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The Black Vote's Impact on the Descent of Boss Crump

Scott Bayer

In 1940 Edward Hull Crump, often called Boss Crump, was the leader of one of the most powerful political organizations in the United States. The Crump machine was as strong as ever as the man who migrated to Memphis from Holly Springs Mississippi had transformed himself into the most influential man in Shelby County and perhaps the state of Tennessee. By 1948, however, Crump's grip over Memphis had loosened and the machine which had won over 100 elections no longer seemed invincible.

Beginning in 1940, a series of confrontations between black citizens and the white police force in Memphis occurred which escalated tension between Crump and the black community. Although Crump and other city officials made some effort to please the blacks in Memphis, these usually took the form of petty concessions such as parks and housing facilities. The officials' refusal to offer racial equality was heightened by several incidents in which Crump upheld the notion of white supremacy and segregation. As the decade neared a close, the black community demonstrated their willingness to defy Crump's authority and assert black power through their vote. Whereas before the black population was swayed by Crump's political antics and incentives, the inconsistency in his support of equality among the black and white population and the abuse of their rights eventually led to the loss of their vote. This ended in a rare defeat for Crump in the 1948 senatorial and gubernatorial election and the decline of his political machine. Crump's political success, therefore, rested on his ability to control the black vote without losing the whites loyal to his candidates. This dependency on the black vote is reflected in his policy towards the African American population in Memphis as Crump made efforts to

please them on the surface but never heeded to their more rooted desires.

In 1940, a number of police violations occurred under Police Commissioner Joe Boyle against Negroes of Memphis. The most notable involved Dr. J.B. Martin, a prominent drug store owner. Martin also owned the Memphis Red Sox, a baseball team in the Negro League, with his brother B.B. Martin and was the President of the American Negro Baseball Association. These well distinguished positions held in Memphis testify to his good character. Ultimately to his disadvantage, however, Martin was Chairman of a committee of colored Republicans in Memphis who were organizing meetings in support of the Republican Party and its 1940 presidential candidate Wendell Wilkie.¹ Martin had previously been involved in city elections, such as in 1923 as a leader of the Colored Citizens Association and supporter of the mayoral candidate opposing Crump's.² Crump knew Martin's influence on the black community and saw his involvement with the Republicans as a threat to his control of the black vote and Democratic victory.

Beginning in late October 1940, the Memphis police department stationed policemen in front of Martin's drug store. "Under a guise of a 'drive against crime,'" the officers searched customers entering and leaving the store pretending to be checking for narcotics.³ Many customers were pushed or antagonized in hopes of discouraging them from entering the store. Boyle claimed that he had reason to believe Martin was involved in drug dealing. This claim was largely based on Boyle's own generalized characterizations of Martin. He described Martin by saying, "Given an inch he will take

¹ Memorandum Regarding Police Persecution of Dr. J.B. Martin of Memphis, Roberta Church Collection.

² G. Wayne Dowdy, *Mayor Crump Don't Like It*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2006), 39.

³ "Ask Roosevelt to Halt Memphis Police Terror," E.H. Crump Collection, Memphis Public Library and Information Center.

a mile. Apparently humble on the surface, in his heart he resents the white man”.⁴ Boyle went on to describe the nerve of Martin when he sat in the white section at the Barnum & Bailey Circus. Boyle wanted to preserve the racial hierarchy in Memphis and was not keen on allowing someone like Martin to think of himself as equal to whites.

In addition to Martin, several other Negro citizens were threatened by the Memphis police. Many arrests were made on the charges of loitering. Negroes riding the segregated street cars were provoked in hopes of inciting violence which would give reason for police brutality. Black newspaper editors were harassed and threatened with further action if they did not stop printing articles regarding the situation in Memphis.⁵

White newspapers, on the other hand, were free to criticize Boyle’s actions. The *Commercial Appeal* explained their support of Martin on November 21 in an editorial under the caption “We Defend the Law”. The article criticized the actions taken by the police, calling them unconstitutional and asserting “If Dr. Martin has committed a crime, arrest him. The Commercial Appeal is not defending Dr. Martin, but the law itself.”⁶

The Memphis Commission on Interracial Cooperation, an organization made up of both blacks and whites, made a similar complaint when they petitioned Mayor Chandler regarding the Martin situation and other similar incidents against blacks. They pleaded for Negroes to either be arrested and given fair trial according to evidence, or otherwise “relieved of further molestation by the police”.⁷ The harassments committed by the police resulted in few if any legitimate arrests and were proving to deprive justice rather

⁴ “Salesman Arrested for Resisting Search,” Crump Collection.

⁵ “Ask Roosevelt to Halt Memphis Police Terror,” Crump Collection.

⁶ “Salesman Arrested for Resisting Search,” Crump Collection.

⁷ Memorandum Regarding Police Persecution, Roberta Church Papers.

than uphold it.

Crump repeatedly defended Boyle and the actions taken by the police department, attacking the *Press-Scimitar*, *Commercial Appeal*, and other newspapers for their defense of Martin. Crump was known to be a target of criticism from Wilkie, who said he was “gratified at the type of person that supported him-not a ‘Mayor Hague...nor a Mayor Kelly...nor a Crump... in the list’.”⁸ This gave Crump more reason to oppose his presidential campaign. More evidence pointing to Crump’s political motivation for the police abuse is his prevention of the hanging of a Wilkie banner across the street where the colored Republican headquarters were located. The banner stating “Our Own Joe Louis is For Wilkie” was banned from being raised. Commissioner Robert S. Fredericks of the city government claimed that, although there was no city ordinance stating so, “it is a matter of policy. I talked it over with the Mayor this morning and he agreed with me that only candidates should have their names on signs.”⁹ The city was able to ban the banner based purely on a last minute judgment made by the mayor and a city commissioner.

