



**For Black History Month, 2022**

## **Taking a Bite out of Racism**

By Robert Porter Lynch, Lt. US Navy<sup>1</sup>



### **Truman Makes a Heroic Choice**

Nearly seventy-five years ago, on July 26, 1948, President Harry Truman issued two landmark Executive Orders declaring:

*“there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin,” along with a similar order for the entire federal government.* <sup>2</sup>

This was a massive turnaround from the highly prejudicial opinions Truman held earlier in his life when he wrote:

*“I think one man is just as good as another so long as he’s honest and decent and not a n- - - - or a Chinaman, ...Uncle Will says that the Lord made a white man from dust, a n- - - - - from mud, and then threw what was left and it came down a Chinaman ... I am strongly of the opinion that negroes ought to be in Africa, yellow men in Asia, and white men in Europe and America.”*<sup>3</sup>

He harbored these views at least up to the Second World War. But after the war, on June 29, 1947, Truman addressed a crowd of more than 3,000 members of the NAACP.

*“As Americans, we believe that every man should be free to live his life as he wishes. He should be limited only by his responsibility to his fellow countrymen. If this freedom is to be more than a dream, each man must be guaranteed equality of opportunity. The only limit to an American’s achievement should be his ability, his industry and his character.”*

As he ended his speech, Truman stressed:

*“When I say all Americans, I mean all Americans.”*

A year later, after signing the Executive Orders, Truman wrote to a friend:

*“The main difficulty with the South is they are living eighty years behind the times and the sooner they come out of it the better it will be for the country and themselves. I am not asking for social equality, because no such thing exists, but I am asking for equality of opportunity for all human beings and, as long as I stay here, I am going to continue that fight.”*

Truman went on to say:

*“When a Mayor and City Marshal can take a negro Sergeant off a bus in South Carolina, beat him up and put out one of his eyes, and nothing is done about it by the State authorities, something is radically wrong with the system.”*

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<sup>2</sup> Executive Orders 9980 and 9981 [Civil Rights - Truman Library Institute](#)

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Washington Post [Truman wrote](#) in a June 22, 1911, love letter to his future wife, Bess Wallace. 2018/07/26 from (source: Truman Library and Museum.)

# Taking a Bite out of Racism

## An Arduous Struggle

I was just a toddler when Truman made these courageous statements. They coincided with my upbringing. Coming from a heritage of ardent abolitionists on Boston's North Shore, there was no discernable racism in my family. My Great-Great Grandfather heroically served in the Civil War,<sup>4</sup> a courageous champion helping save the Union and preserving civil liberties.

When Lyndon Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act into law, I was in high school. At that point, a hundred years after the Civil War, one would think our nation would finally put racism in the rear-view mirror. That presumption would soon be harshly challenged.

During my college years at Brown University, we were certainly aware of the struggles of Martin Luther King against the likes of George Wallace and Lester Maddox. I was Battalion Commander of the Navy ROTC unit in my senior year,<sup>5</sup> and upon graduation was eventually assigned to be part of the commissioning crew of a newly launched ship, the U.S.S. Trippe. Fitting out was in Charleston, South Carolina.

My duties on the ship were primarily as Electronics Warfare Officer and Electronics Maintenance Officer, with collateral duties as the ship's Legal Officer and Minority Affairs Officer. These two collateral duties quickly rose to major importance.



When I was appointed as Minority Affairs Officer, it was because I was the only officer on the ship with a liberal arts background. Our captain, Cdr. Allen Higginbotham, who was a very fine officer hailing from West Virginia, made it clear there were to be no race problems on our ship. He tasked me with ensuring any difficulties be resolved, pronto.

In the fall of 1970, PN1 (Personnel Man 1<sup>st</sup> class) Woods, a fine black enlisted man told me a story I didn't like. He was in close contact with all the crew, being responsible for maintaining personnel records and counseling enlisted Navy personnel regarding training, education, and job opportunities in the service. We had a good working relationship; he often quipped, with a twinkle in his eye, that we were "soul brothers" because I went to that "soul school – Brown."

PN1 Woods told me a very disturbing story about the AmVets Club, which was the primary port-of-call for our men going on liberty. The club was right outside the entrance to the Charleston Naval Base, brightly decorated with red, white, and blue lights.

