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## THE NEGRO POLICEMAN IN THE SOUTH

ELLIOTT M. RUDWICK

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For many years, there was hardly a handful of Negroes working in the South as police officers. Prior to 1921, Negroes were employed on the police forces of only approximately ten Southern cities—among them Baltimore, Knoxville, Memphis, Wheeling, Tampa, Galveston, Austin, and Houston.<sup>1</sup> By 1924 Washington, Louisville, and Beaumont were added.<sup>2</sup> As the years passed, a small number of Southern communities joined the ranks, but by 1940, the number of Negro policemen in the entire region was probably not much over fifty.<sup>3</sup> This figure was especially minute, considering that according to the 1940 census, over three-fourths of the nearly thirteen million American Negroes lived in the South. Furthermore, among the states with the largest Negro populations—Mississippi, South Carolina, Louisiana, Georgia, and Alabama—there was not even one Negro policeman.<sup>4</sup>

Colored neighborhoods were inadequately patrolled by whites, whose methods were often harsh and not infrequently brutal. If their presence was on occasion intolerable, their absence was sometimes worse, and many a Southern Negro neighborhood was "left practically without police protection".<sup>5</sup> Colored leaders were resentful and made polite requests for the employment of policemen from their own race. They were not only motivated by a desire to see their lives and property protected, but they were also humiliated by the implication that Negroes had not yet

reached a cultural stage of being able to bear responsibility for at least part of their law enforcement needs.

However, many white politicians were convinced that the suggestion "just wouldn't work". For example, among reasons given in Greensboro (North Carolina) and Atlanta were that the morale of white police officers would be impaired and many would quit, that local Negroes did not seem intellectually or morally capable, and that the fabric of "Southern tradition" should not be torn away.<sup>6</sup> Was this obeisance to the past a demonstration of white public opinion adamantly united against the idea of Negro policemen or had municipal officials merely rationalized for a lack of imagination and a failure to accurately gauge the more enlightened mood of their constituents? Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish sociologist who studied American race relations in the early 1940's believed that white people in many Southern cities "would tolerate" the employment of trained Negro patrolmen, but that "local politicians and the public institutions lag behind the possibilities."<sup>7</sup>

As long as Southern Negroes possessed no political influence, they had little bargaining power. In 1940, there were probably not more than 250,000 colored people in the South who were allowed to vote, and most of these could cast their ballots only in "meaningless general elections".<sup>8</sup> However, as a result of wartime democratic propaganda, improved economic conditions, and the increase in urbanization, among other factors, the number of registered Negroes in

<sup>6</sup> "Race and Law Enforcement", *NEW SOUTH*, February, 1952, pp. 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> *CHANGING PATTERNS IN THE NEW SOUTH* (Atlanta, 1955), p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> MYRDAL, *op. cit.*, p. 545.

<sup>8</sup> *CHANGING PATTERNS IN THE NEW SOUTH, op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>1</sup> MONROE N. WORK, Ed., *NEGRO YEAR BOOK, 1921-22* (Tuskegee, 1922), p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> MONROE N. WORK, Ed., *NEGRO YEAR BOOK, 1925-26*, (Tuskegee, 1925), p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to the writer, August 4, 1959 from Mrs. Ed. A. Albright of the Research Department, Southern Regional Council.

<sup>4</sup> GUNNAR MYRDAL, *AN AMERICAN DILEMMA* (New York, 1944), p. 543.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 542.

twelve Southern states grew to about 650,000 in 1947 and an estimated one million by 1950.

The Negroes' emerging political influence was probably the most important factor which led to the increased use of Negro law enforcement officers during World War II and in the post-war period. For the first time local Negro leaders, pointing to expanding registration lists, gained attention and sympathetic consideration from city officials. In city after city, Negro organizations such as the Pan-Hellenic Council of Charleston, the Tallahassee Civic League, and the West Palm Beach Voters League wrote letters and signed petitions. Frequently, they allied themselves with liberal whites who were interested in harmonious race relations and had formed local interracial committees. Not only did these groups work together, but they frequently broadened their base of influence by seeking the endorsement of prominent white organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce (as in Atlanta), the Woman's Auxiliary of the Protestant Episcopal Church (as in Charleston),<sup>9</sup> and the local newspaper (as in the case of the PALM BEACH POST).

Practical help was given by the Southern Regional Council, a bi-racial organization desirous of improving living conditions in the South. Each year the Council surveyed the region and compiled reports on the number of Southern cities employing Negro policemen, the manner in which campaigns were conducted locally to bring about this change, and testimonials of leading city officials concerning the effectiveness of the new law enforcement officers. This material was regularly published in the Southern Regional Council's monthly bulletin, *NEW SOUTH*, and there is no doubt that this magazine became the inspiration, guidance, and support of many local groups. Gradually, the regional surveys began to indicate some degree of success. In 1945, the *NEW SOUTH* reported 134 Negro men and women working for police departments; in 1950, the number had increased to over 425, and by 1954, over 800. (See Table I.)