Along with political motivation, the actions taken by the police were indicative of a racist attitude. Boyle was a known racist, saying the black population in Memphis cannot act as they do in the North, for this is “white man’s country and always will be.”¹⁰ He clearly did not want equal economic or social opportunities, seen in his quote in the *Press Scimitar* of December 11 in which he says, “We have a large Negro population, many who have come to Memphis from the farms would be better off to return to them,

⁸ William D Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964) 280.

⁹ *Ibid.*

for there isn't enough work for the unskilled labor now in Memphis." Crump similarly attacked Martin in response to complaints. He spoke out against racial equality, declaring that Negroes must "learn their places" in society.¹¹ Crump was dedicated to white supremacy and keeping separate places for whites and blacks in Memphis. The Martin scandal gave the black community a hint of Crump's racism and reason to distrust the political boss.

Martin attempted to avoid the abuse of Boyle and Crump. In a letter sent to the influential Negro Reverend T.O. Fuller in November 1940, Martin asked him for help with the police surveillance which was ruining his drug store business. Martin was "willing to make any sacrifice" if the violations stopped, including ending his involvement in politics.¹² Martin was eventually run out of town and moved to Chicago. Similar to his brother's concession to the Boss, B.B. Martin wrote a letter to Crump in November apologizing for J.B.'s support of Wilkie. B.B. assured Crump of his own support of Roosevelt and all of the other Democratic candidates. As if that was not enough, B.B. sent Crump season passes to the Red Sox games.¹³

The police abuse did not go unnoticed by the black community. Groups less targeted by Crump's forces came forth to take action against the injustices. In late November, for example, the Memphis Youth Council of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People sent a letter to Mayor Chandler protesting the police abuse on constitutional grounds. They cited the illegality of searching without a warrant

¹⁰ "Salesman Arrested for Resisting Search," Crump Collection.

¹¹ Memorandum Regarding Police Persecution, Roberta Church Papers.

¹² J.B. Martin to T.O. Fuller, Crump Collection.

¹³ B.B. Martin to E.H. Crump, Crump Collection.

and destruction of a private business by police blockade. Furthermore, they complained of Doyle's comment in which he, "as a police official for all Memphians, presumes to claim this country for a part of its citizens."¹⁴ Whether or not their action made a difference, the Memphis Youth Council demonstrated the black community's acknowledgment of their constitutional rights and willingness to defend them.

These incidents heightened the national attention drawn to Memphis and brought more criticism to Crump. Howard Lee, Executive Secretary of the Southern Conference on Human Welfare appealed to President Roosevelt for intervention in order to protect the civil rights of Memphis Negroes. Lee claimed that Crump was "seeking to establish an 'efficient dictatorship'" and attempting to stop any form of independence in Memphis. He alluded to Crump's fear of the abolition of the poll tax system, saying that this would make it more difficult for his machine to control the voters.¹⁵

Another group hoping to alleviate conditions for the black population in Memphis was the Colored Post of the American Legion. Among rumors of a Negro revolt, the District Commander for Colored Posts wrote Mayor Chandler in 1942 to assure him that there was no organized revolt planned. He asserted that although the blacks have "a great battle to fight, and a great victory to win," this must be done through cooperation between both races, not through revolt.¹⁶ Indicating the black population's continued frustration with police violations, the Colored Post expressed their group's concern for race relations in the South and attributed much of the discord in Memphis to the police forces. They were aggravated over the distress caused by the police force in Memphis

¹⁴ Daniel D. Carter to Mayor Chandler, 26 Nov. 1940, Crump Collection.

¹⁵ Memorandum, Crump Collection.

and called forth several examples of continued police abuse. The District Commander of the post cited one incident in which he saw a police officer near Beale St. strike a Negro and curse at him for no apparent reason. The District Commander saw them as common occurrences, as the police “come right into our homes, search them, and many times abuse the occupants”.¹⁷ Most of these incidents went unreported so the group hoped to call this to the Mayor’s attention.

The Colored Post of the American Legion also became one of the leaders in lobbying for black policeman in Memphis. They asserted that the violations made by the white officers showed no sign of ending and suggested the hiring of black officers to help protect the black citizens. Asking for “some legal authority for our people in places of trust,” the District Commander referred to the better relations possible if respectable Negroes were able to serve in the police force. He thought the Negro officers would be better suited to deal with problems arising from black citizens because of the lack of communication common among accused black citizens and white officers.¹⁸

Although these instances of police brutality occurred while he was serving as mayor, Chandler tended to take a back seat when the controversies arose. He had no power over Commissioner Boyle and thus could do little on his own to promote or stop the incidents. Crump, as the leader of the political machine, did have authority over the city officials. This is often a reason why he supported them in elections and allowed them to become part of his machine. Mayor Chandler represents an individual who

¹⁶ P.L. Harden to Mayor Chandler, 8 Oct. 1942, Walter Chandler Papers.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

seemed easily surmounted by the power of Crump. A note to Crump in 1940 reveals this deference in status from Chandler to Crump: “Dear Mr. Crump: The City Commission has several matters on which we would like to have your judgment, and will appreciate an opportunity to see you on Monday, if convenient to you.”¹⁹ It is this type of relationship which transformed Crump into a “Boss”.

