

PAINTING THE PICTURE OF BLACK FEDERAL WORKERS

Slightly to the left of center in the painting is a refined gentleman sitting in a chair with his legs crossed. The chair sits on a checkerboard-design floor. Farther to the gentleman's left is a globe; behind him through an open window can be seen well-tended crops that span a sprawling plantation. On the other side of the table sit two women, one younger and the other older, interacting with a map. Meanwhile, a young boy stands at rapt attention at the stately gentleman's immediate side, clutching a compass in the same hand that rests on the globe. This eighteenth-century scene convincingly portrays the posh gentleman as a man of means, civility, and respect in accordance with the grand manner style of paintings popularized at the time wherein subjects were depicted in their idealized, not actual state. Heightening the picture's focus on the main subjects is that instead of being inside of a regular room, they appear to be onstage, ornately displayed and centrally placed in front of large, draping orange curtains that border the painting. On closer inspection, however, one can observe that five subjects are present, not just the four readily seen around the table.

What is significant about the bordering orange curtains is that they appear to camouflage the presence of a Negro slave, whose body is outlined on the far right side of the painting, but who lacks definitive facial features in contrast

to the central subjects. While the actual identity of the enslaved individual is unconfirmed, what is definite is that this 1796 Edward Savage painting, *The Washington Family*, effectively memorialized the first president of the United States of America, George Washington.¹

In exploring the world of black federal workers in Washington, DC, it is appropriate, albeit ironic, to begin by invoking the name of one of the nation's first and most famous government employees, General George Washington. The main thrust and core argument of the following text on black federal public sector workers in Washington is essentially captured by the scene depicted in Savage's 1796 portrait. Washington's presence speaks to the very heart of the American Dream—the concept that hard workers who apply themselves will be rewarded for their labors.² The American Dream, while not absolute for all Americans, involves variable interpretations of “success,” most of which correspond to themes of financial security, meaningful personal relationships, respect from peers, and esteemed social positions. While progress toward this American Dream can arguably be measured socially, artistically, or politically, it is likely that in America's capitalistic economy, financial growth remains one of the most influential metrics for measuring progress toward this dream.

George Washington certainly represented the upward drive of the American Dream ethos, ascending to the presidency after having started from relatively modest means earlier in life. There is no question that Washington labored to prove himself by demonstrating valor and leadership on the battlefield in addition to prudence and economy in his personal business affairs. No one gifted Washington the presidency—he earned it based on the profound goodwill he enjoyed from his peers. As the highest-ranking federal officer of a fledgling republic, Washington was especially sensitive to his public image; he wanted his presence to reflect the highest ideals of all Americans and is thus widely credited for establishing dignity and respect in the office of the presidency.

In considering the American Dream framework and the excellent model established by one of its pioneering public servants, it is also essential to evaluate the presence of the lone Negro slave in *The Washington Family* portrait. This individual also probably has aspirations to fulfill the American Dream—or at least his conception of it—which may differ from Washington's, but remains consistent in substance. After all, pursuit of the American Dream has been no less intense for black Americans than for any other Americans. Anyone even vaguely familiar with the history of blacks in the United States of America is keenly aware of the complex web of emotions, thoughts, and actions encompassing both triumph and tribulation over several centuries, ever

since the *White Lion* ship arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, with the first recorded shipment of enslaved Africans in 1619.

In evaluating how the American Dream was historically perceived by African Americans, it is important to recall that dating back to what I call the “era of enslavement,” black Americans have traditionally always been economically disadvantaged relative to whites.³ Black labor has not enjoyed the same degree of financial success that has marked the continuous gains of whites in the private sector over the same time period. In addition to successful, long-standing, blue chip, white-owned companies like Caswell-Massey, DuPont, and Colgate, the ability of a crafty entrepreneur to pursue an open-ended income by sparing no mercy—or expense—along the way has been personified by some infamous robber barons and captains of industry of the early twentieth century (e.g., John D. Rockefeller, Cornelius Vanderbilt, J. P. Morgan), all of whom were white males. The private sector, in employing standard rules of Darwinian theory (e.g., “survival of the fittest”) has traditionally disregarded blacks as key contributors to free market economic advancement insofar as many working blacks do not control the means of their own production. This largely remained true until the federal government, much like Washington in his first presidency, took the lead in showing how the descendants of slaves could in fact contribute meaningfully to the growth of a dominant global superpower.

The United States’ role as a dominant global superpower was essentially concretized with its involvement in the Second World War. The country’s conversion from an agricultural force to an industrial powerhouse was completed in the postwar boom when economic growth translated into increased individual growth for many Americans. Many industries shifted gears to wartime production and new economic opportunities for employment were created in response to pressures for labor to maintain high rates of production. Not only did white women enter the workforce in unprecedented numbers, but blacks of both genders found new entry points to the American economy as well. One of the main points of entry was the federal public sector.

