

2000

The Origins Of Tallahassee's Racial Disturbance Plan: Segregation, Racial Tensions, and Violence During World War II

Jon Evans



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Evans, Jon (2000) "The Origins Of Tallahassee's Racial Disturbance Plan: Segregation, Racial Tensions, and Violence During World War II," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 79: No. 3, Article 7.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol79/iss3/7>

The Origins of Tallahassee's Racial Disturbance Plan: Segregation, Racial Tensions, and Violence During World War II

by Jon Evans

A new Negro will return from the war—a bitter Negro if he is disappointed again. He will have been taught to kill, to suffer, to die for something he believes in, and he will live by these rules to gain his personal rights.¹

On the evening of Easter Sunday 1945, a quiet darkness fell on Tallahassee, home to Florida's state government, the Florida State College for Women, and Dale Mabry Airfield. After a day of holiday festivities and celebration, activities in the small town began to wind down. Yet, around 10 p.m., the stillness was broken by the sounds of angry voices and shattering glass in the city's predominantly black Frenchtown neighborhood.² The calm of that Sunday evening was marred by a disturbance involving black troops from Dale Mabry Field and Carrabelle's Camp Gordon Johnston. The melee began, according to Tallahassee Chief of Police W.L. Prater, after "about 200 to 250 colored troops . . . went into Otis McNeil's place . . . and told McNeil . . . they were going overseas and . . . were going to take Frenchtown apart and paint it red." The riot raged throughout Frenchtown for over two hours.³

Jon Evans is a Ph.D. student at Florida State University.

1. Lucille D. Milner, "Jim Crow in the Army," *New Republic*, 13 March 1944, 339.
2. (Tallahassee) *Daily Democrat*, 1 April, 2 April 1945.
3. *Ibid.*, 2 April 1945.

After destroying McNeil's establishment, the rioters moved south along Macomb Street where they gathered rocks, bottles, "discarded ball bearing and pinion gears from automobiles, and miscellaneous pieces of odds and ends that could be used as missiles." As the city's *Daily Democrat* described, the mob proceeded to hurl "a rock through the window of Pete and Nim's poolroom . . . and then they milled along and knocked the window out of Bob Richardson's restaurant. They next tore the plate glass window out of the Capital theatre ticket booth. . . . They also knocked the . . . window out of the Rainbow beer parlor and the . . . window out of Max Smart's barber shop." Two gas pumps and an oil tank were overturned at a gas station on the corner of Macomb and Virginia streets. Ball bearings and pinion gears were then used to shatter the window of Lincoln's jewelry store. The soldiers next converged on "the colored USO on Tennessee street where they tore the screen doors off the front and rear of the building."⁴

City authorities later reported that as the rioters rampaged for two and a half hours, both local and military police responded to the disturbance. State highway patrol units in Quincy, Monticello, Chipley, and Lake City were alerted in case the violence spread. According to city police no one was injured "and none were arrested by city policemen although the MPs did pickup a few disturbers. There was considerable property loss."⁵

Wartime racial violence was not a new phenomena in the nation, nor was this outbreak the first in Tallahassee. Indeed, during the waning days of the Second World War, the State of Florida, in conjunction with federal forces, developed a secret plan to quell such disorders. The *Coordinated, Composite Plan of All Civil Law Enforcement Agencies for the Suppression of Racial Disturbances in the City of Tallahassee, Florida* detailed methods to restore order through civil law enforcement and military forces. And the plan incorporated the far-sighted racial policies of Florida's chief executive, Spessard L. Holland. While the specific cause of the Easter riot in Tallahassee was never determined and the causes of other contemporaneous racial outbreaks varied, all were related indirectly to the growing frustration and anger of African Americans. In the nation as a whole, and the U.S. military in particular, blacks were discriminated against at every level. That soldiers sworn to protect and de-

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 4 April 1945.

fend the nation with their lives were subjected to this treatment undermined the nation's finest values.⁶

In the 1940s, African Americans were denied equal citizenship in virtually every segment of their lives. Blacks faced obstacles to full participation in political, economic, educational, and legal spheres. Many southern states maintained institutionalized disfranchisement through the poll tax and literacy requirements. Southern states continued to relegate black children to inferior educational facilities under the erroneous doctrine of separate but equal. The single most pernicious aspect of the racial caste system, and the most emblematic of the tenuous nature of black American citizenship, was the specter of the lynch mob as the guardian of the southern status quo. When the national economy began to expand, as a result of wartime mobilization, blacks again were excluded. The blatant incongruity between American opposition to Axis racism in Europe, Africa, and Asia and the maintenance of a racial caste system at home energized a civil rights campaign that demanded opportunities for full African American participation in the national defense.⁷

