Mary McLeod Bethune
By what was to be the end of the Great Depression, Mary McLeod Bethune was one of the most visible African Americans in America. She was most certainly the most notable African American woman of her era for she had been appointed as advisor on minority affairs in the National Youth Administration during the Roosevelt administration, “...one of the members of the so-called black cabinet of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.” (Franklin & Meier (editors), p. 193) How she rose to this stature, from child of former slaves to ranking African American woman in the administration, is a story which appears to be little more than a footnote of that turbulent and decisive era.

The daughter of an illiterate South Carolina sharecropper, the youngest of seventeen children. Bethune was the only one in her family to receive an education. At fifteen, after taking every subject taught at the little missionary school near her home, she was given a scholarship to attend Scotia Seminary in North Carolina. (Goodwin, p. 162)

This might be understandable in light of the endemic human suffering and the near catastrophic conflict which plagued the nation in those years. Yet her story is one which in any other time might have been as notable as that of those African Americans who followed her in pursuit of justice, equality and opportunity for their people.

Mary McLeod Bethune was the fifteenth of seventeen children born to Samuel and Patsy McLeod in Mayesville, South Carolina. Both of her parents had been former slaves so though the lived in a four-bedroom cabin on their own land where they grew cotton, they had improved their lives. Unlike most of her older siblings Mary Jane was not born into slavery. By the time of Mary’s birth the family, though free, still had scars of enslavement. Like many Freedmen Mary’s mother still worked for the McLeod family who had owned them. In addition, the family had been divided during slavery. Mary’s eldest sibling had been sold to another slave owner. “The parents would talk of the time when Sallie, their firstborn, had been
sold.” (Holt, p.7) These conditions would play a significant role in McLeod’s crusades.

During Reconstruction white missionaries descended upon the South to help with the task of both educating and converting those most impacted by the violence and injustice. It was a Presbyterian missionary, Emma Jane Wilson, who sought out the McLeods and took Mary under her wing. Mary would prove to be a gifted child.

In a very few years, Mary Jane had absorbed all there was to be had from the “teaching” aspect of the school, and merited a certificate. Her Catechism and Confession of Faith being duly accepted, she was received as a member of the Presbyterian Church. (Holt, p. 29)

Since the educational opportunities were limited where the McLeods lived Mary would be directed to study at a boarding school. In light of her family’s poverty Mary was granted a scholarship to Scotia Seminary in Concord, North Carolina, the only way she could have continued her education.

Upon her graduation from Scotia Seminary she was awarded yet another scholarship to Dwight Moody’s Institute for Home and foreign missions in Chicago. “Soon, Mary was delivering Gospel talks on Clark Street in one of the most debased areas of Chicago in a store-front Mission Room whose windows were kept brightly lighted to attract wandering derelicts from the streets.” (Holt, p.41) Like the normal schools of the era, the course of study at the Moody Institute was not a four-year curriculum. Mary completed the required course work and made plans to apply her skills. McLeod’s first choice was to be a mission in Africa.

... Mary was approaching the end of her course. She had been specifically trained to be a missionary, and, though not yet twenty, was prepared to go. She applied to the Mission Board of the Presbyterian Church, asking to assigned to “somewhere in Africa.” (Holt, p.45)

There were no vacancies for missionaries in Africa, so McLeod set her sites on being assigned
to a position in the United States. Though many of the urban poor she was ministering to were black McLeod felt that she must return to her rural roots.

She was a good singer and a good speaker, but she had not prepared herself for that but rather the mission field. She chose to give back, through being and educator, some portion of the opportunity which had been granted her. As a teacher, she returned to the little mission school where she herself had received her start. (Holt, p.46)

She returned to Mayesville to be her former teacher’s assistant at the Presbyterian Mission School.

The change from strict missionary to teacher was subtle but significant. It was logical, the approach taught at the Moody Institute was a form of preaching which was not unlike the pedagogical technique employed at most educational institutions. The significance was that this would be the first step for McLeod in evolving from ecclesiastical functionary to secular educator. After a brief stay as an educational aid her value as a teacher in her own right was quickly recognized. McLeod was soon appointed by the Presbyterian Board of Education to the Haines Institute in Augusta, Georgia. There she learned to hone her teaching skills under the direction of Lucey Craft Laney. From this master teacher McLeod learned a specific teaching technique based on object teaching principles. The stay at Haines would also have the significance of providing McLeod with exposure to the skills of school administration. Later, McLeod would use the experience to establish her own school.

The Presbyterian Board of Education transferred McLeod to Kendall Institute, Sumpter, South Carolina. It is there she met Albertus Bethune, a former teacher who had become a haberdasher. They married in May 1898. During their ten-year marriage they would have one child, a son, born on February 3, 1899.
Offered the opportunity to start a school in Palatka, Florida by a Presbyterian minister named C.J. Uggans, she accepted the challenge. She remained there about five years gaining the confidence and independence necessary to set out on her own. Frustrated with the Presbyterian Board of Education’s practice of constant transfer based on their perception of needs, Mary McLeod Bethune accepted the opportunity to start a school free from hierarchical interference. Bethune was invited to Daytona, Florida by a Baptist minister, Reverend S.P. Pratt, to open a school there. “The Reverend Pratt suggested Daytona, about fifty miles to the south of Palatka, as a possible point from which to start. It was a growing tourist town and she would probably find winter residents upon whom she could draw financially.” (Holt, p. 54) Raised in the Methodist tradition, Bethune was keenly aware that most African-Americans were either Baptists or members of the African Methodist-Episcopal Church. As long as she stayed with the Presbyterians her task would be more geared towards conversion than service. In 1904 in Daytona she established the Daytona Literary and Industrial School for Training Negro Girls.