DREAM DEFERRED

This book, *American Dream Deferred*, is a complex study that explores two competing and at times contradictory core concepts: the American Dream and a critique of the American Dream embodied in the poem “Harlem (Dream Deferred)” by Langston Hughes. In the poem Hughes demonstrates his genius by encapsulating in just eleven lines the ongoing struggle for economic security, dignity, and respect experienced by many blacks in pursuit of the American Dream:

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

Many historians accurately chronicle the public sector as a rich source of employment for black Americans in contrast to the more hostile and discriminatory environment in the private sector environment. In addition to the increased economic security these public sector jobs provided, many blacks became emboldened to increase their levels of political participation while on the job via public sector union membership. What is often intimated but never adequately explored is the degree and level of resistance faced by black federal employees while embracing their new roles as professionals in society. In other words, the American Dream was not easy to realize for black workers, even when they were directly employed as federal civil servants for America itself. Despite the heavily publicized battles for freedom and pride in the mainstream media during the civil rights movement, many black public sector employees privately waged battles for dignity and respect within the confines of their newfound employment. Using the few legal and social mechanisms at their disposal to exert pressure for grassroots change, these employees were resourceful in creating new solutions to an old problem that simply would not go away easily or quietly.

American Dream Deferred explores the tensions of two core concepts (the American Dream and Dream Deferred) with the nation's capital serving as the background setting. Washington, DC, is not only the capital city that represents the seat of power and policy of the American people and its government, it also represents events similar to those that occurred in many large metropolitan areas once deindustrialization helped spark mass suburbanization in the postwar era. More blacks became employed in the public sector to keep the large urban centers operational once openings were created by fleeing former white inhabitants. Much like the black servant who was fortunate to be included in the painting of the Washington family, but was still only partially depicted in Savage's portrait, federal sector blacks were intimately in-



FIGURE 2. Langston Hughes, one-time Washington, DC, resident, poet, and author of “Harlem (Dream Deferred)” in 1951.

volved in the construction and maintenance of federal affairs, but were mostly partial beneficiaries of their own efforts. And here is what makes Savage's portrait so wonderfully representative of the book's central thesis: while both the slave and Washington shared the same space in *The Washington Family* portrait, and while both likely "worked hard" in the fulfillment of their duties, each had different expectations and outcomes for their investment of labor. In other words, no matter how hard the slave worked for General Washington, his American Dream would have to defer to that of his owner. No matter how hard black federal workers worked in DC, the question remained whether their collective American Dream would have to defer to that of their employer.

GOOD GOVERNMENT JOB

In general, black Americans considered the federal government quite favorably as a worthwhile employer, and therefore felt encouraged to pursue these jobs as a preferred option. For instance, Gladys Derricotte was well-known in her family circle for repeatedly doling out this simple, direct advice to her children and other relatives over the years: "Go on and get yourself a good government job!"⁴

Derricotte was adamant because this same advice had worked for her. Originally hailing from Texas, Derricotte moved to the nation's capital in 1947 to search for government work, having heard from relatives that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) was hiring. Thirty-five years later, Derricotte retired from the public sector along with her husband Randolph, who worked just as long as a civil servant in the postal service. In the interim, the Derricottes were able to realize (at least part of) their American Dream by purchasing a home, enjoying a solid middle-class lifestyle, and sending their children to college. Two of their daughters, Denise Derricotte and Michelle Peyton, followed their parents' lead and became federal government employees and homeowners as well. When Gladys Derricotte's granddaughter, Tisha Derricotte, also became a GAO employee like her grandmother, she became the third generation of black workers in just one family to seek the American Dream through federal employment in Washington, DC.

While not the norm, the Derricottes' experience was not unusual. The idea of a "good government job" was very prevalent in the African American community during 1941–81. In fact, federal employment benefited countless black families whose breadwinners earned stable salaries outside of the restrictive agricultural, manufacturing, and service sectors in which African Americans had traditionally toiled before the Second World War (e.g., seven out of every ten employed black women were restricted to domestic work in 1940).⁵ Government work also served as an entrée to higher-ranking jobs for black em-



FIGURE 3. An illustration from Horatio Alger's "Luck & Pluck" series, circa 1874. Library of Congress.

ployees who lacked high school diplomas or college degrees.⁶ Whereas black workers routinely suffered exclusion from comparable higher-paying, professionally ranked jobs in the private sector, the federal government provided broader access to clerical, semiprofessional, and in some cases, professional positions. Such unprecedented access to economic opportunity prompted Gloster Current, a former top official of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), to facetiously call the federal government “the largest civil rights organization” in the country.⁷

While the federal government’s structural approach to fairness certainly challenged historical socioeconomic norms for blacks, federal employment ultimately did not substantively change black economic stratification. This sobering story of underpaid and underpromoted black federal workers illustrates that the public sector was no complete safe haven from the constant occurrence of racial discrimination, which merely adapted and evolved over the decades. The culmination of this research is my effort to challenge the overly optimistic thinking that black northern migration to cities such as Washington, DC, during and after the Second World War, while understandably fraught with some shortcomings, was overall a boon to the African American condition. Despite several decades of workplace rights activism and changing racial attitudes, black federal workers remained deeply marginalized on the job.

