lifted on 17 August, thirty-four people were dead, four thousand people had been arrested, and over a third of the six hundred buildings damaged in the rioting were completely destroyed, with property damage estimated at $40 million.\textsuperscript{664}

While the Watts riot focused attention on Los Angeles’ black community, the Mexican-American community harbored many of the same grievances that underlay the 1965 riot. The postwar period saw another shift in Los Angeles’ racial hierarchy, with Asians catapulted to the top of the nonwhite social ladder as they came to be seen as the “model minority.” Mexican-Americans and blacks remained on the bottom of the social structure and the economic system. Segregated into impoverished neighborhoods, denied equal access to quality education and better employment opportunities, and living with a chronic police brutality problem, Mexican-Americans experienced a fate strikingly similar to blacks, but the groups were often pitted against one another in the search for jobs and, as gangs became more powerful, for the control of territory. While the Chicano movement took many cues from the black civil rights movement in its push to improve the lives of Mexican-Americans, in the 1960s unity between the black and Chicano communities in Los Angeles failed to materialize in a way that would provide a powerful challenge to white hegemony.

For the Mexican-American community, the 1943 zoot suit riot proved a more important social and cultural touchstone than the 1965 Watts riot. In the postwar period, the \textit{pachuco} was rehabilitated from a delinquent cultural orphan to a proud symbol of Chicano identity and the arbiter of cool. The renewed interest in the 1960s and 1970s in

\textsuperscript{663} Abu-Lughod, 213.
\textsuperscript{664} Abu-Lughod, 213.
the pachuco resulted in the play *Zoot Suit* by Luis Valdez, which debuted on Broadway in 1979 and was turned into a film in 1981. Zoot Suit drew upon the World War II experiences of pachucos, including those involved in the Sleepy Lagoon case and the zoot suit riots, and depicted the false imprisonment of a pachuco for a crime he did not commit (similar to the Sleepy Lagoon case, which inspired Valdez). The pachuco appeared in other pop culture venues, particularly in underground comics created for the Chicano community. While the pachuco was reclaimed as a symbol of Chicano pride, no such redemption was given to the pachuca. She and her more modern counterpart, the *chola*, continued to be shunned for their sustained defiance of the patriarchal system and for their perceived transgression of gender norms, though the androgynous chola dressed farther from the female gender norm than did the skirted pachuca. Mexican-Americans glorified the generation that lived through the zoot suit riot, identifying them as crucial in forming a distinct community identity and drawing inspiration from their defiance and fortitude to agitate for more civil rights during the 1960s and 1970s.

While the Watts riot highlighted the deteriorating conditions for minorities in urban Los Angeles, the Detroit riot in 1967 was the most severe of the 1960s riots both in terms of loss of life and property damage, larger in scale than both the Watts riot in 1965, and the other major riot of 1967 in Newark. Detroit had undergone a period of great economic and demographic change between 1945 and 1967. Deindustrialization had shuttered many factories that were the lifeblood of the city’s working class, making it harder and harder for young people in the urban center to have any hope for gainful and stable employment. While Detroit’s black population increased, both numerically and proportionally due to white flight, the spatial distribution of the black population had

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changed. Adjacent neighborhoods of Paradise Valley and Black Bottom, the heart of black Detroit and until 1948 almost the only areas where blacks could live, were razed in the early 1960s in an urban redevelopment project that included Interstate 75 and Lafayette Park, a master-planned residential development. The demolition of these neighborhoods meant the transferal of the center of Detroit’s black community to the 12th Street neighborhood. The 12th Street area experienced a rapid racial transition, going from ninety-seven percent white in 1940, to sixty-three percent white in 1950, to less than four percent white by 1960. Overcrowding became a major problem, with a population density of 21,376 people per square mile by 1960, the highest of any city area.