Just as indicative of Crump’s power over the police violations is Chandler’s records in which he revealed friendly relations with the black community. This relationship is evident in his correspondence with Reverend T.O. Fuller who praised Chandler for his efforts to ease race relations. The mayor promptly returned each of these letters and voiced interest in any concern the Reverend and other black leaders had. Chandler also demonstrated generosity with the Mayor of Beale Street, an African American elected for serving the black community.²⁰ Allowing police brutality against the Negroes of his city does not seem to be in character for Chandler. Some people even complained that Chandler was siding with the Negroes. In September of 1942, B.E. Boothe and others from the Cotton Exchange asked Mayor Chandler why the Negro Convention was able to be held at the Auditorium. Masked with claims that they were concerned with the convention being held when war supplies were needed, the cotton merchants thought it “certainly the wrong time to encourage a bunch of Northern negroes to come down here, where there is certainly a most distinct feeling of animosity growing daily between the whites and the negroes”.²¹ Chandler worked with the black population

¹⁹ G. Wayne Dowdy, *Mayor Crump Don’t Like It: Machine Politics in Memphis*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 108.

²⁰ Mayor Chandler to T.O. Fuller, Walter Chandler Papers.

²¹ B.E. Boothe to Mayor Chandler, 11 September 1942, Walter Chandler Papers.

more than most of the other white leaders in power but was forced also to remain conscious of his white supporters who had more influence. Crump possessed the most power and was more willing than Chandler to support the police and the violations against the Negroes as long as he and his machine benefited.

Crump believed in providing for the black community but only just enough to keep them happy. Instead of hiring black officers or making serious concessions to the Negroes, Crump made efforts to appease the black community in different ways while upholding the racial hierarchy which had existed for so long. In 1942 amidst rumors of Negro revolt, a “New Movement” was announced which called out to every “colored friend” to register as part of a group called the “Friends of the Administration”.²² This organization, made in attempt to promote good race relations without suggesting major change, used propaganda to lure Negroes into thinking conditions in Memphis were as favorable as could be expected. Advertised on flyers that included registration cards at the back, the city organized movement resembled the familiar method used by Crump in building up his government’s treatment of blacks.

Calling on colored citizens to register “their friendly attitude and appreciation for what has been done and what is being done for the welfare of the Colored People of Memphis,” the flyers publicized the city sanctioned improvements in Negro life.²³ With all of the “lovely Parks” with “modern swimming pools and Playgrounds,” houses enjoying “Modern Conveniences and facilities,” and a “fair share of the work,” why would the Negroes not support their local government? This is the type of influence

²² A New Movement, Walter Chandler Papers.

²³ Ibid.

Crump hoped to have over the Negroes in Memphis. If he was able to keep them happy with material advancements, then it would delay more serious issues like racial equality from coming to the surface. Organizations like the “Friends of the Administration” helped Crump to distract Negroes from the police and other problems polluting Memphis race relations. Focusing on the good aspects of race relations as well as the improvements in Negro facilities allowed Crump to keep control over the black vote.

Crump’s hold on the Negro vote was not due to support from the blacks, rather his ability to control them. Crump and his men knew if they needed more votes, they could get them from the black community. This is why Crump supported the black vote unlike most of the Southern Democrats during his time. With so many white men supporting him, Crump was able to rally black citizens and have them vote for the candidate of his choice. Out of fear, apathy, or enticement, Negro individuals would submit to the Crump and his men’s vote. Whether he just paid for their poll tax or gave them lunch, Crump often presented an incentive for Negroes if they abided. Other times, however, they voted for him out of plain fear. One man described his determination in voting Republican, but then when he tried to vote decided not to risk harm from Crump’s men who were staunchly watching him.²⁴ In one instance a colored lawyer was beaten up and arrested at the polls for merely voting against Crump.²⁵ Sometimes, Negroes would be shuttled around town so that they could vote more than once for Crump’s candidate. If the Negroes did not know who or how to vote, Crump set up signs with men teaching how to fill out the ballot for his candidate.

²⁴ Memorandum, Crump Collection.

²⁵ A. Philip Randolph to E.H. Crump, 6 April 1944, Crump Collection.

As the white leaders in Memphis continued to resist advancement toward racial equality, tension increased between the two races with more black leaders coming forth with ideas of liberty and equality. Perhaps the most prominent public threat to Crump's authority from an African American came from A. Philip Randolph. Randolph came from Florida and was gaining popularity throughout the nation as he fought for more labor opportunities for blacks. He organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925, an organization that later became the first African American labor union. In 1941, he proposed a March on Washington to protest racial discrimination in the army. Randolph had solidified his position as one of the most influential civil rights leaders when he came to Memphis in 1943.

Scheduled to speak in Memphis in November of 1943, Randolph's appearance was expected to be "a milestone in the progress of the Memphis Negro".²⁶ At 3 o'clock on the day of the appearance, the Negro leaders organizing the event were called to meet with white city officials. They were then gathered together as police officers ordered them to stop the assembly. The officers, who had been given orders from Chandler to do so, explained that Randolph's appearance would stir up more racial trouble than it would help. The assembly was called off, thus beginning a war of words between Randolph and Crump.

Randolph immediately spoke out against Crump and the other Memphis city officials, accusing the "political machine" of driving "fear and depravity in the hearts and minds of American citizens" by not allowing freedom of speech and assembly. He went on to say the people of Memphis must not allow "fascism in Memphis" and speak up for

labor rights.²⁷ Randolph suggested a public meeting with whites and blacks expressing together the right of speech and assembly. He encouraged the people of Memphis to stand up for this and expressed interest in speaking at such a meeting if it was to happen.