From the very beginning, many Southern cities which hired Negro policemen regarded the innovation as an "experiment"—as a venture which demanded cautious and careful preparation and treatment. This deliberative approach actually insured the success of the project. The fear of

<sup>9</sup> For Charleston illustration see, John A. Harris, "How Charleston Got Negro Policemen", *NEW SOUTH*, September-October, 1950, pp. 7-8.

TABLE I  
INCREASE IN NEGRO POLICE IN THE SOUTH,  
1945-1954<sup>10</sup>,

Year	States Employing	Cities Employing	Uniformed Police-men	Plain-clothes Police-men	Police-women
1945	9	29	131*		3
1946	10	42	208*		5
1947	10	41	196	25	7
1948	11	54	248	23	8
1949	12	62	301	33	7
1950	13	77	369	41	17
1951	13	82	381	44	18
1952	13	96 Cities 6 Counties	471	60	50
1953	13	112 Cities 18 Counties	545	87	90
1954	13	143 Cities 22 Counties	618	92	112

\* Includes both uniformed and plainclothes policemen.

These figures are intended to give the reader some knowledge of the growth pattern; they are not complete, since some cities did not respond to the questionnaires and smaller communities were not included in the study.

possible repercussions caused civic officials to ask local Negro organizations to act as screening boards and recommend only young men of high character and intelligence. Much greater care was given to the selection of Negro policemen than of white policemen, and the result was that in many communities colored recruits were more educated and intelligent than their white counterparts. (For example, in 1947 the six Negro patrolmen in Greensboro, North Carolina, were college men.) Once appointed to the force, the Negroes frequently received more adequate recruit training than the whites. These courses were often conducted by the top personnel in the department. (For example, in Tallahassee, Florida, the chief personally taught the course.)

For practical purposes, Southern police departments have usually restricted Negro officers to patrolling Negro neighborhoods and arresting colored offenders. Only on an emergency basis do they generally work in white districts. Consequently, they come in contact with few white offenders, and especially in smaller cities, these are not arrested except in unusual circumstances.

<sup>10</sup> *CHANGING PATTERNS IN THE NEW SOUTH*, op. cit., p. 35.

The Negro patrolman "holds" a white suspect until a white patrolman appears and takes over. (This procedure is used even in some larger cities such as Nashville, Tampa, Miami, Savannah, Macon, Mobile, Charlotte, and Little Rock.) Yet many police chiefs are sufficiently practical to be frightened by the very notion of a white felon passing the time of day with a colored policeman on a busy street corner—until the arrival of a squad car driven by a person of the appropriate color. In recognizing this factor of danger, some administrators have permitted Negro law enforcement officers to arrest white felons but not white misdemeanants—the latter may only be arrested by whites.

Such restrictions in authority do not stem from a legal foundation; rather they are rooted in custom. They exist because of fears that Negroes will become "uppity" if placed in positions of power over white people. Vocal opponents of the introduction of colored police were somewhat pacified by these procedures. The limitations, however, while a sop to the folkways of the past, are by no means universal in the South. In Richmond, "Negro police are police officers. They have the same authority as any other police officer. They arrest white offenders, transport them to the lock-up, and testify against them in court." In Newport News, Virginia, "Race is not considered when a law is violated, regardless of whether the officer is white or Negro." In Galveston, "There is no discrimination in making arrests. If a Negro officer makes a call and whites are involved he can make the arrest. We do not have any trouble with our Negro officers and have not had any cases where they have tried to overstep their authority as an officer just because they are Negroes." (The quotations are replies to a recent questionnaire sent by the writer.)

In the South, there are not many Negro law enforcement officers who have reached a rank above patrolman. Since most Negroes have joined the force within the past decade, limitation in promotions should hardly be surprising. Yet, there has been improvement in rank in some communities. For example, until 1955, the highest status attained by Negroes in Miami was patrolman first class. Now there are several sergeants. There are currently at least two Southern cities which employ colored men as lieutenants—Daytona Beach, Florida\*, and Louisville, Ken-

tucky. It is interesting to observe that "the scarcity of Negro police promotions" is not confined to the South—it is nationwide.<sup>11</sup>

What have been the results of hiring Negro policemen in the South? White community leaders have been highly gratified. A decade ago, the Mayor of Nashville said, "Any city with a substantial Negro population cannot really afford to be without Negro policemen on its force."<sup>12</sup> The Southern Regional Council conducted a survey in 1953 and found "almost universal satisfaction . . . among police officials."<sup>13</sup> The police chief of Louisville stated, "Negro policemen have been of great value in combating any accusation of discrimination or mistreatment of the colored people by white officers." The police chief of Miami noted in 1951, "In the seven years since the first of our Negro officers was sworn in, crimes of violence in our Negro communities have been reduced by about 50 percent."<sup>14</sup>

