

There are no 100% Americans

FOR our money, the President's finest single act in the national emergency to date is his loud-voiced demand for an end to all racial discrimination in hiring workers for the defense industries.

Any loyal inhabitant of this country, says the President, is entitled to a chance at any of these jobs, whether he be of German, Italian, colored, Jewish or any other descent. We don't know of anything more timely that could be said just now.

It's common knowledge that discrimination has been practiced here and there against members of these groups ever since the war began, and in favor of alleged 100% Americans.

The fact is that there are no 100% Americans. We're all foreigners when you trace our family trees back far enough. That goes even for our friends the Indians, sometimes called the only real 100% Americans. The Indians' ancestors in prehistoric times came over here from Asia, via the Bering Strait.

Yet in this country, which prides itself on being the melting pot, the haven for the oppressed of all lands, there is a ceaseless undertow of provincialism, nativism, chauvinism. In times of national stress, this undertow strives to become the main current. It manifests itself in Native American, Know Nothing, Ku Klux, Black Legion, Social Justice, etc., movements; and sometimes it gets considerable power.

But it was not by such philosophies that this became a great nation. The United States made the grade by holding to the opposite idea—the idea that this country is big enough and strong enough to give everybody an even chance, regardless of ancestors, backgrounds and so on.

If we alienate the loyalties of large blocks of Americans at a time like this, we shall hack at our own national throat. The common-sense thing to do is to bind those people's loyalties and gratitude to this country with every hoop of steel we can forge. The simplest and most effective of such hoops is the practice of ruling out race discrimination in the matter of filling up the pay rolls.

Not that we should take foolish chances with fifth columnists, spies, saboteurs. We shouldn't. But the government, with its F.B.I., Secret Service and kindred agencies, is well equipped to handle that stuff. The government, for illustration, took a deadly crack at it when it closed the Axis consulates in this country.

That is the kind of work the government should do. It is also the kind of work that citizens should leave to the government to do. The rank and file of us can best combat subversive tendencies by simply staying American for the duration of this emergency.

We found additional information on the topic of Executive Order 8802 in a 1943 article called "Black Brain Trust" by William A.H. Birnie:

Early in 1941, Negroes throughout the country were grumbling about their exclusion from defense jobs. The Brain Trusters decided to take direct action. A. Philip Randolph, president of the International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, an A. F. of L. union with about 11,000 Negro members, proposed a mass march on Washington. Soon there were reports that an army of 50,000 Negroes would march on the capital and picket the White House on July 1.

As the deadline approached, politicians put the screws on Randolph. "Don't do it," they argued. "You'll just inflame Southern senators and you'll be worse off than ever." A few years back, that argument probably would have prevailed, but Randolph was adamant.

"The march must go on," he said. "I am sure it will do some good." Finally President Roosevelt himself summoned Randolph, White, and several other Negro leaders to the White House. Besides the President, Secretary of War Stimson, Secretary of the Navy Knox, and key officials of the then existing Office of Production Management attended the conference.

RANDOLPH told his story bluntly. He reported that doors of defense plants were being closed to Negro workers, and feelings were running high. He wanted a presidential antidiscrimination order "with teeth in it." A few days later, Randolph was called in again and shown the draft of an order committing defense industries only. "Not enough," said Randolph, in effect. Unless the order included government agencies as well as defense industries, he was sorry but the march would take place as planned. The Negroes stood pat, and the administration gave ground. Executive Order 8802 was issued:

"... that it is the policy of the United States to encourage full participation in the national defense program by all citizens in the United States, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin . . . that all departments and agencies of the Government concerned with vocational and training programs for defense production shall take special measures appropriate to assure that such programs are administered without discrimination . . . and that all contracting agencies of the Government shall include in all defense contracts hereafter negotiated by them a provision obligating the contractor not to discriminate. . . ."