

Black Cabinet

The **Black Cabinet**, or **Federal Council of Negro Affairs** or **Black Brain Trust**, was the informal term for a group of African Americans who served as public policy advisors to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor Roosevelt in his 1933–45 terms in office. There was no official organization. The term was coined in 1936 by Mary McLeod Bethune and was occasionally used in the press. By mid-1935, there were 45 African Americans working in federal executive departments and New Deal agencies.^[2]



Roosevelt's black advisors in 1938.^[1]

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History

Although the Council was concerned with civil rights, Franklin D. Roosevelt believed there were larger problems to be addressed than racial inequality during the wartime years; he was also struggling to maintain the support of the Southern white Congressional Democrats. Roosevelt declined to support legislation making lynching a federal offense, and banning the use of the poll tax in the South.

The Black Cabinet, with Eleanor Roosevelt's support, worked to ensure that blacks received 10 percent of welfare funds. The Council argued that blacks were underrepresented among recipients of aid under the New Deal, in large part because Southern Democrats had influenced the structure and implementation of programs to aid their white constituents. For instance, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration helped farmers but did not help farmworkers; farm owners were given the incentive to cut farm production, reducing the need for labor. Programs such as the Works Projects Administration (WPA), and the National Youth Administration (NYA) attempted to direct 10 percent of funds to blacks (as their proportion of the US population). These agencies set up separate all-black units with the same pay and conditions as those in white units, to which black voters responded favorably.

Mary McLeod Bethune served as an informal organizer of the Council, as well as the Director of Negro Affairs in the National Youth Administration.^[3] Rayford Wittingham Logan drafted Roosevelt's executive order prohibiting the exclusion of blacks from the military in World War II. Other leaders included William H. Hastie, and Robert C. Weaver. The leaders associated with the Black Cabinet are often credited with laying part of the foundation of the Civil Rights Movement that developed in strength in the postwar years.

The Council tried to create jobs for unemployed African Americans and to create more opportunities for them; still concentrated in rural areas of the South, blacks made up about twenty percent of the poor in the Depression Era. They were often the first to be let go from industrial jobs. Most of the black community did not benefit from some of the New Deal Acts.

The WPA created agencies that employed creative people in a variety of jobs: as writers, artists, and other photographers. WPA murals were painted and WPA sculptures were commissioned for numerous federal buildings that were constructed during this period. Photographers documented families across the South and in northern cities. The Federal Writers' Project paid its workers \$20 a week, and they wrote histories of every state in the Union, covering major cities in addition.^[4]

Under Roscoe E. Lewis, the Virginia Writers' Project sent out an all-black unit of writers to interview ex-slaves. Such accounts were also solicited in interviews in other states. The Slave Narrative Collection of the Federal Writers' Project stands as one of the most enduring and noteworthy achievements of the WPA. it is available online through the Library of Congress.^[5]

Members of the group worked officially and unofficially in their agencies to provide insight into the needs of African Americans. In the past, there had never been so many blacks chosen at one time to work together for the African-American community. The 45 primarily comprised an advisory group to the administration.^[6] The First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was said to encourage the formation of the Black Cabinet to help shape New Deal programs.^[7]

Members

Most members were not politicians but community leaders, scholars, and activists, with strong ties to the African American community. Prominent members included Dr. Robert C. Weaver, a young economics expert from Harvard University and a race relations adviser. He worked with the White House to provide more opportunities for African Americans. In 1966 he became the first black cabinet member, appointed by Lyndon B. Johnson as Secretary of the newly created Department of Housing and Urban Development.^[8] During the 1970s, Weaver served as the national director of the Municipal Assistance Corporation, which was formed during New York City's financial crisis. Another prominent member of Roosevelt's Black Cabinet was Eugene K. Jones, the Executive Secretary of the National Urban League, a major civil rights organization.

One of the most well-known members and only woman was Ms. Mary Jane McLeod Bethune. "Ms. Bethune was a Republican who changed her party allegiance because of Franklin Roosevelt."^[9] Ms. Bethune was very closely tied to the community and believed she knew what the African Americans really wanted. She was looked upon very highly by other members of the cabinet, and the younger men called her "Ma Bethune." Ms. Bethune was a personal friend of Mrs. Roosevelt and, uniquely among the cabinet, had access to the White House. Their friendship began during a luncheon when Mrs. Roosevelt sat Ms. Bethune to the right of the president, considered the seat of honor. Franklin Roosevelt was so impressed by one of Bethune's speeches that he appointed her to the Division of Negro Affairs in the newly created National Youth Administration.

Members of this group in 1938 included the following:

- Dr. Ambrose Caliver, Department of the Interior
- Dr. Roscoe C. Brown, Public Health Service
- Dr. Robert C. Weaver, Federal Housing Authority
- Joseph H. Evans, Farm Security Administration
- Mary McLeod Bethune, National Youth Administration
- Lawrence A. Oxley, Department of Labor
- Dr. William J. Thompkins, Recorder of Deeds
- Charles E. Hall, Department of Commerce
- William J. Houston, Department of Justice
- Ralph E. Mizelle, US Postal Service
- Dewey R. Jones, Department of the Interior;
- Edgar G. Brown, Civilian Conservation Corps
- J. Parker Prescott, Housing Authority
- Edward H. Lawson, Jr., Works Projects Administration
- Arthur Weisiger, Department of Labor
- Alfred Edgar Smith, Works Projects Administration
- Henry A. Hunt, Farm Credit Administration
- John W. Whitten, Works Projects Administration
- Joseph R. Houchins, Department of Commerce

At various times, others included:

- Dr. Charles L. Franklin, [10] Social Security Board
- William H. Hastie attorney, Department of the Interior
- Eugene Kinckle Jones, Department of Commerce
- William J. Trent, Federal Works Agency

See also

- Civil rights movement (1896–1954)
- List of African-American United States Cabinet Secretaries
- United States Cabinet

References

1. **Front row, left to right:** Dr. Ambrose Caliver, Dr. Roscoe C. Brown, Dr. Robert C. Weaver, Joseph H. Evans, Dr. Frank Horne, Mary McLeod Bethune, Lt. Lawrence A. Oxley, Dr. William J. Thompkins, Charles E. Hall, William I. Houston, Ralph E. Mizelle. **Back row, left to right:** Dewey R. Jones, Edgar Brown, J. Parker Prescott, Edward H. Lawson, Jr., Arthur Weisiger, Alfred Edgar Smith, Henry A. Hunt, John W.

Whitten, Joseph R. Houchins. Source: Scurlock Studio, "President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Black Cabinet" taken in March 1938" online at Smithsonian Institution (<http://siris-archives.si.edu/ipac20/ipac.jsp?&profile=all&source=~!siarchives&uri=full=3100001~!269301~!0#focus>)

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External links

- "[Mary Jane McLeod Bethune](http://www.anb.org/articles/06/06-00042-article.html)" (<http://www.anb.org/articles/06/06-00042-article.html>), *American National Biography Online*

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