The struggle to conquer fascism abroad and the forces of racism and bigotry at home was known as the "Double V" campaign. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the black press, and A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, led the "Double V" movement, among whose achievements were the 1940 passage of an amended Conscription Act to remove prohibitions to black enlistment in the military, and the 1941 creation of the Fair Employment Practices Commission to implement a ban on "discrimination in defense industries and in federal agencies."⁸

Although these measures appeared to partly meet black demands, neither measure was as effective as initially envisioned. The Conscription Act proved more a symbolic than tangible victory. Under the act, applicants were required to be "acceptable to the land or naval forces" for induction into the service, thereby allowing considerable leeway for rejection of black volunteers. Similarly,

6. *Report of The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York, 1968), 104.

7. Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996), 135, 106-7, 82, 81, 137.

8. Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 136-7; Walter White, "It's Our Country Too' The Negro Demands the Right to Fight for It," *Saturday Evening Post*, 14 December 1940, 27, 61-66.

the FEPC was hobbled by its "inadequate budget, . . . small staff, and the meager enforcement penalties provided."⁹

Ironically, the American military rejected many African American volunteers at a time when the War Department could not meet its manpower goals. In July of 1940, the Army struggled to raise 280,000 men, well short of the 375,000 man force requested by Congress. In a discussion of the nation's most pressing defense needs, military experts listed the lack of equipment as second only to the shortage of trained manpower. When they were enlisted, African Americans discovered themselves restricted to "Negro regiments." In September 1940, white enlistment in the 2nd Army Corps Area (encompassing New York, New Jersey, and Delaware) was far below the anticipated level, while African American enlistment opportunities were limited to the number of vacancies in black regiments. In at least two instances, African American volunteers who possessed badly needed skills—in these cases a pharmacist and a pilot—were turned away because the segregated military structure could not accommodate them. The pilot, Walter L. Robinson, later joined the Royal Air Force after volunteering in Canada.¹⁰

The few blacks serving in the "Negro regiments" were often little more than "servants in khaki" under the leadership of white officers. Prior to the implementation of conscription, black units of the regular Army comprised the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry regiments. Men in these units were not trained as combat troops, but were utilized as "truck drivers, cooks, caretakers of horses and in other menial tasks. A few [were] also serving in the band and as clerks and as caretakers of the equipment." There were only five black officers in the Regular Army, three of whom were chaplains.¹¹

Opportunities for blacks in the Navy were limited even more severely. While the Army segregated African Americans into separate units, the Navy had no all-black troops. Therefore, in the supposed "best interests of the Navy and the country" and "the best interests of the men themselves," the Navy restricted black enlistment to the "messman branch" which consisted of menial positions

9. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time* (New York, 1994), 253; White, "It's Our Country Too," 27.

10. "Defense Gaps: Board's Job of Plugging Them Just Getting Into High Gear," *Newsweek*, 15 July 1940, 14-15; White, "It's Our Country Too," 62.

11. White, "It's Our Country Too," 62-63.



In the 1940s, African American soldiers at Dale Mabry Field worked, worshiped, and, as shown in this photograph, ate in segregated facilities. *Courtesy of Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.*

such as mess boy and steward. No African American served, in any capacity, in the Marine Corps.¹²

Blacks in the military became a closely scrutinized and widely reported story in the black press. The leadership of the "Double V" campaign called for America to defend democracy by establishing equality of opportunity at home. As William H. Hastie, Dean of the Howard University Law School and civilian aide to Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, said, "We will be American soldiers. We will be American ditchdiggers. We will be American aviators. We will be American laborers. We will be anything that any American should be in this whole program of national defense. But we won't be black auxiliaries."¹³

Consequently, the War Department became more attentive to public perception of its treatment of African Americans and set up internal mechanisms to investigate the complaints of black service men and to emphasize the role of African Americans in the war effort. However, as the scope and visibility of African American in-

12. *Ibid.*, 63.