In addition to overcrowding due to residential eviction from areas slated for urban renewal, the black community of Detroit experienced a chronically troubled relationship with the police department. Despite the escalating proportion of the city’s population that was black – by 1967, blacks constituted forty percent of the city’s total population – the police force remained overwhelmingly white. Only five percent of the police force was black, and most of the black officers did not hold a rank higher than patrolman. Discrimination and brutality were perpetual problems, prompting the head of the Detroit chapter of the NAACP to state in 1965, “the Negroes in Detroit feel they are part of an occupied country. The Negroes have no rights which the police have to respect.” On the sad frequency of injury and death suffered by blacks in police custody, the chapter president remarked that “every Negro arrested somehow fell down and suffered a cracked

666 Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 244.
668 Herman, 88, 79.
669 Herman, 79.
“skull,” a sarcastic reference when the police vehemently denied their culpability in such instances.\textsuperscript{670} In addition, corruption plagued the police force, with evidence of ties to organized crime and a purposeful collusion between the mob and police to profit from vice in Detroit’s black ghettos.

The Detroit riot began in the early hours of 23 July 1967, when police raided a “blind pig,” an after-hours drinking spot, at the intersection of 12\textsuperscript{th} Street and Clairmount. The clients of the blind pig were celebrating the return of two Vietnam veterans, and the police effort to arrest everyone present – upwards of eighty people – drew a crowd to the scene.\textsuperscript{671} Though later investigations officially cleared the officers involved, those in the crowd alleged that the police beat the prisoners with nightsticks and gun butts.\textsuperscript{672} Despite cries of “Let’s have a riot!” while the police were still present, the police withdrew with the arrested, and the angry crowd began to loot the surrounding area.\textsuperscript{673} Even with a growing number of rioters, the police only slowly responded, believing the 12\textsuperscript{th} Street rioting to be a diversion. When officers did arrive on the scene, they did little to stop the looting. Police inaction further emboldened the rioters; by noon, the crowd numbered nine thousand.\textsuperscript{674}

As in the Harlem/Bedford-Stuyvesant and Watts riots, the Detroit riot was prolonged by delayed action in bringing in reinforcements to end the rioting. But unlike the other two riots, the delay in the Detroit riot was due not to the invisibility of civic leaders but to a clash of personalities between Detroit’s mayor, Jerome Cavanagh, and the Michigan governor, George Romney. The deep distrust and antagonism between the

\textsuperscript{670} Herman, 79.  
\textsuperscript{671} Fine, 156.  
\textsuperscript{672} Fine, 160.  
\textsuperscript{673} Fine, 161.  
\textsuperscript{674} Fine, 166.
two leaders made Cavanagh reluctant to ask the state to mobilize the state police and the
Michigan National Guard, and it was not until late on 23 July that the troops were
deployed. Cavanagh and others in the city government expressed reluctance to call in the
National Guard in particular because they feared greater instances of brutality, and
because a policy of restraint in dealing with prior racial disturbances had proved
effective. President Lyndon B. Johnson called in federal troops by late on 24 July, with
instructions by President Johnson to deploy only if necessary and to exercise the utmost
restraint. Romney’s authorization of the use of lethal force, if necessary, by the state
police and National Guard resulted in an escalation of violence in the riot. At the end of
the first day of rioting, prior to the deployment of state troops, the death toll stood at four;
by the time most of the rioting had ended on 27 July, the death toll stood at forty-three.
With the high death toll, over one thousand injured, over seven thousand arrested, and an
estimated $40 to $45 million in estimated property damage, the Detroit riot was the worst
of the 1960s riots, and the deadliest riot in American history after the 1863 New York
City draft riots and the 1992 Los Angeles riots.\footnote{Rucker and Upton, 165-170. The death toll for the 1992 Los Angeles riot was 53. The exact death toll for the New York City draft riots is unknown, but Civil War scholar James McPherson estimates in his book \textit{Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction} that around 120 people were killed.}

