

## RACE TENSION: SECOND PHASE

By Carey McWilliams

The development of race tension in the United States is now rapidly passing into a new and fairly distinct phase. Up to January 1, 1943, race friction had steadily increased; but since then friction has changed to tension, and tension, in turn, to aggressions of unmistakable seriousness upon colored groups in this country.

The verbal exhortations and makeshift expedients of the earlier, or friction, period, have not much applicability to the present emergency. For what makes the new phase particularly dangerous is that reaction is now consciously seeking to take the initiative from the democratic forces on this, as on most other, issues related to the war. "Reaction always crystallizes," as Clude Williams recently observed, "in direct proportion to the effectiveness of the challenge to the status quo by progressive forces." The Detroit, Beaumont, Los Angeles, and Harlem riots clearly indicate the existence, in each case, of an unmistakably reactionary pattern. Reaction is obviously determined to prevent further concessions to colored Americans, and also to exploit race tension for its own purposes.

The report of Judge William H. Hastie to the National Lawyers Guild serves to illustrate the drift of events. Judge Hastie points out that five Negro soldiers were killed or wounded during the first three months of this year through assaults upon them in civilian communities. The situation here presented is not friction incident to changing relationship, but of overt and serious assaults upon members of a colored group. The attacks themselves are a direct outgrowth of a series of more or less tentative assaults against Negro soldiers which took place during 1941 and 1942. The fact that swift official reprisals were not forthcoming at the time merely encouraged civilian ruffraff elements to make attacks of a more serious character. Judge Hastie correctly appraises the situation when he notes in the report that "both the seriousness of this form of lawlessness and the lack of any effective methods of control have become more important and increasingly grave in their implications."

The fight which Negroes have been making on the West Coast to outlaw Jim-Crow locals in the shipyards is still a further indication that the struggle for racial equality has entered a new phase. Negro shipyard workers are not merely "protesting" discrimination: they are in open rebellion against it. The



Principal union involved has been turning their names in to the management for non-payment of dues and, in accordance with existing contracts, has been demanding their discharge. But the Negroes will not continue to pay dues in the union as long as they are segregated in Jim-Crow locals. Here a clear-cut issue has been joined in such a manner that the federal government can scarcely avoid a direct decision of a most fundamental character. The case is of more than passing significance because of the determination which Negroes have shown. This determination is itself a sign of the times.

The way in which anti-Oriental prejudice is being artificially stimulated and carefully organized on the West Coast is another illustration of the same trend. Prior to January 11, 1943, there had been little recent artificial stimulation of this old issue. But since the first of the year, reactionary groups have been organizing a systematic assault upon Orientals on the Coast. Since virtually all those of Japanese descent have been removed from the area, this aggression has taken the form of what Max Lerner calls "psychic imperialism," but the significance of what is happening is not to be minimized because of this fact. For it is becoming apparent that anti-Oriental feeling is being deliberately organized for partisan political purposes.

In view of the key importance of California in the 1944 campaign, it is quite likely that the Republicans may nominate Governor Earl Warren for Vice-President. If Warren should be nominated, I predict he will attempt to swing California into the Republican column by making a direct issue of the "Japanese problem." There is also reason to believe that the Hearst press has been deliberately playing up existing race tension in the country to create division within the Democratic Party. Certainly there is no doubt that anti-Oriental feeling in California is being artificially cultivated for the purpose of directing public opinion--to the right. By and large, the anti-Oriental resolutions being adopted all over the state can be traced back to not more than four or five key organizations. It is significant that these resolutions are more or less identical in phrasing, and are always presented to organizations for concurrence rather than having arisen spontaneously within particular groups.

New racist pressure groups have recently been organized in the state, such as the Pacific Problems Study Group and the Home Front Commandos, Inc., of Sacramento (which last-named organization is flooding California with racist pamphlets and throwaways). The chief financial supporter of this curious organization is Mr. C. M. Goethe of Sacramento. Several times a millionaire, Mr. Goethe is the founder of the Eugenics Society of Northern California, formerly an active member of



the Sacramento Council of Churches, and currently the public relations director for the Northern California Council of Churches. In making remittances to the Home Front Commandos, Mr. Goethe is always careful to request that no use be made of his name. He is also one of the chief financial supporters of the California Joint Immigration Committee--the main source of anti-Oriental propaganda in California today.

Aided by these and other organizations, the Costello sub-committee of the Dies Committee has recently demonstrated how effectively popular hatred of Japanese can, by a kind of political ambivalence, be transferred to some 70,000 American citizens of Japanese ancestry. Since the appeal to hatred is made strictly in racist terms, the effect is to heighten race tension in general. It should also be noted that, in this movement, one can detect a self-conscious effort to make the anti-Oriental agitation a part of the war effort. That is, groups and individuals are repeatedly told that certain measures must be taken against the resident Japanese as a part of the war effort as a means of winning the war. This type of propaganda is spreading eastward, as evidenced by the following comment from an editorial in a recent issue of the Detroit News: "The more we are obliged to look into the nature of the Japanese as revealed in this war, the more we incline to wonder what is the highest common divisor of the races of mankind, to what degree we are really brothers under the skin."