This book explains the seemingly intractable subjugated status of black federal workers. For at first blush, the primary movement of blacks up north, and secondarily into federal jobs certainly fostered *change over time* with respect to a growing black middle class. In fact, so many black workers successfully descended upon Washington, that E. Franklin Frazier observed that due to the “large numbers of Negroes employed in the federal government, Negroes in the nation’s capital had incomes far above those in other parts of the country.” Furthermore, these higher incomes enabled blacks to “engage in forms of consumption and entertainment that established [federal employment’s] pre-eminence among American Negroes.”⁸ Full economic citizenship was finally within grasp for many a black worker who otherwise did not fit the mold of a young, upstart white male courting American Dream success as described in a typical Horatio Alger novel (e.g., *Luck & Pluck*).

What was *consistent over time* was the ever-adapting nature of racial discrimination that essentially neutralized any collective gains that had amassed. My research is part of a vivid, historical understanding that shows even though black federal workers in DC were “better off” than those blacks who remained trapped in depressed southern economies, they were nonetheless consistently restricted from upwardly mobile economic and social growth opportunities.

The data bear out my argument that lower wages and slower raises for black workers stubbornly persisted in spite of official federal interventions from above and black-initiated grassroots efforts from below. My book examines the irony of how a “good government job” did not secure freedom as much as it secured the fantasy of freedom. The fact remained: *if blacks were thus restricted in the public sector, they were similarly restricted in the private sector, if not more so*. As a barometer of collective progress, black public sector workers are an overlooked group for insight into blacks’ socioeconomic status today.

BLACK-COLLAR WORKERS

The best histories have focused on the mere advent of black government employment and how it has increased significantly and substantially around the Second World War. In other words, the quantitative analysis has been well-documented. Less known is what these jobs meant over time to African Americans themselves; the qualitative literature is thin on evaluating the modest quality of such employment and what black workers did to improve their conditions. Most accounts that mention black workers focus on the white actors or institutions that shaped the surrounding conditions of employment. For instance, Joseph Slater’s work, while thoroughly documenting public workers’ trials and tribulations in organizing against state actors and pushing the public sector from peripheral to primary importance in the labor movement, inexplicably omits black workers from his otherwise excellent analysis of unionizing. Similarly, Nancy MacLean’s work effectively introduces job discrimination as the key battleground for the civil rights movement, but only touches on black workers as part of her larger focus on white women and Mexican workers as protected groups. Few studies deal with black federal workers as the center of their own postwar narrative; the specific history of these workers themselves remains largely unexamined. Yet existing narratives of public employees, black workers, and postwar black progress cannot be understood without taking black federal workers and their history into account.

History, of course, is the study of change over time, but it is often overlooked that change is a concept fraught with relativity—a concept that is uniquely dependent on its opposite, constancy. To properly evaluate any change relative to the past, one must also measure what has remained constant or consistent over time. Since the inception of their relationship with the United States of America, African Americans have had a difficult relationship with labor. The African American experience is unique in having been characterized by legally restricted opportunities in the job market, romantic racist notions of blacks being best suited only to serve or entertain whites,

or flat out racist notions of presumed incompetence and lack of intelligence necessary for gainful employment.

In the aftermath of the era of enslavement, a short-lived “radical” Reconstruction period gave way to a rigged economy in the South whereby blacks navigated labor spaces that were similar in social and economic tone to slavery, except that the working dynamics operated by different names. Sharecropping, convict lease programs, and apprenticeship programs for vagrant black youths were all transparent in their design to subjugate black labor and its black laborers. Black Codes and the subsequent institutionalization of Jim Crow segregation after the turn of the century all contributed to a dire economic outlook that would make even Horatio Alger blush.

For example, Eric S. Yellin cogently described how “the American state has been complicit in racism and black poverty” with the Wilson administration’s decision to segregate blacks in federal employment in the wake of Reconstruction. At a cabinet meeting on April 11, 1913, President Woodrow Wilson made no objection to Postmaster Alfred Burleson’s recommendation to segregate the federal workforce, which meant that no safe haven existed for black laborers. While many federal agencies declined to do so, several prominent agencies such as the Treasury Department and Bureau of Engraving and Printing followed the segregationist lead of Burleson who wanted all rail line and local postal service window positions made “lily white.”⁹ Burleson wasted little time in advancing his segregationist agenda; President Wilson was scarcely in office for one month, having been inaugurated on March 4, 1913.¹⁰ So many progressive reformers signed on to the idea of workplace segregation because it represented efficiency for the government. Disparaging narratives in circulation at the time about blacks being associated with dirty politics made the whitening of government a simple and rational choice, rather than a racist one. Yellin ominously observed that “if radical reconstruction offered a chance for the United States to fulfill its founding promises, Wilsonian discrimination revealed the extent to which the state continued to be implicated in the nation’s failures.”¹¹