13. *Ibid.*

volvement increased, the white-erected barriers to greater civil rights became more formidable.¹⁴

Of the more than 920,000 African Americans in World War II, 80 percent were trained in the South. Military service brought most of them to the region where, as in civilian life, blacks "were segregated into the least desirable sections of the camps, areas that were congested and lacking in adequate recreational facilities." One such base was in Carabelle. Isolated among the scrub pines and sand dunes of the Gulf Coast southwest of Tallahassee, Camp Gordon Johnston was a training center for the use of amphibious landing techniques and equipment. Numerous complaints regarding conflicts between black and white soldiers, as well as the often deplorable conditions under which African Americans served, drew the attention of the NAACP, the press, and the military.¹⁵

An NAACP internal memorandum dated January 6, 1944, described the problem and inquired whether "another protest should be made in reference to this particular camp." Among the conditions were the absence of

service clubs for Negro troops at this port although there [was] one for white troops. Negro soldiers [were] constantly . . . berated . . . by white southerners at this camp many of whom [went] so far as to call the Negroes 'Black Bastards' and [tried] to pick fights with them. . . . The Negroes [were] quartered in barracks having dirt floors and the toilets [were] very unsanitary in that there [was] no system of sewage disposal other than by the men themselves.

Furthermore, Camp Gordon Johnston's African American soldiers were on their third training assignment and believed they were being shuffled from base to base to prevent meaningful participation in the war effort. "The sentiment of the group [was] that rather than tolerate any longer the type of treatment they [had] been subjected to they would rather 'go over the hill' or preferably be overseas," a memo concluded.¹⁶

14. Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 136-7.

15. *Ibid.*, 136; Gary R. Mormino, "World War II," in *The New History of Florida*, ed. Michael Gannon (Gainesville, Fla., 1996), 325.

16. "Regarding Conditions at Camp Gordon Johnson [sic], Florida," in *Papers of the NAACP, Part 9, Series B: Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces, 1918-1955*, ed. Richard M. Dalfiume (Bethesda, Md., 1989), microfilm, reel 10, doc. 10.

The Philadelphia *Record* specifically noted Camp Gordon Johnston in a series of articles detailing indignities suffered by black soldiers stationed in the South. Beyond the lack of recreational facilities and the difficulties of Jim Crow segregation on civilian bus lines, the *Record* noted how “[i]n only one camp—Gordon Johnson [*sic*], Fla.—was there evidence of downright, deliberate discrimination. There Negro soldiers [were] forced to perform menial tasks (such as latrine duty) for the entire post, thus being made, in effect, servants to the white soldiers.”¹⁷

In the fall of 1944 a company of black soldiers stationed at Camp Gordon Johnston went on strike over their assignment to latrine duty. An African American soldier wrote Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP, describing a quietly conducted trial and subsequent conviction of the strikers. Regimental and company commanders hoped that the secrecy surrounding the episode would prevent bringing “too much infamy” to the post. The author signed, “One who would serve.”¹⁸

Dale Mabry Airfield also warranted investigation. A. Maceo Smith, secretary of the Texas NAACP, complained to Roy Wilkins, assistant secretary of the NAACP, about the

more than 3000 Negro soldiers at this Florida installation who [were] being discriminated against to the maximum degree. There [was] no Negro chaplain assigned to this contingent to whom these men may express their distaste for this treatment in confidence. Of the 3000, 200 [were] wounded and sick soldiers needing hospital care. They [had] been declared . . . disqualified for military services overseas. It seem[ed] that these men [were] being deliberately intimidated so that they may ask for discharges from the army void of permanent disability benefits that [were] provided in such cases. Officers in charge refuse[d] to admit these men to a general hospital for proper medical care.¹⁹

Camp conditions were compounded by the oppressive Jim Crow system of segregation in Tallahassee and other southern

17. (Philadelphia) *Record*, 18 May 1944.

18. “Camp Gordon Johnston, Fla.,” in *Papers of the NAACP*, roll 12, doc. 682.

19. “Conditions at Dale Mabry, Tallahassee,” in *Papers of the NAACP*, roll 12, doc. 52.

towns. One of the most blatant acts of southern segregation reportedly occurred on a train in Texas. A group of black soldiers ate in the "Colored only" section of a dining car while German prisoners of war dined in the white section. One of the African American soldiers later wrote "There they (the Germans) sat, eating, talking, laughing, and smoking. They were enemies of our country, people sworn to destroy all the so-called democratic governments of the world. And there we were. Men sworn to fight, to give our lives for this country, but WE were not good enough to sit in the lunchroom." Widely reported in the black press and reinforcing black perceptions of the pervasiveness of white racism, the episode excited commentary from throughout African American society, including the following poem, entitled "Defeat," by Witter Bynner.²⁰