It is interesting to compare the recent "hearings" of the Costello sub-committee (so-called in derogation of Mr. Dies because of the circumstance that Mr. Costello intends to be a candidate for United States Senator in 1944) with the first Congressional inquiry into the Oriental problem on the West Coast. At this initial inquiry in 1876, it was apparent from the testimony that most Californians were firmly convinced (a) that all Chinese were untrustworthy and (B) that no Chinese person was to be believed under oath. No one in California today--with the possible exception of former Attorney General U. S. Webb--will repeat these old calumnies against the Chinese; but there is general public acquiescence in the same charges when directed Japanese Americans. The exemption of the Chinese, however, is really more a matter of courtesy than of belief. A minor purpose of the current furor about the Japanese Americans, for instance, is to defeat the legislation now pending in Congress designed to relax the immigration laws on behalf of the Chinese. While local racist pressure groups do not, at the moment, dare inveigh in public against the Chinese, they can create such a general excitement over the Japanese that people will conclude, as they are concluding, that "now is no time to tamper with the immigration



laws." "White supremacy" may again become a major political war cry in California. It can be readily demonstrated in most cases that the pressure groups now operating are as violently opposed to Negroes and Chinese and Filipinos as they are to Japanese, and for the same reasons. Here again, the current anti-Oriental agitation involves, not an instance of race friction, but a calculated, well-financed, and skillfully directed campaign to arouse hatred of colored Americans and, by raising the race issue, swing public opinion to the right.

What the next phase in the development of race tension will be depends, of course, upon many variable and contingent factors. The developments since the first of the year indicate that the immediate prospect is for more trouble. It therefore becomes imperative to attack the entire problem in an organized systematic manner. Preliminary to such an effort, however, there should be thorough-going investigation of the riots which have occurred this year and of the pressure groups which are operating, so that the people can be made to realize there are groups in existence which seek to organize racial animosities and latent prejudices for selfish political or economic purposes. Once such a demonstration has been made, it should then be possible to point up a curative program.

For such a program, we must have, first of all, as John Collier and Saul K. Pasover say elsewhere in these pages, a policy." I pointed out in *Brothers Under the Skin* that our first assignment is "to establish the principle that, as a matter of national policy, there shall be no discrimination against individuals because of race, color, creed, or country of national origin. Such a statement seems innocuous; but it is the crux of the matter. For once such a national policy has been proclaimed (and we have already attempted to do so), then it can be implemented in a limitless variety of ways." Once we have such a policy clearly enunciated, we can forge ahead with the twin tools of the educational, advisory, and trouble-shooting Bureau of Ethnic Democracy proposed by Mr. Collier and Mr. Pasover, and of legislative enforcement of the Bill of Rights. We would have a base from which to operate in the passage of a Fair Racial Practice Act, with enforcement in the hands of an administrative agency; for wiping out restrictive covenants, for outlawing the poll tax in federal elections, for eliminating discrimination in industry and trade unions, for removing racism from our immigration policy, for pushing forward generally with the unfinished business of democracy.



In bringing about the formulation of such a policy and implementing such a program, much depends, in the immediate future, upon the extent to which the people themselves will become active and articulate, will counter the organized forces of ill will with organized goodwill. The fact that there will be a Presidential election in 1944 creates more than a suspicion that the Administration cannot be relied upon to take the initiative in launching a counteroffensive against the growth of race tension, or to assert the type of vigorous leadership needed. But the people do not need to wait for the Administration to act; nor are they doing so. Since the first of the year, there has been an enormous increase in the number of interracial committees, of anti-discrimination committee, of so-called "good conduct" committees. Their widespread geographical distribution indicates that the people at the base of American society are themselves beginning to be thoroughly aroused to the dangers inherent in racist propaganda. Extremely important occupational and functional groups have undertaken similar activities. The forthcoming Conference on American Racial and National Unity scheduled for September 11 and 12 in Chicago will probably result in the creation of a nation-wide committee that can co-ordinate the activities of local groups and begin to exert national pressure upon the Administration and Congress.

In this whole counteroffensive, the people are of vital importance. In view of the existence of so many potentially hopeful manifestations of intelligence and goodwill, it is important that the people be given a sense of confidence in their ability to achieve what they have undertaken, and a new perspective on the problems of race which will encourage them to redouble their present activities on the local and national level. In the past when Americans came at the problem, it was with a half-hearted, tentative, and dubious approach. The implication had always been that the attitudes involved could only be changed by a long-range educational process. Obviously a stronger dynamic must be supplied if people are really to meet the challenge implied in recent aggressions upon racial groups. New perspectives indicate that such a dynamic is already at work. If the immediate outlook is grave, it is largely because so much improvement has already taken place. It is important to recognize that one reason race tension is mounting today is precisely because racial groups have been making important advances toward equality of recent years. The nearer they achieve such equality, the more intense the opposition is likely to become.



