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## A Page from History

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# James Forrestal and racial integration

by Anton Chaitkin

The Schiller Institute's Martin Luther King Day march in Washington on Jan. 16 brought together civil rights activists, anti-Communist freedom fighters and farmers opposing the international grain cartel. To the Eastern Establishment, this growing freedom movement is "unfair" . . . "illogical" and . . . dangerous. It is dangerous to the false assumptions that were supposed to be fixed in the public mind, that those who oppose Russian imperialism are "racists," and those who want racial justice are "pro-communist."

But the American republican tradition, going back to the "conservative" Alexander Hamilton, who fought against slavery, cannot be understood within the cheap anti-human framework of Establishment logic.

We present here, as one example of this tradition, preliminary findings of a story still under investigation, that of U.S. Defense Secretary James V. Forrestal, the controversial anti-Communist who personally orchestrated the racial integration of the American armed forces in the 1940s. His aggressive leadership against prejudice and discrimination is unheralded 40 years after his death, perhaps because his life is embarrassing and inconvenient to the rigged game of Left versus Right.

Forrestal was born in 1892, the son of an Irish immigrant building contractor and postmaster of Matteawan, New York. He worked his way through Princeton University, then went to work as a bond salesman for what became Dillon, Read & Co. After a World War I stint in the Navy, Forrestal returned to Wall Street and drove himself up the Dillon, Read ladder, becoming president of the ultra-Establishment investment banking house by 1938.

Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Forrestal undersecretary of the Navy in August 1940. Centralizing procurement and construction authority, and putting all naval bureaus on a seven-day-a-week basis, Forrestal mobilized every possible element of American industry for the building of a new fleet. Navy Secretary Frank Knox died on April 28, 1944, and Forrestal took the job early in May, having already organized the vast armada which would support the invasion of Europe in June. During the final year of the war, he worked to

coordinate the Navy's deployments in the Pacific with Gen. Douglas MacArthur. As Navy Secretary he was with the task force during the American invasion of the Marshall Islands.

### Integrating the Navy

By late in the war, Black servicemen showed growing resentment against insulting segregation policies in the services, and Jim Crow policies blocking virtually all advancement for Blacks; anti-Negro rioting was breaking out in some naval units. Ten days after taking over the Navy, two weeks before D-Day, Secretary Forrestal sent a memo to President Roosevelt: "From a morale standpoint, the Negroes resent the fact that they are not assigned to general service billets at sea, and white personnel resent the fact that Negroes have been given less hazardous assignments." He proposed racial integration as the definitive answer to the problem. Forrestal immediately put through a plan for the racial integration of 25 auxiliary ships of the fleet.

On July 28, 1944, Forrestal recommended to President Roosevelt that Black women be trained in the WAVES organization on an integrated basis and assigned "wherever needed within the continental limits of the United States, preferably to stations where there are already Negro men." The recruitment of Blacks to the WAVES had hitherto been barred by Secretary Knox; FDR ordered the change. When Navy Capt. Mildred H. McAfee complained to Forrestal that separate Black companies were being maintained, he broke the stalling and integrated the WAVES.

Forrestal had to overcome time-encrusted politics. For example, Army brass blocked the publication of the Army's own poll: It showed that in some small units that had been integrated as an experiment, Whites had come to favor having Blacks in their companies. The Negro platoons were detached from these units at the war's end, and were disbanded or re-segregated.

James Forrestal named his friend Lester Granger, Executive Director of the National Urban League, as his special assistant on Black affairs. In this capacity during the last six months of the war, Granger traveled 50,000 miles and went to 67 naval bases around the world. With Granger's "authority," and with the unenthusiastic but loyal help of Adm. Ernest King, Forrestal pushed and propagandized against racial injustices within the Navy; this drive continued after the war.

Non-discriminatory assignments and training became Navy policy. Secretary Forrestal issued the following order to all Navy commands on Feb. 27, 1947: "Effective immediately, all restrictions governing the types of assignments for which Negro Naval personnel are eligible are hereby lifted. Henceforth, they shall be eligible for all types of assignments in all ratings in all activities and all ships of the Naval Service. . . . In the utilization of housing, messing, and other facilities, no special or unusual provisions will be made for the accommodation of Negroes." Putting this policy

fully into practice, however, would require more political power than was then available.

## As Defense chief

Forrestal resisted postwar plans, formulated at the highest levels of the Anglo-American Establishment, for the consolidation of the traditionally separate armed services into a new Department of Defense. But though he and his military allies lost this fight, James Forrestal was appointed by President Harry Truman as the first Secretary of Defense in 1947. The new arrangement weakened the nationalist element in the services, without giving any important constructive power to the new Defense chief.