Members of the March on Washington Movement in New York wrote Chandler, complaining of his violation against the Constitution for not allowing free speech or the right of free assembly. They thought it blasphemous that the city officials could act so rashly during the war, for “if such a thing can happen in America, of what avail is all the terrible slaughter in this war supposedly fought to preserve the rights”.²⁸ Although the march was cancelled, the Members were influential in asserting constitutional rights and means for achieving civil rights.

As the Members of the March on Washington had expressed, World War II gave America even more reason to stand up for civil rights. In the midst of struggling for freedom at home, many African Americans from Memphis had to fight for freedom and democracy abroad in World War II. Often having to serve in segregated units, the black soldiers were reminded of the inequality waiting for them when they returned home from the war. The “Double V” campaign served as a symbol for racial equality as it “urged Americans to work for victory in war as well as victory over racism”.²⁹ African American soldiers returned to the United States determined to achieve the principles which they fought to defend. Along with fueling activism within the black community, the returning veterans stimulated white thought regarding racial equality. Many whites

²⁶ *Memphis World Newspaper*, 4 November, 1943.

²⁷ *Memphis World*, 9 November, 1943.

²⁸ Rev. L.J. Sullivan to Mayor Chandler, 23 November, 1943. Walter Chandler Papers.

²⁹ Saxe, *African-American Veterans and the Limits of Consensus*, Chapter 5, 215.

gave the black veterans the respect deserved for men who fought for our country. They realized the contradiction in continuing to deprive black citizens the rights that they fought for in the war. Other whites, however, became even more determined to suppress the Negroes as they responded to black activism with more violence. Both of these sentiments were felt in Memphis.

Randolph indeed had a chance to return to speak in Memphis, perhaps sooner than expected. On March 31, 1944 Randolph spoke at First Baptist Church on Beale Avenue. Randolph encouraged the establishment of a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) and explained to Memphis citizens why doing so was important to establishing racial equality.³⁰ He criticized the men who stopped him from speaking in November, particularly Crump, saying he “out-Hitlers Hitler” in the way that he controls black citizens with threats and violence.³¹ Randolph’s criticisms were too much for Crump not to respond.

While he had remained fairly silent in response to the original cancellation in November, Crump quickly defended himself and the previous actions taken by white leaders. Crump reiterated white officials’ fear of race riot. He thought Memphis a potential city for riot, saying “There are a lot of white people who hate the Negroes... likewise there are Negroes who hate the whites”.³² This would make it possible for an “upstart, vicious, demagogic type” like Randolph to come in and stir up problems.³³ Crump and the other leaders labeled Randolph as “radical” and hoped the Negroes in

³⁰ Philip Randolph folder, 1944, Crump Collection.

³¹ Memphis World, “Randolph Scores Attitude Of Memphis Labor Leaders,” April 4, 1944.

³² Memphis World, “Crump Speaks,” April 4, 1944.

³³ Ibid.

Memphis would think the same and remain happy with the existing way of governing.

Crump, however, dodged the actual argument at hand as he often did. He avoided talking about racial equality or labor rights, instead changing the topic to something more easily defended. Resorting to a familiar tactic which he often used when criticized of mistreating the blacks in Memphis, Crump referred to the things he had provided for the black community. The parks, swimming pools, and housing projects he supplied provided distractions to the many disadvantages facing Negroes. These things gave instant gratification while other desires such as equal opportunity employment would be gradual. Crump also referred to the common violence among Negroes which the white police have to deal with and control.³⁴ He saw this as giving the white officials the authority to control such violent events from occurring.

Randolph thought differently and this time countered Crump's statements with more rational arguments. Randolph had spoken in cities across the country and had not had problems with riots or violence starting before, so he asked why Memphis should be different. Furthermore, if Crump is right in saying that friendly relations exist between whites and blacks in Memphis, then why is his speech such a threat to their relations? Riot should not be a possibility if the Negroes are actually happy in their position. Speaking out against Crump's attempt to keep the Negroes subdued, Randolph concludes by saying the "Negroes do not want to be well kept slaves".³⁵ Nearing a century after slavery had ended, blacks in Memphis were still able to compare their situation to enslavement.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *Memphis World*, 4 April, 1944.

As if Randolph's criticism of Crump and the Memphis situation in the newspapers was not enough, Randolph sent a letter to Crump a few days after leaving Memphis. Written in derogatory fashion and full of sarcasm, Randolph elaborated on his complaints to Crump and opinion of his leadership. Randolph claimed that in order for the citizens of Memphis to know the truth about Crump's policies and their effect on the city, he was challenging him to a public debate to be held in Memphis with citizens in attendance. His suggested subject of the debate was whether "Memphis Colored Citizens Are Deriving Any Benefits That Are Worthwhile From Gifts of Jim Crow Schools, Parks, Hospitals, Streets, Electricity and Water"; he then added that he could include fresh air on that list except that Crump was unable to attain a monopoly on that.³⁶ Randolph expressed his belief that blacks in Memphis were better off before Crump came to town. He wanted to prove that blacks were not happy with Crump's policies towards them, contrary to what Crump claimed to believe. Randolph maintained that blacks would have challenged Crump before had they not been "scared you would use your Gestapo ruthlessly to beat them up and run them out of town."³⁷ Crump never gave Randolph the pleasure of debating him but Randolph had left his mark on Memphis. If they did not already know before, the Negro citizens were informed by Randolph that their situation in Memphis was not how it was in all of America. Boss Crump's control over the black population through the use of illegal measures was recognized as something that needed to end.

As done before, the Memphis city government used more propaganda efforts to

³⁶ A. Philip Randolph to E.H. Crump, 6 April 1944, Crump Collection.