Woods stated that the club discriminated against blacks. Apparently, when a black man tried to go into the club, he was told he needed a membership card, which only the manager could issue. However, the manager was never there to issue cards. Nevertheless, if you were white, you never had to show a card – admittance was automatic.

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<sup>4</sup> See [Racing to Washington to Protect the Capitol](#) -- Massachusetts 6th & 8th Regiments Respond to Lincoln's Urgent Plea for Protection

<sup>5</sup> See [The Almost Forgotten Story of How Brown University's New Curriculum was Nearly Derailed by Subterfuge](#)

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I was angry. These were my men, and, as Minority Affairs Officer, I was obligated to ensure their protection, equal treatment under the law, and their well-being. I knew the Captain had my back, which was important.

### Beginning the Fight

The next step was to find Chief Boatswain's Mate Melvin Carter. He was a great leader, and we were on close speaking terms having car-pooled together many times. I met with Carter and Brown on the mess decks, where other black enlisted men could tell their versions of the discrimination story.

After that, Carter, Woods and I mapped out a strategy to build a strong legal case, which was also my duty as the ship's Legal Officer. Our game plan was to send every combination of white and black men to the AmVets Club to see what happened.

For example, a black sailor would arrive in full dress uniform with medals accompanied by a white sailor in Navy working clothes. The black would be rejected, and the white accepted.

I went myself in officer's uniform with a black sailor in uniform. Same results.

We put together seven or eight incidents to show there was no deviation from the discriminatory practices.

Our Captain had been in on the plan, telling me to put together a rock-solid case he could take to the base commandant.

Once we built an iron-clad argument, Captain Higginbotham and I went to the Admiral of the base. I waited in the ante-room if needed, while Higginbotham presented the evidence. Upon the meeting ending, the Captain looked at me silently and motioned me outside where he explained, in polite terms, that the Admiral told him to pound sand. We were just northerners (our ship was to be stationed in Newport Rhode Island), and we should just quietly go to hell.

I had been forewarned. As one who loves historic preservation, a few weeks earlier I had been invited to a reception in a beautifully restored old mansion on Charleston's Battery Street. One of the guests approached me with a guileful look in his eye and said in a deep Southern drawl:

*"Y'all from the north, aren't you?"*

*"Yes"* I responded.

*"Are you a Yankee or a Damned Yankee?"* he queried.

*"What's the difference?"*

*"A Yankee is a Northerner who goes back home;  
a Damned Yankee is one who **staaays**."*

I got the message.

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## Escalating the Battle

It was just before Christmas. Higginbotham moaned “Bah Humbug.” He asked me the next step of recourse. I explained the next level up in the chain of command was to appeal to the Minority Affairs Officer at ComCruDesLant (Commander of the Cruiser-Destroyer force in the Atlantic). This was a black officer named Lt. Don Johnson based in Newport. I packaged up the case, sending it by courier to his office.

Then I went back to the black crewmen to explain the situation, and asked for their patience as we went up the chain of command. They had confidence in my willingness to champion their cause and our Captain’s sincerity.

Several weeks went by; no word from Lt. Johnson. I sent messages requesting action; still no reply. For me this was more than irritating. We were defending a noble cause, and getting nothing back. I don’t like being rejected, but become very hot under the collar when neglected. Our men deserved better, and they were putting their faith and trust in my hands.

After six weeks, I reported to the Captain that there was negligence on the part of ComCruDesLant. He asked my advice on the next steps.

## Captain Shows Courage and Toughness

We discussed going straight to the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Zumwalt, who was also a champion of equality and would not take kindly to the violation of civil rights. Captain Higginbotham, a career naval officer, knew there was also some risk jumping the chain of command.

However, as I native Rhode Islander, I explained we were lucky with a “back door” option. The former R.I. Governor John H. Chafee was now SecNav (Secretary of the Navy). Chafee was a good friend of my uncle, and knew my father, who also served with distinction as a Naval Officer in W.W.II.<sup>6</sup> If necessary, and there was any cross-fire, we’d play the SecNav card. Fortunately, we never needed this option.

Several more weeks went by, and I was almost begging for patience and trust from the black crew members. By that point it was February, 1971. We had no word from the top brass; nothing to keep the faith of our men. No news is uncertainty, which generates doubts.