On train in Texas German prisoners eat
 With white American soldiers, seat by seat,
 While black American soldiers sit apart,
 The white men eating meat, the black men heart.
 Now, with that other war a century done,
 Not the live North but the dead South has won,
 Not yet a riven nation comes awake.
 Whom are we fighting this time, for God's sake?
 Mark well the token of the separate seat.
 It is again ourselves whom we defeat.²¹

Despite the evidence of segregation that permeated southern military bases, traditionalist white southerners considered blacks and other critics as outside agitators. The Tallahassee *Daily Democrat*, in an article entitled "The South Has No Race Problem," claimed that "So far as social equality is concerned the South has never considered this a problem. It is a simple question that is answered before it is even asked so far as the Southerner is concerned." Furthermore, while "[p]eople in . . . other sections of the country . . . fraternize with the Negroes on an equal social level, agitators . . . propose social equality from evil or selfish motives . . . but the people of the South are not influenced and . . . are not im-

20. Milner, "Jim Crow in the Army," 341; Richard M. Dalfiume, ed., *Papers of the NAACP, part 9, series A: Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces, 1918-1955* (Bethesda, Md., 1989), microfilm, reel 14, doc. 409.

21. Witter Bynner, "Defeat," *New Republic*, 8 May 1944, 627.

pressed. The answer of the South is . . . 'Never.'" The editorialist went on to ominously assert that "The people of the South do not fear the Negro. . . . The people of the South are thoroughly acquainted with the situation and know how to handle it. It is the agitators outside the South . . . to whom it therefore appears a problem. These people would do well to let the South alone."²²

Local reaction to the editorial was mixed. One reader, who signed his letter "A Northerner, (Now living in Tallahassee.)," called it "the finest answer I have ever read for the race problem in the north." But, another reader suggested that the editorialist "forget about you being better than the negro, when every body knows different, and your Maker knows different. You only fool yourself, not civilized people." This letter was signed "Soldier, Camp Gordon Johnston."²³

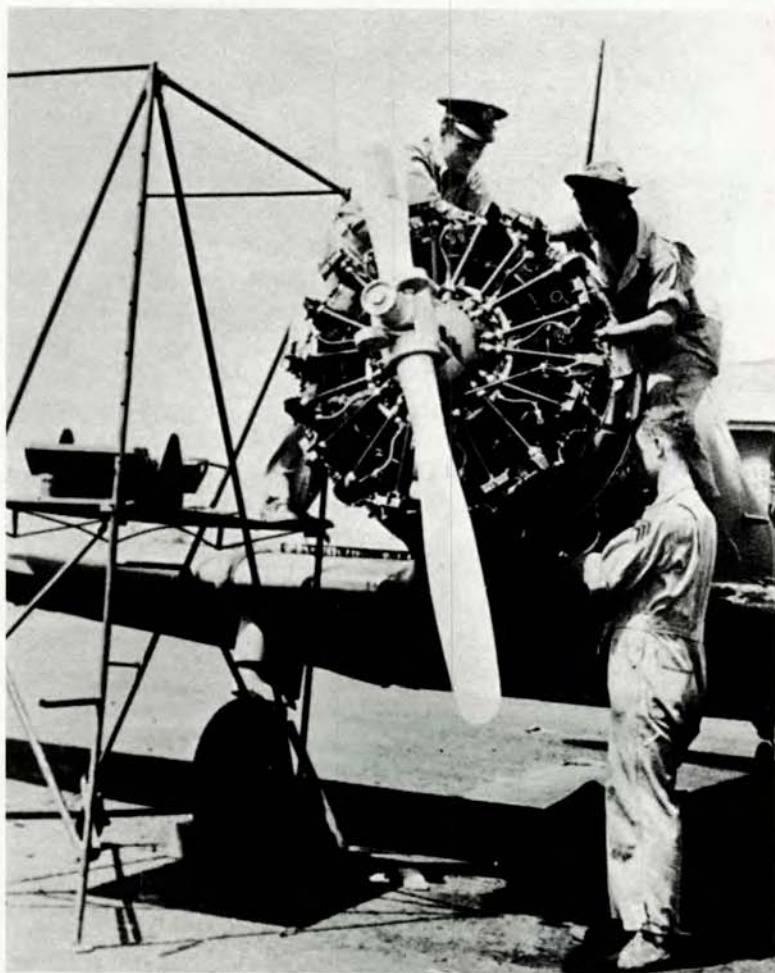
In another editorial entitled "Let Fact Dispel Rumor," the *Daily Democrat* aimed at calming white fears that "war department policies forbidding discrimination between white and negro personnel" on army posts were applicable to private businesses. Anxieties over "the war department . . . attempt[ing] to enforce any . . . policy upon . . . stores, transportation, theatres, or recreational facilities where the policy would conflict with local civilian custom or local law" were unnecessary; the editorial assured alarmed white citizens that the military's prohibition on discrimination posed no threat to the maintenance of white institutions. In the opinion of many southern whites, and presumably many residents of Tallahassee, segregation was not a problem to be solved, it was the answer to the question of African Americans' place in society. The defense and perpetuation of the racial caste system was essential to most southern whites' perception of a workable society.²⁴