American Dream Deferred picks up this narrative of the federal government’s involvement in both the hope and failure of African American actualization. The narrative of limited black economic opportunity was further cemented with the widespread hardships brought about by the Great Depression. In the Jim Crow era, limited resources for whites most certainly meant limited to no resources for blacks. For instance, federal initiatives such as the Social Security Act of 1935, which explicitly excluded agricultural and domestic workers from its protections, served to further ostracize blacks from the ever-elusive American Dream. But in wartime, the prioritization of do-

mestic discrimination was trumped by the need for global goodwill. Many historians, including Margaret C. Rung, note that nontraditional employment opportunities did not just open up generally during the Second World War, but that specifically “the federal government led the way in providing new employment opportunities for women and African Americans.”¹²

Enthusiasm was initially high about the economic and social significance of the war to blacks. Andrew Kersten notes, “More recently, historians have tempered the notion of the 1940s as ‘watershed’ or ‘revolution’ in the Black experience, but still emphasize its significance in presaging the modern Civil Rights Movement.”¹³ During this “watershed” blacks built an infrastructure of political action through the black press, the growth of the NAACP, and the founding of other significant civil rights groups, such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). African Americans in the military gained access to education, training for new jobs, and the tantalizing experience of greater freedom in countries like England and France. In turn, many African Americans on the home front moved away from agrarian incomes, learned new job skills, and improved their quality of life by fleeing Jim Crow segregation in the South. Government policy also underwent a significant shift during the war and by the end of the war, fighting for civil rights became a central part of the liberal agenda.

It is thus accurate to state that the meticulously organized data of Desmond King and others paints a poignant picture of change over time. Further analysis is nevertheless required regarding what specific types of changes transpired over time. Political and symbolic changes aside, direct and substantive economic changes have been slower to come for blacks in the federal workplace. This is why I do not share Rung’s optimism when she states that for “African Americans and second and third generation Americans, working for the federal government provided an opportunity to prove one’s employment ability and one’s worth as an American.”¹⁴ If anything, economic stagnation has been the predominant narrative for blacks since their initial contact with the federal sector; this economic marginalization has been consistent and institutionalized over time. Ultimately, the collective black federal workers’ experience demonstrates that the worth of a black American civil servant is disproportionately discounted.

While economic prosperity has never been guaranteed to American citizens, the hope and promise of financial well-being have been freely shared. It is fascinating to observe how, over time, despite significant political and social change, continuous challenging economic conditions have remained for black Americans as a whole, notwithstanding exceptional individual cases, which do not challenge the overarching rule. This idea of consistent economic mar-

ginalization is encapsulated in the term “black-collar workers,” which I offer as a distinct interpretation of this dynamic as reflected in federal employment in the nation’s capital.

Many colors have been used to categorize workers in labor circles since the Great Depression. Upton Sinclair coined the term “white-collar worker” as early as the 1930s to refer to professional grade workers who presumably wear a shirt with a white collar (and tie) to work. A blue-collar worker is one who typically labors on an hourly wage in factory or industrial settings (in uniform) in contrast to a white-collar worker who usually commands a higher salary for an administrative or managerial position. The white- and blue-collar workers contrast with the more recent designation of pink-collar workers in the 1990s, which represents women in the service industries.

In this book, as opposed to referencing manual laborers in exclusively dirty and dangerous industries, *black-collar workers* will refer to the dynamic of black federal workers (despite their manual, professional, or service status) who remained economically marginalized just because of their black identity, or the black skin that touches their collar. Whereas other “collar” designations refer to workers by function, this term organizes workers by identity, as the consequences of having a black identity in the federal workplace are distinct and separate from general issues common to workers with particular functions in the economy. This work further develops what Thomas Sugrue termed “racialized inequality” of black workers, which was not merely the by-product of inevitable, uncontrollable market forces at work. Rather black-collar workers represent the concerted efforts of many individuals from numerous federal agencies that influenced national policies. Just as Joseph Slater demonstrated that government employees became just as important to the American political economy as private sector workers after the Second World War, I argue that black government workers are key to appreciating the overall stunted socioeconomic status of black laborers in both the public and private spheres.

CONSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The disparate, spread-out nature of the federal government has made it difficult to research as a single cohesive unit. Yet the study of black federal workers during the period between 1941 and 1981 readily illustrates that the workers’ black identity is what made the phenomena of lower wages and slower raises consistent across different federal agencies, various professional specialties, and diverse educational backgrounds. This makes Philip Rubio and Paul Tennessee’s exclusive works on black postal workers significant: the quasi-governmental agency was sufficiently large enough to warrant independent study, in contrast to other agencies with markedly different behavioral charac-

teristics. As fewer works explore the degree to which isolated struggles and triumphs of unionizing inside the postal service were replicated by black workers in myriad other federal agencies, my contribution comes largely through the broader profile of nonpostal, nonmilitary, nondefense workers.