## Top Brass Strikes a Blow for Freedom

Then, like a bolt out of the darkness came a very powerful order from Melvin Laird, the Secretary of Defense. The directive prohibited any club, like the AmVets, or social establishment anywhere in the world, from discriminating against black members of the Army, Navy, Marines, or Air Force. Any private clubs violating this order would be placed off limits and guarded by military police or shore patrol to prevent members of the military from entering.

This was a major victory for us. Apparently Zumwalt took the matter before Navy Secretary Chafee, who brought it to the Secretary of Defense.

To celebrate, we took Laird’s directive, marched off the naval base into the AmVets Club. I took command of the ship’s shore patrol unit, and waved the directive in the face of the AmVets manager on duty. Our black and white crew members walked unimpeded into the club and had a round of drinks.

*We had helped shift the entire military.*

Shortly thereafter we set out for sea trials, leaving the Charleston Naval Base in our wake.

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<sup>6</sup> See [But for the Turn of a Screw](#)

# Taking a Bite out of Racism

## Epilogue:

Several decades later, I met Lt. Cdr. Robert Overton, who was Admiral Zumwalt's Special Assistant as Warrant Officer during Zumwalt's tour (1970-1974) as Chief of Naval Operations -- the highest command position the Navy. Throughout this time, in the middle of the Vietnam conflict, there were many changes in the way the Navy would deal with the issues of leadership. Race relations was high on the list.

Lt. Cdr. Overton<sup>7</sup> wrote me telling the story of what happened behind the scenes:

*Actually, you did play the SecNav card without realizing. It was Chafee as SecNav and Mel Laird as SecDef who jointly conspired to nominate and sell Zumwalt to Nixon to become the youngest CNO [passing over many senior officers]. Their motivation was partly their belief that Zumwalt was the right guy to reform the Navy's treatment of people and who had also vowed to fully integrate minorities into the Navy.*

*The brilliance of your tactic of jumping the chain of command was a perfect example of causing similar values to converge to right a wrong. Here's how:*

*Laird was committed to leading the Department of Defense into the equal opportunity era and rooting out racist practices. This was partly a result of Laird's private life where he has experienced an "AmVet type injustice."*

Quoting from Larry Berman's book on Zumwalt:<sup>8</sup>

*"Laird had joined the Kenwood Golf and Country Club as a young congressman because it was within walking distance of his home and it had a swimming pool for his children.*

*"In 1968 waiters at the club refused to serve his guest, the mayor of Washington, D.C., Walter Washington, a black man. Laird demanded that they serve him.*

*"Afterward, the president of the club told Laird that this had been a onetime exception and that no blacks would be served again.*

*"Laird decided to fight the policy, joining with Senator Frank Church to lead a petition drive. By the time the case reached the courts in 1970, two prominent Republican members of the administration had already resigned from the club in protest of discriminatory practices, Laird and Secretary of State William Rogers."*

Apparently, the stars were in alignment, and we struck a raw nerve when Zumwalt (with Lt. Cdr. Overton working behind the scenes) took the matter to John Chafee, and then upward to Melvin Laird.

I am deeply grateful to Captain Higginbotham for his courage; it could have put his career in jeopardy. Fortunately, our actions worked to his benefit. Special recognition should go to all the black crew who acted honorably, without malice, and stood behind me to build an iron-clad case. And our nation should be especially thankful to Adm. Zumwalt, Navy Secretary Chafee, and Defense Secretary Laird for their courageous action and strong adherence of the principles that make our country great.<sup>9</sup>

The Civil War ended over 150 years ago. Our fight for equality is still a struggle. We must never waiver, never flinch, and continue to elevate the dignity of the human spirit.

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<sup>7</sup> Lt. Cdr. Overton was subsequently asked by Admiral Hayward (CNO from 78-82) to become his Admin Assistant from 1980 to 1982

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence Berman, Zumwalt: The Life and Times of Admiral Elmo Russell "Bud" Zumwalt, Jr., 2013

<sup>9</sup> Author's Note: After my tour of sea duty, I requested assignment to Adm. Zumwalt's special team to improve teamwork & leadership – which then led me to Harvard's program in Organization Development and Human Behavior.