³⁷ Ibid.

make it seem like race relations in Memphis were good. The “Benefits and Opportunities for Colored Citizens of Memphis” was a pamphlet issued in 1945 discussing the economic opportunities in Memphis for its black citizens. Although it seemed like a useful and uplifting document at first, it soon received criticism from those who realized it left out many issues like the lack of black policeman or fireman. Although it claimed that Memphis included the black population and sought to provide opportunities for them, it was clear that they were still a second-class citizen.³⁸

In 1947, the American Heritage Foundation, a "patriotic, non-partisan, educational organization," proposed a program to the Truman administration centered on a Freedom Train which would tour the country displaying important documents from America's history. In hopes of inspiring a nation lacking in patriotism during the aftermath of World War II, the foundation initiated the program in effort to bring forth the principles of freedom and liberty as well as stimulate American citizen's involvement in political and community activity.³⁹ The Freedom Train display consisted of a seven car railroad exhibit housing important American documents including the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Emancipation Proclamation. The unit was manned by decorated U.S. marines for protection. The train would tour over 300 cities, including all 48 states, and travel a distance of 33,100 miles. The American Heritage Foundation sent a letter to each of the 300 city governments which would be involved in the Freedom Train's tour. Each city was asked to host a "rededication week" which would lead up to the day of the train's stop and consist of activities stimulating individual

³⁸ “Benefits and Opportunities for Colored Citizens of Memphis,” Walter Chandler Papers.

³⁹ Freedom Train-American Heritage Foundation 1947, The James J. Pleasants, Jr. Papers.

patriotic interest. The slogan for this week would be "Freedom is Everybody's Job".⁴⁰

In October 1947, U.S. Attorney General Tom Clark sent a letter to Mayor Polk of Memphis reiterating the ideas behind the Freedom Train's tour. Mayor Polk responded to the Attorney General with apparent interest. The next couple of months were filled with letters to the Memphis government from organizations and people volunteering their effort in preparing for rededication week. Among the groups were important organization such as the American Legion in Memphis, the YMCA, and several women's clubs.⁴¹ It appeared that Memphis would be among the cities participating in the tribute to America's founding principles. The scheduled date for the Memphis stop, however, was January 7, 1948. This meant the responsibility for Memphis preparations would be up to newly elected Mayor Pleasants and the Crump administration.

On November 17, 1947, Mayor Pleasants announced that the Freedom Train in Memphis would be segregated. The display would consist of six hours of viewing for the Negroes, and six for the whites.⁴² Shortly following this announcement, the American Heritage Foundation stated the Memphis stop would be cancelled because of their refusal to allow a desegregated display. The Memphis administration's refusal was in direct opposition to the policy agreed upon by the Board of Trustees of the Heritage Foundation, who passed this resolution unanimously:

"RESOLVED, that no segregation of any individuals or groups of any kind on the basis of race or religion be allowed at any exhibition of the Freedom Train held

⁴⁰ Letter from Winthrop W. Aldrich to Mayor Polk, 21 Oct. 1947, Pleasants Papers.

⁴¹ Freedom Train-American Heritage Foundation 1947, Pleasants Papers.

⁴² "Memphis Definitely Off Train's Schedule," Pleasants Papers.

anywhere."⁴³

The Freedom Train would not be stopping in Memphis unless the Crump administration agreed to allow whites and blacks view the documents together.

Mayor Pleasants quickly placed the blame on the American Heritage Foundation for not allowing Memphis to segregate the train viewing. The Memphis city government did not make the ultimate decision so “condemn the Foundation, and not your officials, who are working in your interest.”⁴⁴ He claimed that it was necessary for the exhibit to be segregated because of the large number of blacks living in Memphis. People from the North did not have any right to interfere with the way of life established in the South which he claimed allowed for harmonious relations between blacks and whites. Echoing arguments made by officials against the Randolph speech, Pleasants said a desegregated viewing of the Freedom Train would be too great a potential of racial violence and conflict.

Mayor Pleasants’ office was flooded with responses expressing their support or disdain for the mayor's decision. Most letters from individuals praised the mayor, encouraging him to stand firm. Some went further than his decision implied, saying there is no reason for the South to celebrate freedom since they have not had it since 1865. Several people defended Mayor Pleasants’ decision by associating it with state's rights.⁴⁵ This argument was based on the idea that the Attorney General and other national foundations had no right to dictate to Memphis on how the program could be run in its own state and city.

⁴³ “News from... The American Heritage Foundation,” Pleasants Papers.

⁴⁴ “Memphis Definitely Off Train’s Schedule,” Pleasants Papers.

Most organizations, however, such as the Memphis Labor Review and the American Veteran's Committee scolded the decision, implying that it probably came from higher officials such as Crump. Pleasants had no response other than to criticize Barney Taylor, the head of the Veteran's Committee and his policy of permitting Negro Veterans to join the organization. Calling him "a hired agitator and trouble maker in the South," Pleasants looked down upon Taylor's support of racial equality.⁴⁶ The Minister's Council spoke out in an article published in the *Memphis World* on December 2, 1947. Referring to Mayor Pleasants' radio address as "devoid of social vision or social conscious," the article found no logical reasoning in the decision not to allow a desegregated Freedom Train showing.⁴⁷ Especially post World War II where men from Memphis had died for democracy and their country, they could not believe the Mayor and others would not allow a unified showing of the train. He had damaged the population of Memphis to the entire country.