While many different federal agencies operate independently of one another, protecting their budgetary fiefdoms with fervor, one national Constitution serves as a common denominator among them all to promote the general welfare. For federal workers most especially, I frame this collective encumbrance as a “constitutional responsibility.” My general topic is not new, but my specific focus builds on the idea that if there was ever an area of the nation’s economy where people stood the best chance of realizing the American Dream, it would be in the public sector. Transparent entrance examinations, public scrutiny, and accountability all contribute toward having a system that appears and operates in a fair manner to uphold public trust.¹⁵

If there is one sector of the American economy that can make the argument for idealist principles of fair play in a meritocratic marketplace, where participants fairly keep what they earn, it might well be the federal government. After all, the federal government is fundamentally about the “business” of America, its operations and policies, many of which are influenced to varying degrees by seminal documents such as the Declaration of Independence (e.g., “We hold these truths to be self-evident . . .”) and the Constitution of the United States (e.g., “To secure these rights . . .”), which outline the tenets of a functional democratic republic. In one of the most remarkable displays of human rhetoric, in his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. even seized on this concept to make his influential point: “When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.”

I acknowledge that no written express obligation presupposes that the government must promise to help people make money and become independently wealthy. Yet I am persuaded by Dr. King’s assertion that this promissory note was indeed “a promise that all men . . . would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”¹⁶ Thus, under principles of equal access and “fair play,” pursuing potential wealth (i.e., happiness?) unhindered by the frustrating friction of racial discrimination I argue is implicit. No specific language in the Constitution forbids racial discrimination, but equity and fairness are key undergirding principles that make up much of what composes the noble American idea and the great American experiment.

One fascinating place to further explore this concept of presumed accountability, or constitutional responsibility, is the public sector. The private sector

is always “free to be discriminating” and choose whomever it wishes to employ for whatever reason, but the public sector is designed to serve all citizens alike. Despite different agencies focusing on various populations and regions throughout the country, the bottom line is revealed in data on black-collar workers who on average have consistently suffered economically compared to their white counterparts. The historian Letitia Woods Brown, one of the first black women to earn a PhD in history from Harvard University, observed that “slavery and the slave trade in the nation’s capital were a constant source of embarrassment to men who espoused democratic equalitarian principles.”¹⁷ Time was to tell whether systemic racial discrimination would prove to be just as embarrassing, for the American Dream was equally as tenuous for those working directly for the American government as for those working in the private sector—if not more so.

In accordance with this constitutional responsibility, the federal public sector began to quickly outpace the private sector in its effort to eliminate racial discrimination soon after the Second World War. In a marked departure from Wilsonian policies, President Harry S. Truman remarked, “We cannot be satisfied until all our people have equal opportunities for jobs . . . and until all our people have equal protection under the law. . . . There is a serious gap between our ideals and some of our practices. This gap must be closed.”¹⁸ Accordingly, the federal government created several opportunities for federal agencies and their employees to address the gap that Truman referenced. From 1941 to 1981, every president except Gerald Ford issued an executive order to directly address racial discrimination in the workplace (see chapter 4, table 4.1). At least three federal commissions studied the matter intently, gathering data and making recommendations for change; in addition, individual agencies investigated their own internal affairs. Nearly every administration also introduced new or refined grievance measures, frequently referencing the sensitive and symbolic nature of federal service and its high visibility.¹⁹ A major legal effort to eradicate workplace discrimination came with Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). However, it was not until 1972 that the EEOC was authorized to levy sanctions in both the federal and private sectors.

The influence of the EEOC was nevertheless more limited than its architects cared to admit. New antidiscrimination policies and procedures required implementation by employees and administrators who were not inclined to change their old habits so quickly, if at all. While no longer barred from specific jobs that were explicitly reserved for whites, many blacks still encountered more subtle forms of racism as manifested in lower wages and slower promotions.²⁰ As black federal workers realized the extent of their plight,

they began to organize and resist. Indeed, their employment opportunities were not brought about due to “a shift in white attitudes. Rather, they were a result of decades of activism and policy making—boycotts, pickets, agitation, riots, lobbying, litigation, and legislation.”²¹ Active black federal workers organized job actions through local branches of organizations like the National Urban League (NUL), the NAACP, various labor unions, local grassroots activists like Julius Hobson, and individual challenges to agency officials. Many black federal workers took great pride in their work and in the government that hired them to serve. It was more remarkable that so many black federal workers remained loyal to their jobs, even if they risked their livelihoods or spent years of their lives fighting for such equal opportunities.