With the passage of time, some of the objections and reservations of white patrolmen have been overcome. James Ball, in his excellent Florida study, has commented upon the white officers' fears of losing social status when Negro officers were hired. In his notes on Belle Glade, a small city in South Florida, he observed:<sup>15</sup>

The opposition to Negro policemen by about two-thirds of the other policemen in the department was a major problem at first. One difficulty was quickly solved when it became apparent that there would be discord over how white and Negro policemen should address each other. They were told by the chief to address each other as "officer" or by the rank held. The intradepartmental feeling gradually disappeared in a few months as the white officers found that the Negro patrolmen did not try to take social advantage of them. Other reasons for the acceptance of Negro policemen in the department can be attributed to the fact that: white policemen were relieved of the threat of civil rights cases from Negro

<sup>11</sup> WILLIAM M. KEPHART, *RACIAL FACTORS AND URBAN LAW ENFORCEMENT* (Philadelphia, 1957), p. 138.

<sup>12</sup> "Employment of Negro Policemen in Southern Towns and Cities", *NEW SOUTH*, September, 1948, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> "Negro Police in the South, 1953", *NEW SOUTH*, October-November, 1953, pp. 7-8.

<sup>14</sup> *NEW SOUTH*, November, 1951, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> JAMES A. BALL, III, *A STUDY OF NEGRO POLICEMEN IN SELECTED FLORIDA MUNICIPALITIES, 1954*, Master of Science thesis, Florida State University, pp. 100-101.

\* The Daytona Beach lieutenant retired October 1, 1959.

citizens; Negro patrolmen handled most of the annoying minor cases, such as drunkenness and public indecency, in the Negro section; and, white policemen developed an appreciation for the position of the Negro patrolmen as a result of being subjected to the same difficulties and dangers in performing police duties together.

Negro community leaders feel vindicated and point out that their neighborhoods are now less "rowdy", with fewer assault, profanity, and drunkenness cases. ("Before we got Negro policemen, East Market Street was so dangerous you didn't dare walk down it with your wife. Now the street is unimaginably changed. You don't even hear bad language any more.")

However, Southern Negroes are far from unanimous in their attitudes toward colored patrolmen. One of the most interesting findings in Ball's Florida study was the observation that "lower class" Negroes prefer white policemen to colored policemen.<sup>16</sup> These poorer, uneducated people, when they need help, frequently ask that a white man be sent. They constantly complain about the severe, dictatorial conduct of colored officers. When arrested by a white man they often plead guilty, but when a colored patrolman makes the arrest, they not infrequently plead not guilty. What generates this hostility when members of their own race are in positions of authority? Possibly these "lower class" people have been conditioned by tradition to readily accept only white authority. Perhaps Negro officers are resented precisely because they are performing their jobs well. They know their neighborhoods thoroughly and are aware of who creates the disorders. They work full time in the colored community and are less likely to overlook certain types of violations (such as drunkenness), the way white lawmen often do.

Yet there is also a possibility that Negro policemen *are* actually more severe with colored offenders. If this is the case, it would be quite ironic, since one of the reasons Negroes were added to the force was to combat the charge that colored people were being roughly handled by white officers. Dr. William Kephart compared

attitudes of white and Negro patrolmen in Philadelphia and made the following notation which may have relevance in the present discussion:<sup>17</sup>

Although most white patrolmen admit they are more strict with Negro than with white offenders, Negro patrolmen maintain that white patrolmen are *not* unduly strict with colored violators. The logical interpretation is that the Negro policeman, himself, is stricter with Negro than with white offenders, and by his own standards the actions of white policemen against Negro offenders do not appear to be unduly severe.

Professor Kephart found that the Philadelphia Negro law enforcement officers, disturbed by the high arrest rates among colored people, were filled with moral indignation against those who were damaging the reputation of the race. However, this same reaction of infuriation did not characterize the colored officers' dealings with the white lawbreaker. Perhaps this manifestation of righteous indignation may also be operating among Southern Negro policemen. Certainly, the charge of undue harshness requires further investigation.

The introduction of Negroes on Southern police forces has not come about without a struggle. There have been many obstacles and many petty discriminations. It is a long way from the 1930's, for example, when Louisville Negro patrolmen were not permitted to return home wearing their uniforms. (Now these men have gained increasing recognition; Louisville boasts a colored lieutenant who is presently on leave of absence in Liberia, setting up a training program for officers of that country.) But even today in some communities, Negroes are not allowed access to the headquarters building. Their presence is sometimes unwelcome when the department sponsors a short in-service training institute designed to improve the skills of the force. Nevertheless, since the end of World War II, Southern Negroes in law enforcement have made impressive strides. If they maintain their enthusiasm, combined with an objective understanding approach, the future should see their expansion and advancement.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>17</sup> KEPHART, *op. cit.*, p. 164.