Crump quickly came to the defense of the city official's decision in a statement delivered to the Memphis public. Crump began by referring to the good conditions created by the tight enforcement of law in Memphis. He advised the citizens to think calmly regarding the decision regarding segregation, saying "a custom of 150 years can't be sidetracked in a day or a year and made workable."⁴⁸ He then went on to allude to how segregated conditions are better off for both blacks and whites. Considering the Freedom Train would only be on exhibit for 12 hours, the Negroes would probably be

⁴⁵ Correspondence, Crump Collection.

⁴⁶ *Memphis World*, 25 Nov. 1947.

⁴⁷ *Memphis World*, 2 Dec. 1947.

⁴⁸ "Memphis Definitely Off Train's Schedule," Pleasants Papers.

pushed to the back and not have enough time to see the documents. This then would cause potential problems as the Negroes tried to push their way in. Crump claimed to sympathize with the black citizens, professing good relations with them in the past as he "never felt too great to do the little things and never too proud to do the humble things" for them.⁴⁹ He even joked about the subject as he "replied that he thought the train had 'run out of gas' when asked when it would be in Memphis."⁵⁰ Crump's drawn out defense of the segregation of the Freedom Train is one of the several hints that Crump had a big part in Mayor Pleasants' decision. Just as he had supported Chandler before regarding the police brutality, Crump defended another member of his machine in Pleasants.

Other implications of Crump's involvement in the decision include a letter from Mayor Dacus of West Memphis addressed to Mr. Crump. Newspapers had reported Dacus's interest in replacing the Memphis stop with one in West Memphis. Dacus denied these reports in his letter and assured Crump he and the other city officials of West Memphis respected Crump's decision and fully supported it.⁵¹ Officials such as Dacus were quick to acknowledge the authority of Crump.

Many newspapers from other cities mocked Crump and other Memphis city officials as they thought it ridiculous to demand segregation for an event standing for freedom and liberty. The *Tupelo Journal* explicitly criticized the Boss Crump Machine, saying his dictatorship over Memphis had gone to a climax as he deprived the citizens of a celebrated tour which would probably never be available again. In the article, titled

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ *New York Times*, 25 Dec. 1947.

"Say 'Memphis' And Hold Your Nose," the author questioned if "it be wise to let the white and colored people of that controlled, boss-ridden area look at the Declaration of Independence at all?"⁵² Many people found it ironic that Crump would allow the blacks to vote at the same polls as whites but not let them view America's founding documents together. Likewise, in places of business or when it was to the Boss's advantage, areas were allowed to be desegregated. Crump's administration was exposed in the public as an anti-American city.

Crump's rejection of the Freedom Train in Memphis fueled opposition to his authoritative control over the city. The Freedom Train represented America's desire for patriotism and an effort to move on from World War II and celebrate the country's democratic freedoms. Crump became a symbolic figure making Memphis distinct from much of the country where people were ready to move forward in regards to civil rights. With Truman's Civil Rights Program going through Congress, Crump again revealed his determination to uphold white supremacy in Memphis. African Americans were once again set to deal with a white leader in their city who kept them inferior.

The abuse of civil rights in America had gained international attention. Especially during the aftermath of World War II, it was ironic that the country that fought for principles of freedom and democracy had flaws in their own democratic system. Referring to the forty lynchings in America since D-Day, the Russian delegate told the United Nation's Subcommittee on Human Rights that "the lynching of Negroes in the

⁵¹ Letter from Mayor Dacus to Crump, Crump Collection, 230 Da 1947.

⁵² "Say 'Memphis' And Hold Your Nose," Crump Collection.

United States is the most horrible crime of civilization”.⁵³ Whether or not this was an overstatement, the United States had issues to deal with which was apparent internationally. U.S. Attorney General Tom Clark was embarrassed after seeing the NAACP petition. He also knew that the nation was “under the critical scrutiny of the world” and that no act such as lynching “will go unobserved by our enemies.”⁵⁴ International pressure was just one of the reasons Truman and many other leaders were pushing for a civil rights plan.

On October 29, 1947, a committee appointed by President Truman proposed 35 recommendations to Congress regarding civil rights. They recommended “segregation be wiped out of American life ‘now’”.⁵⁵ Also included in the recommendations were fair employment legislation, anti-lynching laws, and anti-poll tax laws. Truman supported the Civil Rights Committee’s report, saying he hoped it would be “an American charter of human freedom in our time.”⁵⁶ Truman said it was the correct time for this kind of plan for moral, economic, and international reasons.

The report, which was published under the title *To Secure These Rights*, began with a presentation concerning the many recent violations of civil rights in America as submitted by a recent NAACP petition.⁵⁷ This was followed by a series of recommendations for safeguarding these rights. Truman received many letters from Southerners expressing their feelings regarding the report. Echoing the sentiment that Crump had often expressed when criticized for his stance on segregation, one writer

⁵³ *Memphis World*, 5 Dec. 1947.

⁵⁴ *Memphis World*, 4 Nov. 1947.

⁵⁵ “Wipe Out Segregation Now, Urged Truman Civil Rights Body,” Crump Collection.

⁵⁶ *Memphis World*, 4 Nov. 1947.

⁵⁷ Monroe Billington, *Civil Rights, President Truman and the South*, *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol.

claimed that “if the do-gooders and Damyankees would keep their noses out of our Business as regarding the negroes of the South we will get along fine as we have been getting along for years.”⁵⁸ Arguments that had been used over a century ago were being resurrected as white Southerners once again fought to defend their racial superiority.