The Detroit riot capped off four successive summers of urban riots in hundreds of
locations, and President Johnson established a National Advisory Commission to
investigate the cause of persistent urban unrest, chaired by Illinois Governor Otto Kerner.
The findings of the commission were published as the \textit{Kerner Commission Report} in
1968, a few weeks before renewed rioting in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s
assassination. Echoing both Tocqueville and Myrdal, the Kerner Commission Report
As in An American Dilemma, Kerner and the commission concluded that contemporary racial problems like the urban riots were rooted in white racism. The Kerner Commission Report concluded that the 1960s riots were not caused by black radicalism, as had been popularly believed by government officials from the president to the director of the FBI. The commission laid the blame for the riots on a systemic white prejudice that resulted in widespread discrimination against minorities in employment, housing, education, and other areas, and the report advocated greater involvement of civic authorities in ameliorating these conditions. In other words, the Kerner Commission Report bore a striking similarity to conclusions drawn by earlier riot commission reports from the 1930s and 1940s. And, as with the recommendations for avoiding future rioting put forth by those commissions, the Kerner Commission Report’s recommendations would be largely dismissed and ignored.

Even though the underlying causes of the riots remained the same between 1943 and the 1960s, the style of riot was now firmly changed to reflect the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943, with blacks rioting in urban centers and targeting white-owned property for destruction. None of the 1960s riots featured whites rioting against minorities. The old model of “race riots” – vigilante mob violence against minorities as a means to reinforce the white hegemonic power structure – disappeared after World War II. In part it was because social mores changed. Such blatant displays of racial violence by both police and private citizens in the form of rioting mobs fell out of favor when the violence was photographed and filmed, entering the American home in newspapers and on television sets, and forcing the American public to acknowledge that it had a racial

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676 Rucker and Upton, 331-333.
violence problem, and that it needed to be addressed. Blatant racism and outbursts of racial violence were swiftly condemned – at least in public. Public censure of such “private violence,” of the type noted by scholar Arthur Waskow in examining the riots of 1919 and discussed in the Prologue, became the norm as society became increasingly uncomfortable with the escalation of racial violence against entire minority communities. Instead, sanctioned “public violence,” administered by the state, came to increasingly be applied only to specific parts of the minority population; many scholars have argued that the modern American prison system currently serves that purpose by targeting minorities in higher proportions than whites for imprisonment and execution for criminal actions.

Another argument to explain the disappearance of older-style race riots is the one Janet Abu-Lughod champions in *Race, Space, and Riots*: that white mob violence became scarcer because the geographic proximity it required was no longer a reality in most urban spaces. Increasing residential segregation and increasing geographic distance between racial groups meant that it was logistically much more difficult, and dangerous, for mobs of white vigilantes to rampage in black residential areas. Traditional race riots only thrived in geographic spaces where different racial groups lived in close proximity with only a narrow “borderland” region separating them, making spontaneous acts of mob violence possible. With minorities increasingly concentrated in an urban core, and whites increasingly concentrated in the suburban periphery, the “borderland” was simply too geographically large to traverse. This large borderland also meant that there was much less chance for social interactions that might spawn clashes between whites and minorities.
At the same time that patterns of greater residential segregation caused older-style race riots to all but vanish, they ensured the survival of the “new definition” race riots. If greater residential segregation and larger borderland regions meant that white mobs were less likely to invade minority neighborhoods, it also meant that minorities were less likely to leave their own neighborhoods. White-owned properties served as proxies for the whites who were beyond their reach, as well as symbols of oppression in denied employment opportunities and predatory pricing. Riots on a scale that would attract media attention were the most immediately effective way to air grievances with the white system to a white audience that rarely personally encountered evidence of the system’s socioeconomic inequality for minorities.

Abu-Lughod’s use of spatial analysis of the transition between the types of race riots offers fruitful insights into the riots of the 1930s and 1940s. In New York, the last major traditional race riot occurred in the early 1900s, when blacks lived together with and in much closer proximity to whites in lower Manhattan. The intense growth of black Harlem and its subsequent housing of nearly all of Manhattan’s black population by the 1930s meant that the conditions for a newer, innovative race riot – greater residential segregation and bigger borderland regions between racial populations – already existed at that time. This explains why the 1935 and 1943 Harlem riots are considered the first examples of the “new-style” riots that became standard by the 1960s, when urban areas across the country developed similar patterns of wide-scale residential segregation. Conversely, the 1943 Los Angeles riot and half of the Detroit riot took place in borderland regions, where minority populations from nearby neighborhoods interacted
with whites. These borderland areas disappeared in Los Angeles and Detroit by the late 1950s, paving the way for the Watts riot in 1965 and Detroit riot in 1967.