Many actors in federal employment openly embraced the concept that the federal government had an obligation to fight for equal opportunity. President Dwight D. Eisenhower once stated: “On no level of our national existence can inequality be justified. Within the federal government itself, however, tolerance of inequality would be odious. What we cherish as an ideal for our nation as a whole must today be honestly exemplified by the federal establishment.”²² Thus, by developing the construct of constitutional responsibility, this book explores the contours of what Samuel Krislov meant when he wisely observed that the “symbolic role of public position should not be overlooked. In seeking to implement the goal of greater equality in society generally government has a special responsibility to come to others with clean hands.”²³ In other words, just as “the father of Harlem radicalism” Hubert Harrison suggested, one of the best methods to test the strength of American democracy is through historical analysis of African Americans. As Harrison declared that African Americans are the “touchstone of the modern democratic idea,” the collective triumphs and tribulations of American blacks have brought to bear in living color both evil and cruel actions wrought upon them by fellow Americans. More specifically, the contours and limits of American democracy can be seen through the working experiences of black employees of the federal government.²⁴

A REPRESENTATIVE CITY

The locale of this study is the heart of American federal employment—Washington, DC. I have deliberately chosen DC as the setting for a case study because of the high concentration of federal jobs within the city limits. The capital city represents a trend that occurred in many urban areas after the mass migration of blacks to northern cities both during and after the Second World War. In exploring the collective experience of black federal workers in DC, spanning the presidencies from Roosevelt to Reagan, this book explores the

intersection of public sector labor and black labor, and thus contrasts with existing studies that deal with the two separately. The book examines the working lives of black federal employees and their efforts to improve their status from the Second World War to the early 1980s. Because “the color line between black and white has remained America’s most salient social division,” the experiences of Washington and other cities with significant populations of black public sector workers have much in common.²⁵

Several push and pull factors contributed to the groundswell of black labor in DC. One major push came from the increasing mechanization of Southern agriculture. More machinery meant less labor was required to work the lands, which translated into fewer jobs available for blacks.²⁶ A significant pull factor was the promise of an improved lifestyle outside of the South. Under the Jim Crow order, a white superior did not feel pressure to pay a black worker his or her fair market value, making these workers perpetually vulnerable to exploitation. Additional factors pulling black laborers away from the South included the fervent pace of increased economic activity taking place in major northern urban centers as industrial mobilization hit full stride during the war. This exodus was widely supported in publications such as the *Chicago Defender* and others with the message that anywhere but the South held the promise of a better life.

The representative function of Washington, DC, as the nation’s capital meant that the extent to which blacks were successful in federal jobs had outsized significance for blacks nationwide, since “discrimination in Washington was never merely another example of southern Jim Crow: it was evidence of the white supremacy at the heart of the nation.”²⁷

While DC had no manufacturing industries that attracted blacks during the Great Migrations from 1915 to the 1950s, similar to cities like Chicago, Pittsburgh, and New York, black newcomers did find jobs in DC’s burgeoning public sector. While smaller in absolute size, DC had a higher proportion of blacks than metropolises such as New York, Detroit, Pittsburgh, or Philadelphia during the postwar era.²⁸ By 1950, blacks composed a third of the population in Washington and would reach a majority over 70 percent just two decades later.²⁹

As federal agencies based in Washington grew in size and number, so did the national presence of black federal government workers. Numbering less than a thousand at the turn of the century, the numbers of black government employees swelled to over a quarter of a million nationwide during the Second World War.³⁰

Moreover, during the war, the nation’s capital became the undisputed center of a blossoming federal workforce. In 1946, only the state of California

could boast more federal employees (247,600) than Washington, DC (235,100), although the state was nearly twelve times larger in population.³¹ At the turn of the century, less than 1 percent of federal employees were black. But this proportion rose to 11.9 percent in 1944, including 41,566 in Washington.³²

With such a rapid increase in the black population came a steep learning curve; blacks and whites separated by many social conventions outside of work now had to labor together on the job. As with any new arrangement, there were initial conflicts. In theory, black citizens working for the federal government were entitled to full dignity and respect. In practice, Jim Crow social customs dictated a social hierarchy that placed black dignity and respect under constant threat. In an effort to better understand this conflict between theory and practice as it related to black citizens, President Truman established a Committee on Civil Rights. The committee warned in its 1947 report that for “Negro Americans, Washington is not just the nation’s capital. It is the point at which . . . the South becomes ‘Jim Crow.’ If he stops in Washington, a Negro may dine like any other man in the Union [train] Station, but as soon as he steps out into the capital, he leaves such democratic practices behind.”³³

But the irony that the epicenter of a leading democratic global superpower was contaminated with racial discrimination was not lost on black activists. In contrast to static accounts of new antidiscrimination policies, this research explores the true limits of American identity through the strategies employed by black federal workers to leverage the powerful federal government’s verbiage against itself. Many federal employees took advantage of a growing civil rights consciousness and attempted to force the government’s hand toward implementing equity in view of the nearly constant racial discrimination they faced on the job. Moreover, the development of the Cold War forced U.S. officials to oppose racism and Jim Crow customs domestically rather than risk key international alliances by contradicting their rhetoric about global democracy.³⁴