On February 2, 1948, President Truman announced that he was including ten recommendations of the Civil Rights Committee in a proposal to Congress. Truman’s plan would have huge implications on Memphis and the entire South. The four proposals which would have the greatest impact on the South were the establishment of a permanent FEPC, an anti-lynching law, an anti-poll tax measure, and a law against discrimination in interstate transportation facilities.⁵⁹ Truman wanted to “guarantee the same rights to every person regardless of who he is, where he lives or what his racial, religions or national origins are.”⁶⁰ This would end segregation in Memphis and force white supremacists to concede to racial equality.

The proposals were immediately praised by the African American community and those supporting their racial progress. The NAACP thanked the President for the report and said if it was “followed will make real our principles of human freedom.”⁶¹ If the recommendations were passed, African Americans would finally feel like citizens equal to the other whites that they lived with. This would be beyond a new park or a new school. It would spark their social advancement.

Many African Americans, however, were realistic of the chances of the full plan

58, No. 2. (Apr. 1973), pp. 127-139.

⁵⁸ Monroe Billington, *Civil Rights, President Truman and the South*, 131.

⁵⁹ Monroe Billington, *Civil Rights, President Truman and the South*, 132.

⁶⁰ *Memphis World*, 4 Nov. 1947.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

going through. While grateful for Truman's support of the plan, they were skeptical of the likelihood that these laws could actually go into effect with the current government. Some questioned whether such legislation could be passed and if the "expressed desires and wishes of President Truman in the present Congress [could] be lifted above mere words."⁶² Furthermore, references were made from both blacks and whites accusing Truman of playing to the Northern Negro vote in light of the upcoming Presidential election.⁶³ An article published in the *Memphis World* urged black citizens to evaluate words vs. action. They had been fed talk of civil rights progress before and it was often to no avail. The author looked forward to the upcoming election of 1948 and encouraged blacks to be "harsh and uncompromising in our analysis of men and situations" who are running for government positions.⁶⁴ They wanted candidates who will take all possible measures to initiate progress for African Americans.

While blacks in the South were hoping for the plan to be implemented, many Southern whites were adamantly opposed to Truman and the civil rights proposals. Political leaders across the South spoke out against the plan and plotted ways of preserving the "South", or the traditional Southern white interests. Memphis newspapers were full of reports explaining the white defiance in what was called "the greatest upheaval since the Confederates fired on Fort Sumter," which opened the Civil War.⁶⁵ As Truman was a part of the Democratic Party, Southern Democrats were immediately concerned with the future of their party and the split in interests within the party.

⁶² *Memphis World*, 6 Feb. 1948.

⁶³ Monroe Billington, *Civil Rights, President Truman and the South*, 133.

⁶⁴ *Memphis World*, 6 Feb. 1948.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*.

Initial reactions from Southern Democrats to this split ranged from suggesting the formation of a new party to Southern secession. President Truman's office was flooded with letters from individuals expressing their outrage with the proposals, often through elaborate metaphors. One man said when Truman asked Congress to pass the legislation, he pressed "down the Crown of Thorns on the South's brow and crisify [sic] the South's people on a Communistic Cross disguised in Negro Equality."⁶⁶ Another claimed if the measures were passed "there will be enough blood shed to make the Mississippi River run RED."⁶⁷ Truman's plan had touched upon something which Southerners felt emotionally willing to do anything to stop. Their reaction was not rational or specific to the legality of the proposals; rather it was personal and emotionally fueled.

Southern political leaders expressed their dissatisfaction with Truman's plan in a more civilized manner. Mississippi Governor Fielding Wright led Southern Democrats against the proposal, calling a "Southern Governor's Conference" at Tallahassee, Florida.⁶⁸ This meeting would serve as a Southern Democratic convention independent of the National Party convention in Philadelphia. The men plotted political means, such as withholding Southern electoral votes, in order to assure that Truman was not elected in the 1948 presidential election. The main objections from the Southern leaders were directed to the anti-lynching legislation and fair employment practices. Representative Kefauver of Tennessee, while opposing the poll tax, believed the other proposals were "unconstitutional and are getting away from our system of government".⁶⁹ The men not

⁶⁶ Monroe Billington, *Civil Rights, President Truman and the South*, 134.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Memphis World*, 6 Feb. 1948.

⁶⁹ *Press Scimitar* 4 Feb. 1948.

only opposed the proposals out of personal belief, but thought them out of line with the Constitution and legal form of government.

The Southern Democrats feared what would happen if Truman's plan was passed and were determined to use whatever legal means necessary to prevent it from happening. Senator Stennis of Mississippi thought the proposals would "sweep aside many of what remnants we have of State's rights," and, if passed, "[we] will lose many of our social habits and customs in the South."⁷⁰ Southern white men felt as though they had already been stripped of some of their constitutional rights beginning with the Civil War and were afraid of more Northern imposition. Senator Russell of Georgia claimed that President Truman was "planning an FBI 'gestapo' to break down race segregation in the South."⁷¹ Russell was able to compare Northern desegregation efforts to Hitler just as Randolph previously did to Crump's segregation implementation. He felt as though the Truman plan would be a direct violation of the South's rights, as if it was a foreign force imposing against their rights.

Crump agreed with the Southern Democrats who were organizing opposition to Truman and his civil rights plan. Crump asserted that he would vote for a Democrat in November, but that it would not be Truman. By proposing the plan to Congress, Truman had "endeavored to reduce the South to a country of crawling cowards."⁷² He agreed that Northerners and others lobbying for Truman's legislation had no business intermingling in the South's affairs. Once again mentioning the facilities held by Negroes in Memphis, Crump claimed the good race relations in Memphis and the lack of necessity for

⁷⁰ *Memphis World*, 6 Feb. 1948.