The conflict of beliefs and ideals between African Americans, particularly those from outside the South, and southern whites heightened racial tensions. African Americans continued to encounter rejection, segregation, and humiliation, and the resulting frustration and anger manifested itself in many ways. "War time ra-

22. Thurman Sensing, "The South Has No Race Problem," (*Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, 7 August 1944.

23. *Daily Democrat*, 9 August 1944.

24. *Ibid.*, 7 August, 3 September 1944.



Whites and blacks worked alongside one another in mechanical training. *Courtesy of Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.*

cial disorders” erupted in many American communities—Mobile, Detroit, Harlem, Los Angeles, Beaumont, Texas, and Tallahassee.²⁵

Beginning in the fall of 1942, Tallahassee experienced recurring racial conflicts of escalating severity. Just before 9:45 p.m. on the evening of September 5, 1942, a fight began between black sol-

²⁵. *Report of The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 104.

RECEIVED
UCF LIBRARY

MAR 06 2001

Serials 10

diers from Dale Mabry Airfield and black civilians in Frenchtown. A group of African American soldiers reportedly broke away from that fight to attack T. R. Battle, a white man "in Frenchtown to call for his laundry." After assaulting Battle, the soldiers fought among themselves in Letha Allen's Frenchtown area café, located on Macomb Street. By this time both military and civilian police had responded, but one of the disorderly, Private Wilbur Harris, attacked Tallahassee policeman Theo Couch, attempting to wrest his service revolver from him. During the struggle for the gun, Officer Couch drew a second gun from his pocket and shot Harris twice in the abdomen. At the Dale Mabry hospital, Harris later "died of peritonitis due to gunshot wounds."²⁶

A coroner's inquest presided over by Leon County Judge Ben A. Meginniss "heard more than a score of witnesses" and despite "differing accounts of the actual shooting . . . given by Couch and his fellow officers and negro military policemen and negro soldiers," a jury of six white businessmen "returned a verdict that Harris died 'as the result of gunshot wounds fired by Officer . . . Couch in the discharge of his duty and was justifiable homicide as he acted in self-defense.'" The conflicting testimony concerned the positions of Couch and Harris at the moment the latter was fatally wounded. Couch claimed both he and Harris struggled on the ground and that Harris had freed Couch's service revolver from its holster when Couch fired. "Several negro military policemen," however, claimed "that Harris was shot while . . . on the ground but differed in their statements as to whether Couch was rising . . . from his knees or standing . . . when he shot." Another black military policeman, James Sampton Jr., testified that "Harris was knocked unconscious to the ground 'by someone in civilian clothes' and then Couch drew his service revolver from the right side and shot three times."²⁷

The actions of civilian and military authorities immediately after the altercation demonstrated their determination to prevent further escalation of the disturbance. An armed security detail from Dale Mabry field arrived and ordered all African American soldiers to return to the base. At that point civilian officers, including sheriff's deputies and highway patrolmen dispersed remaining crowd to prevent further trouble.²⁸

26. *Daily Democrat*, 6 September, 7 September, 14 September 1942.

27. *Ibid.*, 14 September 1942.

28. *Ibid.*, 6 September 1942.

On the afternoon of November 6, 1942, a "free-for-all fight" broke out between black soldiers and white civilian employees at a Dale Mabry field warehouse over the use of a "whites only" soft drink machine. The fracas reportedly began after the white civilian workers objected to a black soldier's attempt to get a drink from the vending machine. Eventually, some twenty-five to thirty African American soldiers and an unspecified number of white civilians became involved, resulting in eight civilian injuries.²⁹

Tensions between African American soldiers and whites in Tallahassee increased throughout the war as civil disturbances marred the peace of the small southern town. In the early hours of August 10, 1944, Tallahassee police worked with military police to quell a riot of two hundred African Americans protesting the arrest of five black soldiers said to be intoxicated and armed with razors and pistols. Armed with riot guns and tear gas, the combined civilian and military force suppressed the melee.³⁰

