

“The Right to Participate”

Date: September 27, 1940

Participant: Franklin D. Roosevelt Sr.

Participant: A. Philip Randolph

Participant: Robert P. Patterson Sr.

Participant: Unidentified Speaker

Start Time: 11:30

Place: Executive Offices of the White House

Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces emerged as a civil rights issue as the United States responded to the expanding wars in Europe and Asia. This conversation between President Roosevelt and civil rights leaders highlighted the challenge of ending discrimination in the U.S. military. Roosevelt preferred a measured approach to integrating the services—“a thing,” he said, “that we’ve got to work into.”

A. Philip Randolph: Mr. President, it would mean a great deal to the morale of the Negro people if you could make some announcement on the role the Negroes will play in the Armed Forces of the nation—

President Roosevelt: We did the other day.

Randolph: —in the whole national defense [*unclear*].

President Roosevelt: We did it the other day. That was when [*Randolph attempts to interject*] the chief of staff told me this thing.

Randolph: If you did it yourself . . .

President Roosevelt: Right. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Randolph: If you were to make such an announcement, it would have a tremendous—

President Roosevelt: I’m making a—

Randolph: —effect upon the morale—

President Roosevelt: I’m making a—

Randolph: —of the Negro people all over the country.

President Roosevelt: —national defense speech around the, I don’t know, [*unclear*] this month on what—about the draft as a whole, and the reserves, and so forth. I’ll bring that in. No trouble at all.

Randolph: It would have a tremendous effect, because, I might say, that the—it is the irritating spot among the Negro people. They feel that they—they’re not wanted in the various armed forces

of the country, and they feel they have earned the right to participate in every phase of the government by virtue of their record in past wars for the nation. And consequently, without regard to political complexion, without regard to any sort of ideal whatever, the Negroes were [unclear]. And they're feeling that they're being shunted aside, that they're being discriminated against, and that they're not wanted now. [*President Roosevelt acknowledges.*]

Unidentified Speaker: [Unclear], Mr. President, newspapers are saying the other day that other persons are trying to find a way to [unclear], say that the Negro's trying to get in the Army. [*An unidentified speaker acknowledges.*] He's trying to get in! He isn't trying to get out.

President Roosevelt: Of course, that was the main—the main point to get across is that, in building up this draft army, selective draft, that we are not, as we did before so much in the world war, confining the Negro into the noncombat services. We're putting them right in, proportionately, into the combat pool.

Randolph: Well, we feel that's sound. We—

President Roosevelt: Which is something. Yeah, I mean, it's apparently [unclear]—

Randolph: We feel that—

President Roosevelt: It's a step ahead.

End of excerpt 1.

President Roosevelt: Well, you see, Walter, my general thought on it is this: it's a thing that we've got to work into. Now, for instance, you picked the divisional organization. What are your new divisions? About 12,000 men.

Robert P. "Bob" Patterson Sr.: Fourteen, I think. They're [unclear]—

President Roosevelt: Yes, and 12[000], 14,000 men. Now, suppose in there that you have one . . . What do they call the gun units? Artillery?

Patterson: Battery?

President Roosevelt: What?

Patterson: Battery?

President Roosevelt: One battery. With Negro troops and officers in there in that battery. Like, for instance, New York. And another regiment or battalion, that's a half a regiment, are Negro troops. They go into a division, a whole division of 12,000. And you may have a Negro regiment—you would—here. And right over here on my right in line would be a White regiment, in the same division. [*The tape briefly loops back onto itself.*] Maintain the divisional organization. Now, what happens? After a while, in case of war, those people get shifted from one to the other. The thing we sort of back into, [*an unidentified speaker acknowledges*] to have one battery out of a regiment of artillery that would be a Negro battery, with the White battery here and another Negro battery, and gradually working in the field together. You may back into what you're talking about.

End of excerpt 2.

President Roosevelt: I think another thing—another thing, Frank, that I forgot to mention. I thought of it about, oh, a month ago, and that is this: we are training a certain number of musicians on board ship . . . the ship's band. Now, there's no reason why we shouldn't have [*someone in the room says "no"*] a colored band on some of these ships, because they're darn good at it. And that's something I wish you would look into. [*Someone attempts to interject.*] In other words, it'll increase the opportunity. That's what we're after.

End of excerpt 3.

Franklin D. Roosevelt Sr., T. Arnold Hill, William Franklin Knox, Robert P. Patterson Sr., A. Philip Randolph, and Walter F. White on 27 September 1940," Conversation with Franklin D. Roosevelt Sr. and Civil Rights Leaders, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition* [*The Presidential Recordings of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, ed. Kent B. Germany, Ken Hughes, Guian A. McKee, and Marc J. Selverstone] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–). URL: <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4022332>