⁷¹ *Press Scimitar*, 6 Feb. 1948.

change.⁷³

Crump characteristically remained optimistic and aggressive in the Southern Democrats' ability to stand firm. Although he knew Truman would be nominated, a "defeat sometimes carries people forward" and the Southern Democrats would find their own means of persevering.⁷⁴ He declared that they would appoint their own Democratic presidential candidate, as "we owe it to ourselves and to the South to rebuke the perpetrator of this vicious legislation."⁷⁵ Crump and the other Southern Democrats united in what became known as the States' Rights ticket, or the Dixiecrats.

Always aware of the political implications of his words and actions, Crump was less aggressive in his policy than more extreme Southern leaders. In July of 1948, the States Rights leaders held a nomination convention for their Presidential candidate. Although Crump had originally sent emissaries to the first States' Rights meeting, he declined to take part in this convention. The Dixiecrats at the time were talking about revolt and been a bit too extreme for Crump and other political machines who led industrialized populations with "heavy Negro voting strength".⁷⁶ If Crump aligned himself too much with leaders that spoke so much of white supremacy and the fear of racial intermingling he would lose the support and vote of more blacks in Memphis. Crump knew that the black vote was important to his control over Memphis and Shelby County and wanted to make some kind of effort not to lose it. The lack of representation at the convention demonstrated the lack of organization and capability of the Dixiecrats

⁷² *New York Times*, 2 Mar. 1948.

⁷³ Letter from Crump to Mr. R.M. McKay, Crump Collection.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ William D Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964) 324.

⁷⁶ *New York Times*, 19 Jul. 1948.

as it seemed unlikely that they could pull together a victory.

Crump, nevertheless, continued to support the Dixiecrat ticket and campaigned vigorously for its Presidential candidate, Strom Thurmond. Thurmond wrote Crump a few months before the election asking for suggestions from him regarding the States' Rights campaign in Tennessee. Asking him for the "benefit of your views," Thurmond hoped Crump's support would help him to win the state.⁷⁷ Newspapers acknowledged the potential influence Crump would have on the Tennessee presidential election, but began to realize he might only sway his loyal Shelby county supporters.⁷⁸ As the election drew near, it was evident that "Dixiecrat prospects became tied to the declining fortunes of Memphis machine boss E.H. Crump."⁷⁹ Crump's conflicts with popular politicians Estes Kefauver and Gordon Browning were losing him support throughout the state. Just as Crump's influence over Tennessee was lessening, so too was the possibility of a Dixiecrat victory in the presidential election.

Besides campaigning for Thurmond for president, Crump was also involved in the Tennessee state election. Although he realized the odds were against his candidate for senator and governor, personal distaste for the opposing candidates drew him in. If Gordon Browning had not been running for governor, Crump stated "It would have been my very great pleasure to say I am through with anything in the state. My activities will only be in Shelby County where there will be but little trouble."⁸⁰ Crump's power over Tennessee had resulted from his control of Memphis but the state power had dwindled

⁷⁷ J. Strom Thurmond to E.H. Crump, 16 August 1948, Crump Collection.

⁷⁸ *New York Times*, 23 Oct. 1948.

⁷⁹ Kari Frederickson, *Dixiecrat Revolt and the end of the Solid South*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

⁸⁰ William D. Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis*, 327.

and Crump realized this.

In the Tennessee Democratic primary of 1948, “African Americans joined forces with an outraged white middle class to elect Gordon Browning as governor.”⁸¹ Crump’s choice for senator had lost as well. On election day, the “old morbid fear has gone from Shelby County. No longer are men afraid to do right.”⁸² In one of the few honest elections in Memphis’ recent past, Crump suffered his first defeat since 1928. Although both of Crump’s candidates acquired the most votes in Shelby County, the margin of victory was not as great as in the past.

Immediately following the election, citizens of Memphis could tell that something was different. Crump no longer seemed to be dominating their politics and “people began to talk about this new freedom which had always been assured them.”⁸³ Blacks had been able to register their vote without the fear of abuse from Crump’s men. Thurmond lost the presidential election and although Truman’s civil rights proposals did not pass, African Americans could look forward to more civil rights advancements to come. Never again would Crump be able to control their voting rights in such restraining fashion.

As A. Philip Randolph had predicted in his letter to Crump in 1944, “the day of boss rule machine politics all over America is nearing its end and you too will soon get the gate by the decent Negro and white citizens of your city.”⁸⁴ The incidents of police brutality, Crump’s treatment of Randolph, and the rejection of the Freedom Train angered

⁸¹ G. Wayne Dowdy, *Mayor Crump Don’t Like It: Machine Politics in Memphis*, 111.

⁸² William D. Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis*, 330.

⁸³ William D. Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis*, 333.

⁸⁴ A. Philip Randolph to E.H. Crump, 6 April 1944, Crump Collection.

African Americans and turned them against Crump more than ever before. World War II provided blacks with experiences which further emboldened them to fight for equality as well as making whites more aware of the need for a change in American race relations. In addition, Truman's civil rights program allowed blacks in Memphis to see that change was within reach. Although Crump still yielded power in Memphis after 1948, he was not nearly as powerful as he had been a decade earlier. The black citizens would no longer be happy with only getting new parks or schools whenever they had a problem. Although it would be several years before the Civil Rights Movement began and African Americans achieved substantial progress towards racial equality, small steps had been taken. The power to vote for their candidate of choice gave them the means to elect officials more likely to serve the black community. Boss Crump had lost the black vote in Memphis and with it lost much of his power.