The August 10th disturbance prompted a letter from Sergeant Louis Alexander to the NAACP. Alexander expressed frustration with the conditions he encountered while stationed at Camp Gordon Johnston. From "Somewhere in Dutch New Guinea" he wrote, "Being one of the many soldiers that was forced to take training at Camp Gordon Johnston, Fla. before being sent overseas found many things and conditions that were a blow to soldier morale. I am sure that real American's [*sic*] do not sanction the overall treatment of Negroe soldiers in those areas." Alexander also noted that "Tallahassee, being the only town located near enough that a soldier can go and enjoy the facilities of the U.S.O., should be willing in the spirit of civilian cooperation to assure soldiers treatment that becomes an American."³¹

Instead, on September 1, 1944, in an apparent response to the need for greater law enforcement and stricter segregation, the city organized a Tallahassee police auxiliary. "Five times larger than the regular police department" the auxiliary was "to supplement the regular policemen in their line of duty" and "in case of emergencies." The Chamber of Commerce formed a military affairs com-

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 10 August 1944.

31. Louis Alexander to the NAACP, 7 September 1944, in *Papers of the NAACP, part 9, series B*, roll 12, doc. 680.

mittee, which further suggested "Tighter supervision of drinking places and other night spots."³²

By the next month, greater supervision of black soldiers' recreation and two incidents resulted in the temporary discontinuance of "convoys of negro soldiers to Tallahassee" and limits on the "sale hours for beer on week days and over the weekends." The first occurred on October 1 when two to three hundred black service men tried to liberate another black soldier from police custody. The arresting officers were taking the soldier to their car when the soldiers, armed with pocket knives, confronted them. Military and civilian police responded to the arresting officers' request for assistance, and tear gas was employed to disperse the mob.³³ Military police responded to a second disturbance that same day at 8 p.m. It was a fight involving several hundred black troops and was subdued by military police. Following the second incident, all business establishments were shut down for the night.³⁴

Civic officials reacted quickly to prevent further incidents of African American violence in Frenchtown. Complaints by Tallahassee City Manager Malcolm N. Yancey and the city police department inspired Brigadier General W. H. Holcombe, commander of Camp Gordon Johnston, to suspend base transportation of black soldiers to Tallahassee. Yancey was primarily concerned with the soldiers' "utter disregard for law and order" and their "absolute refusal to obey orders of the military police and our local police."³⁵

Yancey assigned responsibility for the recent civil unrest to the behavior of black soldiers on leave: "These disturbances have reached the point where it is unsafe for our white population to pass the area in which these negroes are unloaded. . . . The most recent occurrence of a drunken mob of negroes occurred last Sunday." Furthermore, Yancey argued, "If the military cannot control these men, I do not think it right and proper to expect a community of our size to furnish ample police for at least 1,000 drunken negro troops."³⁶

In the wake of the October 1 riots, military and civilian authorities met to discuss the safety of the civilian population and the sol-

32. *Daily Democrat*, 1 September 1944.

33. *Ibid.*, 2 October, 4 October, 11 October 1944.

34. *Ibid.*, 2 October 1944.

35. *Ibid.*, 4 October 1944.

36. *Ibid.*

diers. Yancey continued to voice his concern over the presence of the African American soldiers in Tallahassee: "I feel like these negro troops have built up so much resentment between themselves and others that it will be practically impossible for them to get together without creating some disturbance." He was not alone in harshly criticizing the conduct of the African American soldiers. Officials of the local American Legion post called upon the city commission to restrict severely military personnel on visits in Tallahassee. The letter suggested closing "jukes and eating places . . . at reasonable hours as our experience proves that much of the trouble can be curbed by stopping the sale of beer." Furthermore, the Legionnaires warned that "we mean business in regard to impudent and unruly negro soldiers. We do not expect to tolerate another such incident as occurred here Sunday, Oct. 1."³⁷

Concern over growing unrest among African Americans was not limited to Tallahassee's city fathers. Incidents in the town and other Florida communities had the attention of state and federal officials, including Governor Holland. Their response included a series of secret plans for the restoration of order "between members of the Caucasian and Negro races." These were designated as Racial Disturbance Plans.³⁸

Undercurrents of racial unrest seemed serious enough to warrant the creation of Racial Disturbance Plans for five Florida cities: Jacksonville, Miami, St. Petersburg, Tallahassee, and Tampa. Estab-

37. *Ibid.*, 5 October, 11 October 1944.