What all America needs to know and understand is that our racial problem has never been static. Such profound changes have occurred in the relationships involved that, as a matter of fact, the dimensions of the problem have been basically reduced. The American Negro of fifty years ago or even of twenty-five years ago. So much is generally recognized. But what is not so generally recognized is that "we" too are changing and have changed; that our culture is itself under-going profound modifications. Societal pressures are at work in the world today, as Dr. Odum recently observed, which are making for an integration of all peoples in all areas into a common world culture. If these pressures are at work in the world, we can rest assured they are operative in the United States. We need an action program, therefore, geared to what is really a very dynamic situation. The "edging along" process certainly does not fit the present emergency.

If the so-called technique of cultural analysis be applied to the problem of race tension, some important further perspectives can be acquired. The underlying assumption of this technique, as Mr. Ernest S. Griffith has pointed out, is that there is always a basic tendency for all major elements in a culture to achieve a substantial harmony each with the other. A major change in any major cultural segment introduces an element of instability in the culture as a whole and sets in motion changes or adaptations in the other major segments. The major change in our culture is associated with the vast technological advancement of recent years, particularly in the economic field. "Changes and crises which occur on the economic level," to quote Dr. Robert E. Park, "where human relationships are relatively abstract and impersonal, must bring about repercussions on every other level....When changes on the economic level are more rapid than changes on the political and religious levels, the solidarity and efficiency of society on every other level are inevitably affected."

In general, this is what has been happening in American society. There has been a definite "cultural lag," in that social and political relationships have not changed as rapidly as the economic. The result is "crisis" and "tension." This is important for us to understand. It underlines our primary need for a set of mechanisms, at the local and the national level both, by which these requisite adjustments in social and political relationships can be made. In the long run they will be made. Actually they are already taking place in American society now. It is in part because they are taking place, and in larger part because they are about to take place, that oppositional forces have tended to crystallize. Resistance stiffens; counteroffensives are deliberately launched, as in Detroit, Beaumont, and Los Angeles. Ugly as this



reaction most certainly is, it should not of itself discourage the forces of goodwill and dishearten them for the job ahead. It is in a real sense a measure of the progress made by racial groups in recent years and particularly since the war, an indication of the extent of their challenge to the old status quo. It is a sign of the times. It is the place to go on from. We can move with the times and make the adjustments efficiently, sensibly, and quickly; or they can be brought about as a result of violence and protracted struggle that will only delay, not ultimately prevent, final achievement. There are evolutionary forces at work in our society stronger than the reactionary forces that would block them.

"It goes without saying," runs a recent editorial in the Michigan Chronicle, "that the democracy of which we dream can never be realized in this country until the gap between our peoples is bridged. The illusory concept of a black nation within our nation no longer blinds our group to the fact that a functioning democracy is predicated upon complete equality among all peoples, and that the narrow nationalism of any one group becomes an obstacle in the way of complete equality. The doctrine of white supremacy and the philosophy of Negro nationalism are twin evils which thwart national unity in peace and in war and play into the hands of fascist forces at home and abroad. The New Negro American has renounced this narrow nationalism, and the New White American has recognized the peril to world peace in the doctrine of white supremacy. These emerging groups in our society which have caught the profound overtones of this worldwide war for freedom must come together in a common fight for a new world order. This is the hope of no visionary, but rather the only recourse left to those among us who dare to believe in a new world of freedom and equality ... In some respects, the New Americans, black and white, are making progress even in this period which is fraught with racism and hate."

The very fact that this editorial speaks in terms of "emerging groups" and "New Americans, black and white" is a recognition of the all-important fact that our culture is changing, and more rapidly perhaps than we imagine. Alert to these factors of cultural change, we need to adopt programs based upon an understanding of what is actually happening in American life now—not upon the assumption of a social equilibrium that existed, say, in 1905. We need to talk—all of us—in terms of a New America, not in terms of temporizing with reaction, of appeasing race bigots, and of a gradualism utterly out of keeping with the forces of the times.

Carey McWilliams is a familiar contributor to these pages. His recent book, *Brothers Under the Skin* (Little, Brown. \$3) is an indispensable volume for everyone searching to understand and heal increasing race tensions in America. It should be on the shelves of every high school and public library in the country and in the hands of all CG readers. Examine closely the problems of "color" in America,



Mr. McWilliams discusses the Negro, the Chinese ,  
Japanese, Mexican, Filipino, and other Americans,  
correlates the problems involved, and charts a con-  
structive and workable method of pearsach to cor-  
recting them.