Activists wisely understood that the federal government had a complex role in both serving as a leader in setting standards for the public sector and in following public opinion. The transparency and openness of federal government records also meant that the public sector was more vulnerable to shifting public consensus about jobs and discrimination. Racial discrimination was especially acute and overt in the federal ranks before the Second World War as a reflection of larger American society at the time. Yet when discrimination became less acceptable to the general public (e.g., heightened awareness through the civil rights movement), federal agencies were forced to address such inequities in the workplace. Address they did. Eliminate they did not.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

To understand and depict the nuanced struggle of black federal workers in Washington, DC, in chapter 1, I establish the importance of DC as a growing city during the Second World War that attracted the attention of many blacks looking for work. The U.S. government achieved unprecedented levels of production during the Second World War, which would not have been possible without the contribution of an increased number of black workers. However, the federal government maintained mostly segregated workspaces for the new black workers it tepidly “welcomed,” but in fact earnestly and desperately *needed* on the job. This chapter highlights how even an unusually progressive agency, the Office of Price Administration (OPA), struggled with overcoming entrenched customs of segregation. During this time, there is little official record of black resistance to such treatment, probably because workers had few official outlets on the job to address such grievances.

In chapter 2, I look at the federal government’s first steps, just after the Second World War ended, to eliminate discrimination on the job. In 1946, President Truman established a federal panel to investigate racial discrimination, which published recommendations on how to combat it. The report marked a federal shift from passive observer to concern and study in the face of ongoing discrimination; this shift was assisted by the prodding of small but vocal public sector unions, Cold War pressures, and an evolving liberal agenda. This chapter details how the President’s Committee on Civil Rights (PCCR) provided legislators with concrete data that would later prove influential in changing federal policy. Despite a strong mandate from the president, action was far from uniform as many heads of federal agencies denied that any racial problems even existed, while others failed to realize how their standard hiring practices harmed the career prospects of black federal workers.

In chapter 3, I analyze white resistance to increased pressure to bring about racial equality in the federal workplace. From 1948 to 1959, after the dissolution of the Fair Employment Practice Committee in 1946, the federal government continued to move away from structural discrimination in the federal workplace and, for the first time, mandated low-level dispute resolution procedures to recognize the grievances of black federal employees. Many blacks in Washington, DC, continued to draw benefits from federal employment in contrast to existing private sector jobs, but still had to contend with the deeply ingrained practice of racial harassment on the job. While racial discrimination increasingly became less permissible publicly, federal agencies, their supervisors, and many white employees still practiced it out of habit or spite. Accordingly, individual black federal workers protested and advocated

for change through local chapters of the NAACP and NUL. New workplace protocols—such as the use of independent arbiters—emboldened many black workers who pushed their federal agencies to take a harder stance against discrimination. Others went outside the workplace and used the NAACP and NUL to amass data and file lawsuits.

Chapter 4 focuses on the political gains enjoyed by black federal workers from 1960 to 1969. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 included provisions that represented the strongest stand the federal government had ever taken to do away with workplace discrimination. Emboldened by the black freedom movement, many black federal workers sought to take advantage of both the new EEOC and the protections offered by Title VII of the 1964 act. This occurred simultaneously when the government, for the first time ever, recognized limited collective bargaining rights for all federal workers. This intersection of black workers' rights with the increased legitimacy of public sector unionism was initially a boon to black federal workers. Chapter 4 also details the dogged efforts of Julius Hobson, a former federal employee turned community activist, to maintain pressure on the federal government for workplace equality. Hobson relentlessly used data collection, pamphleteering, petitions, case law, Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and any other tool at his disposal well into the 1970s, which suggests that the historian Nancy MacLean overstated the case when she asserted that Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act was a "a powerful tool with which to open entry into the economic mainstream."³⁵ This chapter shows the immediate, suffocating backlog of cases that effectively neutralized much of the good that Title VII and the EEOC was theoretically to bring for aggrieved black workers—even though black federal workers were not included in Title VII's protections until close to a decade after its original passage. Hence, the data demonstrate that racial disparities persisted more covertly, as Rogers M. Smith's analysis maintains: even at the apex of racial liberalism (e.g., civil rights movement), federal policies paradoxically reinforced racial inequalities in the manner of their execution.³⁶

Finally, in chapter 5, I explain why and how many black federal workers formed a nonunion, professional advocacy organization of their own—Blacks In Government (BIG)—in 1975, a good decade after the civil rights movement had birthed the most groundbreaking federal antidiscrimination mechanism to date, the EEOC. While blacks were always active in asserting their agency for change in the federal workplace, Blacks In Government was a direct and organized response to the shortcomings of past federal mechanisms that failed to effectively solve nagging problems of lower wages and slower promotion rates for black federal workers.

For instance, black postal workers first organized themselves as an industrial union called the National Alliance of Postal Employees (NAPE) in 1913, and later expanded their focus to include all federal employees. However, the union lost considerable political influence when it was not recognized as a bargaining agent during the reorganization of the postal service in the early 1970s, despite the fact that a significant part of workers striking for change were black, inner city postal workers. Hence, BIG's broad search for practical solutions to the common economic malaise afflicting many black federal workers across agency lines led to a 1979 conference held in Washington, DC, designed to teach black federal employees how to best prepare for career advancement. No longer content to wait for the government to make equality a reality, members and supporters of BIG decided to help themselves through a more structured organizational format.