38. Attempts to analyze the Racial Disturbance Plan are stymied by considerable challenges. The series of five Racial Disturbance Plans were declassified on January 22, 1993, and placed within the State Defense Council collection at the Florida State Archives in Tallahassee. Extensive research at the archives, in the State Defense Council collection and several related collections, has to this point failed to find any additional evidence to aid in the interpretation of these documents. One of the most potentially promising sources of information relating to the creation and implementation of the Racial Disturbance Plans are the Minutes of State Defense Council Meetings, a record of the semimonthly meetings of the State Defense Council to consider state defense and military preparedness issues. This record contains a conspicuous gap beginning after the February 17, 1944, meeting. The available record begins again with the State Defense Council's final formal meeting on February 28, 1945. Assuming that the State Defense Council continued to meet between February 17, 1944 and February 28, 1945, and there is no evidence to suggest otherwise, this would indicate the record was excised, possibly due to the need to suppress information related to the Racial Disturbance Plan; Racial Disturbance Plan, District No. 5, Fourth Service Command, State Defense Council, ser. 419, box 57, RG 191, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.



Recreational activities for white soldiers at Dale Mabry Field included co-ed dinners, marching bands, and minstrel shows. *Courtesy of Florida State Archives. Tallahassee.*

lished August 2, 1944, the Tallahassee plan consisted of two components—Field Orders detailing the tactical mission and goals, and the Composite Plan containing background information and detailing the delegation of authority.³⁹

According to the Tallahassee plan, “there is a minor undercurrent of tension, actuated chiefly by so-called white and colored leaders, supplemented by local civic organizations and influenced by other factions, outside the city. Other factors which are playing their roles are increased earning power caused by war activities.” In particular, the problems arose from the “Allotments of colored soldiers for their families, which results in idleness and disorderly conduct and a resentment on the part of the white population toward Negroes refusing to perform necessary work.” Seemingly at fault as well was “agitation on a national scale for the advancement of the rights of the colored race has been greatly influenced by recent developments.” Since Tallahassee’s population of 22,000 people was

39. *Ibid.*

56 percent African American, authorities took the threat of extensive interracial violence very seriously.⁴⁰

According to the Tallahassee Racial Disturbance Plan, any action would be federally approved: "the Governor of Florida . . . requested the assistance of the President of the United States in quelling the riots and restoring law and order. The president acquiesced, and the Army has been assigned this mission." Indeed, implementation of the plan became the responsibility of the army commander stationed at police headquarters in Tallahassee who would control "civil and military forces now on duty in the affected area."⁴¹

The stated purpose of the plan was "the protection of life and property and the . . . restoration of law and order." Upon the outbreak of a general civil disturbance "with attendant riots and bloodshed," military officials would declare martial law, and the military commander would assume command of city police, county sheriff's deputies, fire department personnel, and the Florida State Guard, a volunteer state militia organized in early 1941 to replace Florida National Guard units nationalized by the federal government.⁴² The streets and main thoroughfares of the city would be cleared and secured for essential travel. Bars, clubs, and other public places would close, and "the congregation of more than three persons at any place prohibited." Additionally, the military would censor "all radio announcements, news releases, and statements as to incidents, or any other facts."⁴³

To achieve the specified tactical objectives, the plan called for blacks to be confined to designated refuge areas, and whites were prohibited from entering those areas. Until order was restored, only civil or military police could cross the lines separating racial areas. The plan also provided for reserve units from Fort Barrancas, Camp Gordon Johnston, and Camp Blanding to reinforce the initial complement of troops.⁴⁴

As a product of the administration of Governor Spessard L. Holland, the Racial Disturbance Plan reflected the administration's interests in racial matters. Foremost, the governor intended

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

42. Minutes of the State Defense Council, State Defense Council, ser. 506, box 1, RG 191, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.

43. Racial Disturbance Plan.

44. *Ibid.*

to prevent loss of life, damage to property, and further deterioration of race relations. Under the plan, the physical separation of the races, while appearing to reek of segregation and disregard for African American civil rights, was actually a precaution designed to protect black property and lives. Since the Civil War, the most pervasive pattern of racial conflict was the pillaging of black neighborhoods and business districts by riotous whites. Notorious instances of white-on-black violence included the New York City draft riots of 1863, the Springfield riot of 1908, and the East St. Louis riots of 1917. The Tallahassee Racial Disturbance Plan's exclusion of whites from black areas of the city, then, should be interpreted in part as a measure to protect the black community.⁴⁵