The 1943 riots are important not only for their pivotal position in the history of racial violence in twentieth century America, but also as catalysts for the civil rights movement. In discussions of race riots in the twentieth century, the 1943 riots form a bridge between the “old” riots of 1919 and the “new” riots of the 1960s. Detroit and Harlem in 1943 in particular presaged conditions endemic in urban areas by the 1960s, namely a greater concentration and segregation of racial groups in cities, perpetual overcrowding and poverty, and social and economic isolation. These conditions ensured the disappearance of traditional race riots as the physical and social divide between minority groups and whites widened. Chronic poverty and the maintenance of white power, as evidenced by white politicians and a majority white police force, even in areas that became overwhelmingly populated by blacks and Hispanics, ensured lingering resentment that erupted in new-style race riots.

Discussion of the 1943 riots and their origins also provides a greater context to the 1960s riots and the trajectory of the civil rights movement in both the black and Hispanic communities. Black Power, grassroots organization, focus on socioeconomic issues like employment and housing, and the importance of radicalism in the 1960s can be seen as a rebirth of the movement’s goals and tactics in the 1930s and 1940s, before the specter of McCarthyism damaged a powerful coalition between conservatives and radicals and compelled the national black civil rights movement to focus on legal and political rights – since this approach was devoid of any implications of socialism or communism. That black activists in the 1960s fought similar battles as activists in the 1930s and 1940s was
emblematic of the longevity of structural racism. The riots and their aftermath also sparked an increasing interest in civil rights activism in the Mexican-American community. The Sleepy Lagoon case and the zoot suit riot helped to move the Mexican-American community away from a racial uplift ideology that mimicked white values and toward an idea of socioeconomic improvement that embraced their unique culture. Entities like the FEPC put Mexican-Americans and blacks into increasing dialogue with one another, and the adoption of tactics and goals similar to the black civil rights movement eventually blossomed into the Chicano political movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Activists in both the black and Hispanic communities today still struggle to ensure minority access to meaningful employment and quality housing, healthcare, and education.

The 1943 riots and the response to them arguably illustrated the last time that the nation had a serious, long-lasting discussion on racial equality in the nation as a whole. The threat of a “race war” on the home front forced the nation to evaluate how well it lived up to its national creed; internment of Japanese-Americans and the wave of race riots demonstrated that it had not. While democracy was being defended abroad, the period of introspection spawned by the riots violently illustrated that democracy was often denied to minorities at home. While the nation reached the same conclusions during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s, most of that discourse blamed a recalcitrant South that dragged the whole nation down in global esteem with its Jim Crow system and deadly, officially sanctioned violence. Similarly, the cause of the 1960s riots was popularly ascribed to black radicalism; while the Kerner Commission Report concluded otherwise, the findings of the report that black radicalism was not to
blame were widely debated. While some attempts were made in the wake of the 1943 riots to accuse the South or Southerners, or black radicals in the Harlem riot, most of the dialogue about the riots eventually concluded that the nation as a whole was to blame, not just the South or radical civil rights activists.

The introspection generated by the 1943 riots was short-lived, as was the introspection after the 1919 riots and the 1960s riots. The twentieth century illustrates a kind of chronic, willful amnesia on the part of the American public as to the source of racial problems, punctuated by brief periods of lucidity that were generated by riots that demanded reexamination of the issues plaguing urban minorities. That any evaluation of the status of inner city minorities today would mirror the *Kerner Commission Report* in 1968, which in turn recalled *An American Dilemma* in 1944 and *Democracy in America* in 1831, demonstrates the pervasiveness of structural racism. The unwillingness of Americans to act seriously on the recommendations of riot commission reports from 1919, 1943, 1968, or 1992, suggests the deep entrenchment of racial inequality in American society. Despite arguments to the contrary by politicians who feel that American society can do away with programs like affirmative action or portions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 because racism is no longer a problem, America has a long way to go before becoming a post-racial society.
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