With respect to how efforts to organize workers after the civil rights movement dwindled considerably, Joseph McCartin provides an excellent history of one smaller, specific group of federal workers.³⁷ By the early 1980s, public sector unionism had weakened considerably because of a strike by the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) that failed to generate broad labor support. As McCartin illustrates, before that fateful strike, public sector unionism had helped air traffic controllers, nearly all of whom were white, to improve their working conditions. In contrast, my study describes the obstacles black federal workers faced from a wider array of different agencies in seeking to advance their careers, especially in organizing a larger constituency unified along more abstract definitions of shared racial identity.

While air traffic controllers experienced plenty of turbulence in getting their union to a respectable position of power, there was little doubt among members about their larger group identity, forged through the shared experiences of rigorous and stressful training and work. Since the African American experience is far from monolithic, my research shows that organizing black federal workers primarily based on their racial identity was even more challenging than organizing workers who shared the same job function, which likely contributed to the continued maintenance of black-collar worker status over the decades. Given the broader, muddier interpretations of race, black workers had to create internal consensus as well as gain consensus with the external forces they faced. The chapters in this book illustrate black agency in wrestling with these questions surrounding socioeconomic identity, rather than only showing black federal workers as passive reactors to policy decisions made by high-profile, white political actors.

By the late 1970s, while more blacks had acquired supervisory positions with larger incomes across varied federal agencies, few obtained the new Se-

nior Executive Service (SES) positions created for the most elite federal workers. As a result, at the beginning of the Reagan era, it was still as uncommon as it had been forty years earlier for any black federal worker to supervise large numbers of white employees. My study ends in 1981; the election of President Ronald Reagan and the decline of unionizing and federal employment growth were two trends that had significant consequences for black workers who were precariously positioned near the bottom of most economic wage scales. My research investigates the documented contextual changes for black federal employment between the eras of Wilsonian progressivism and Reagan conservatism.

With transparent hiring practices, steady and secure benefits, and a theoretical mandate for fair play, federal employment certainly looked promising. First, however, black-collar workers chronically suffered from lower wages and slower raises. Second, government-led, anti-racist employment policies were consistently manipulated and marginalized over the years. Third, black workers ultimately suffered the indignity of working for a system that simply did not work for them. When viewing the big picture of black federal employment from these three angles of historical analysis, it becomes readily apparent how the status of black federal public sector workers in Washington is encapsulated in the grand scene depicted in Savage's 1796 portrait, *The Washington Family*. Black workers were included in the picture, but largely brushed to the side of the larger economic picture.

My research shows how black government workers continued to believe in the promise of the American Dream and struggled in different ways to achieve it during a period noted for increasing racial liberalism. The public sector offered an improvement over a more openly hostile and discriminatory private sector, and in addition to greater economic security, many blacks increased their levels of political participation through membership in public sector unions. In contrasting the virtues of the public sector versus the private sector, it is vital to recall that one's income is theoretically unlimited in the private sector. Meanwhile, many black federal workers struggled for years just to obtain improved compensation in a large and coordinated wage system that had hard caps or fine limitations on one's earning potential.

By definition, it was (and still is) impossible for any black federal employee to earn more than a million dollars annually through wages alone; many chief executive officers working on Wall Street would seriously frown on such a restriction.³⁸ The implications of this socioeconomic dynamic cannot be overlooked. Blacks faced limitations in the job market where wages were limited in the public sector, and likely faced even greater restrictions where wages were less limited in the more remunerative private sector. In the struggle waged by

black-collar workers for higher wages and faster raises, the economic stakes were still relatively low compared to the traditional earning power exhibited by whites in the private sector since time immemorial.

The Derricottes and other black families would agree that working for the federal public sector was definitely a “good government job,” all things considered. However, my book contravenes the wholesale historiography that characterizes federal employment for blacks as “good government jobs.” They may have been good jobs, but the question remains whether they were *great jobs*. Although the historian Thomas Sugrue declares that “no institution played a greater role than government in breaking the grip of poverty and creating a black middle class,” the grip may have been broken but not obliterated.³⁹ Historical tensions regarding keeping blacks “in their place” are nowhere made more manifest than here, for if anything, the opportunity cost of being a black-collar worker (i.e., lower wages and slower raises) is incalculable. The idea that blacks should be satisfied—if not gracious and grateful—for a mere good job is an inadequate analysis. Such logic is reminiscent of how Southerners complained about “impudent Negroes” who would not stay in their place. African Americans should be free to pursue excellence in all its forms, including workplace economic equality. What is largely missing from the “good job” debate is dialogue and critique about how good jobs objectively could have been made greater. To criticize these good jobs as not good enough is to move from this sunken place, and perhaps toward a more encouraging reality that might better capture the idea of the American Dream, and not an *American Dream Deferred*.