Several instances from the career of Governor Spessard L. Holland suggest that programs or policies developed under his administration strove for racial justice. Holland, while generally considered a conservative, was a moderate on racial matters. His commitment to justice, regardless of race, was a hallmark of his political life. While serving in the state senate, for example, he personally intervened to stop a lynching outside the Lakeland jail. Holland, who was driving by the jail that morning, found his way blocked by a mob intent on lynching two black men housed in the jail on murder charges. He made his way into the crowd "grabbed the shoulders of a man . . . banging on the jail door with a piece of concrete" and persuaded the mob to let the men face trial. The angry whites agreed on the condition that Holland would act as prosecutor. Both men were convicted.⁴⁶

At roughly the same time as the racial unrest in Tallahassee, Holland managed the "Gadsden County Rape Case," employing Florida State Guard units and state highway patrol officers to protect three African Americans accused of raping a thirty year-old soldier's wife, shooting her in the head twice, and leaving her for dead in the woods beside a Gadsden County road in late July 1944. The victim recovered and identified her assailants. Holland earned much praise for his decision to guard the Leon County jail where the alleged assailants were housed and to provide security for the accused while in transit to Gadsden County for trial. State of Florida supreme court Justice Armstead Brown applauded Holland "for the splendid courage and high sense of official duty which you

45. Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder, 98, 99, 100, 101.

46. (Polk County) *Democrat*, 8 November 1971.

have displayed during the past week. Also for your good generalship." W. A. Morris Jr., president of the Tallahassee Civic League, commended Holland on his "wise and prompt action that prevented an act of mob violence recently in Gadsden County." "It is indeed heartening to the Negro citizens of the State of Florida," Morris continued, "to know that the Governor is alert to such events and willing to take action to prevent it."⁴⁷

In retrospect, Holland's actions appear especially enlightened when compared to those of his successor, Governor Millard Caldwell. During Caldwell's administration, Jesse James Payne, an African American indicted on charges of attempted rape, was "taken from an unguarded jail and shot to death by a mob." The Governor reportedly excused himself from responsibility by claiming that he did not consider this act a lynching and that it had saved the victim the embarrassment of cross-examination in open court.⁴⁸

While the Tallahassee Racial Disturbance Plan was never implemented, the plan and the civil unrest that prompted it were manifestations of the evolving racial climate of the era. The actions and reactions in Tallahassee resulted from developments that, according to Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish social scientist who studied American race relations, "changed the whole configuration of the Negro problem." The New Deal spurred a radical transformation in the condition of blacks in America. Developments on the economic, political, and judicial fronts both reflected and were catalysts to greater awareness of and willingness to address the plight of African Americans. Blacks capitalized on this opportunity to fight for the bounty of American life they had been denied. Coming close on the heels of the New Deal, World War II allowed black activists to decry the hypocrisy of fighting for democracy abroad while denying it at home. The crisis of war provided a chance for African Americans to further leverage their demands for inclusion in society.⁴⁹

47. *Daily Democrat*, 31 July, 24 August, 27 August 1944; Gadsden County Rape Case, Spessard L. Holland, box 41, ser. 406, RG 102, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.

48. "Two Governors," *Time*, 7 January 1946, 16.

49. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, 2 vols., 2d ed. (New York, 1962), 1: 74; John B. Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era: Liberalism and Race* (Knoxville, 1980), x, 218, 219, 222, 235; Richard M. Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution," in *The Negro in Depression and War: Prelude to Revolution 1935-1945*, ed. Bernard Sternsher (Chicago, 1969), 303, 304.

Blacks were not alone in awareness of the changing relationship between the races. Whites of all ideological inclinations recognized the increased politicization of the race question and the inevitable impact on society. Conservative whites, especially in the South, viewed developments with alarm and anger. As African American service men moved southward in increasing numbers, the enormous gulf between the expectations of blacks and the intransigence of southern whites resulted in increased racial hostility. Liberals viewed the changes with cautious optimism, but often followed a path between militants seeking to overturn the status quo and traditionalists determined to preserve it. Many southern liberals and moderates worked for greater black equality while maintaining sympathy with the precepts of southern life.⁵⁰

The World War II era was a transition period in American race relations. It was a period of action, reaction, and forging new modes of racial interaction, in which blacks gave notice that they had unmet expectations and aspirations. In Tallahassee, black soldiers challenged the southern racial caste system in many ways, including confrontation. The actions of whites in positions of leadership, particularly Spessard Holland, revealed a recognition on whites' behalf that the status quo was crumbling and a new relationship with African Americans had to be forged.

50. Dalfiume, "The Forgotten Years of the Negro Revolution," 308-09; Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era*, 54, 52.