American Blacks more confidently sought racial justice in the postwar era. A. Philip Randolph and others threatened a boycott of the proposed military draft law, if the services were to retain segregation.

The Army was the major roadblock to racial integration, with Army Secretary Kenneth C. Royall taking a hard-line segregationist stand against Forrestal's initiatives; two decades later Royall would be a key backer of the Lyndon Johnson-Hubert Humphrey ticket.

In the middle of the tumult, on April 26, 1948, fifteen Black leaders met in the Pentagon at the Defense Secretary's invitation, and were given representatives of all the armed services to confront and question. The Blacks held a press conference, and then Forrestal published their report, in which they declined to serve as advisers to the military as long as segregation was in force. There now existed a politically explosive stalemate for the upcoming 1948 elections. With the Communist-line Henry Wallace third party campaign, with Republican Thomas Dewey out-liberaling Truman, the President issued a vaguely worded military anti-discrimination Executive Order No. 9981. The seven-member President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services, put together with Forrestal's advice and including Lester Granger, first met in January 1949.

Truman had admitted to Forrestal that "he had not himself wanted to go as far as the Democratic platform went on the civil rights issue." But racial integration of the military was now pushed through, beginning under the new Defense Secretary. It was the first great breakthrough toward racial justice in 20th century America, and was an important first step in the public crusade which was to reach its climax with Dr. Martin Luther King.

Harry Truman, inaugurated President in 1949, promptly fired Forrestal; "terminated" would be more precise. The Defense Secretary had passionately opposed the pro-Soviet lurch in American policy at the end of World War II. He had tried to stop the State Department faction's betrayal of the Chinese Nationalists to the Communists. Forrestal had organized military backup to Greece and Turkey when they were threatened with Communist takeovers, and when Truman came out in support of the Secretary's efforts, it had

become known as the "Truman Doctrine."

One country after another was slipping under the Iron Curtain. The 1948 Russian takeover of Czechoslovakia typically involved the "suicide" of their opponent, Jan Masaryk, and later the trials and executions of all opponents.

In the Italian elections of 1948, Forrestal determined to go around the back of the State Department, which had arranged tacit U.S. support to a Communist victory. Secretary Forrestal personally collected an unauthorized million-dollar electoral support fund for the Christian Democrats, not matching but somewhat countering the Comintern's multimillion-dollar efforts. He secretly sent his priest, Msgr. Maurice S. Sheahy, to work on the campaign in connection with the Vatican. One of the leading organizers of squads to protect voters against Communist goons was a Father Bichierai, who had fought in the underground against Mussolini.

Forrestal, on the eve of the elections, directed that ships from the fleet bound for Greece and Turkey should stop "for refueling" in Naples, where he ordered U.S. sailors to drive tanks in parades behind Italian troops. Voters got the false impression, momentarily useful, that the U.S.A. was supplying military aid to the Italian government, to help prevent a Communist coup in case the Christian Democrats should win the election. In fact, a huge voter turnout assured a Communist defeat.

## Suspicious death

The pro-Russian faction sought and won Truman's firing of James Forrestal in March 1949. He was rushed out of his office on March 28. Flying to Florida, he was unable to take with him his voluminous personal diaries, which contained scathing attacks on the administration's policies. The diaries were confiscated by the President, and made available to Forrestal's opponents.

An Army psychiatrist was immediately dispatched to Florida, and Forrestal was flown back to Washington and placed in Walter Reed Army Hospital. The "patient" was diagnosed as suffering from mental exhaustion and was given insulin shock treatments. Forrestal demanded the right to see his priest, Sheahy, but he was denied all visitors except his somewhat estranged wife and children. The presence of his family may not have been very consoling: His son Michael V. Forrestal, had been an assistant naval attaché in Moscow in 1946-47, and an aide to Forrestal's arch-enemy, W. Averell Harriman. From 1978 through 1980, Michael Forrestal would serve as president of the U.S.-U.S.S.R. Trade and Economic Council.

On May 22, 1949, James Forrestal's body was found, his bathrobe cord tied tightly around his neck, after he had been flung out a 16th story window of the hospital. The chief psychiatrist called the death a suicide before any investigation was started. The results of the Army's inquest were kept secret. Forrestal's diaries were "published," 80% deleted, after a year of direct government censorship and rewriting.