Free now from the control of a church hierarchy she no longer had the accompanying financial support. With freedom came the responsibility of raising money to run the school.

Her initial step in establishing The School was to exert all her powers to enlist the backing of the Negroes of the community to make them feel the need for cooperation. They did feel the need and responded generously within their means, sometimes at a sacrifice. (Holt, p. 60)

She needed the African-American community for part of her support. Still in the throws of Jim Crow oppression African Americans were generally unable to offer financial aid, but would be invaluable in terms of offering all other forms of support to this fledgling institution.
The financial support Bethune needed would be supplied by those rich white Northerners who spent their winters in this new resort. In fact, it had been part of Reverend Pratt’s plan to tap into this resource and it ultimately played a role in where the school would be located.

Because Daytona was largely a tourist town, its population usually had permanent homes in the North. She had many friends who had invited her to visit them and she realized that many more could be found, stretching far out over other parts of the country. These, too, could be interested and would contribute if they could hear her plea. (Holt, p. 97)

These contact would prove pivotal in the survival of the school and would be critical in furthering Bethune’s career. It would be the networking she practiced from the Daytona resort which would introduce her, and her cause, to some of the most powerful people in the United States.

Though fund raising among the winter residents was critical, it was not the only means of providing support for the school. Still not that distant from her own condition of poverty, Bethune knew how to be creative in survival. She was not beyond begging in the more conventional meaning of the term. “From week to week Mrs. Bethune faced the daily problem of meals for the children. She would go to the orange-growers (sic) to ask for the “pulls” which had been withheld from the market.” (Holt, p.63) Acutely aware of the role of the African-American community in providing both the basis of support for the institution and a source of the institution’s student population Bethune worked closely with them to fulfill both functions. She did so in a manner which would allow the poverty-burdened community a sense of ownership and a feeling that they contributed to their children’s education.

The School grew almost faster than Mrs. Bethune could keep up with it. She had
sent messages to her friends in Palatka describing progress, and word came back that some boarders would arrive as soon as their fare could be scraped together; it was doubtful if there would be much money for their board. Some could pay fifty cents a week, but the “tuition” consisted chiefly of concrete offerings to the household—chickens, eggs, choice portions of a slaughtered pig. (Holt, p. 68)

She knew the school’s survival depended upon her efforts. It might be speculated that one legacy of her family’s ordeal under the regime of slavery resulted in her resolve to do all that was in her power to survive.

Bethune was not a distant leader or a figurehead. She was intimately involved in the daily chores of teaching children and running a school.

By this time Mrs. Bethune had about a hundred pupils. The daily routine started in the morning with the ringing of a big brass cowbell. If the girl in charge of this duty was not awake on time, Mrs. Bethune rang them up herself. At the six o’clock bell, all filed in for breakfast. (Holt, p. 84)

This capacity to function in both the day-to-day existence of education while at the same time doing what was necessary to keep the school funded displayed the breadth of her skills.

Though she was no longer a missionary, for the school had only a tacit sectarian affiliation through Reverend Pratt, she never lost that zeal she developed during her training at Moody.

Educating and training girls was only part of Mrs. Bethune’s vision. She was essentially a missionary, with all that the word implies: making converts from “wrong going” to “good doing”....and making her fellow human beings more happy through the simple fundamental habits of living which had been imbued in her. This profound spiritual drive had expressed itself in social work, which played an obbligato to all her endeavors. (Holt, p.112)

It would be this boundless energy and comprehensive approach to her endeavors which would be both the basis for her success and a source of her potential demise.
Bethune had worked with the local African-American community to seek out support for her school. In doing so she had become involved in the issues and concerns of these people who had been so generous with their time and effort. She was too busy to involve herself in politics which did not directly impact upon her school. But once she was established in Daytona, Bethune was drawn into the fray of racial politics. “Mrs. Bethune only became actively interested in politics after coming to Daytona, which was just beginning to think progressively in terms of being a progressive town. Participation by Negroes seemed to her highly necessary, but they had no leadership. (Holt, p.119)

It was this involvement in community matters which brought on a confrontation with the Ku Klux Klan.

There came an election which closely concerned the Negroes of Daytona. A bill to provide for a Negro high school was coming up. Two candidates for were contesting. One was sponsored by the Ku Klux Klan and the other, a prohibitionist, had promised that, if elected, he would throw his influence toward sponsoring the high school and advocated better streets and lights and sewerage in the Negro district. (Holt, p.119)

As was the Klan’s style of terrorism they sought to limit African-American participation in the electoral process. Their long history of violence enabled this local chapter to trade upon that reputation while not actually engaging in violence. In Daytona, the Klan’s primary tool was intimidation. “The politically powerful KKK had turned off all the street lamps for its demonstration parade, designed to intimidate the entire Negro section and frighten its potential voters away from the polls.” (Holt, p. 121) Sufficiently entrenched in the political establishment of the resort community the Klan knew that they only need remind the African-American community of their power.
Despite the history of the Klan in Daytona and throughout the region Bethune would not let herself become intimidated. Her resilience, independence, and leadership which became a symbol of hope to the African-American community was perceived as a challenge and a threat to the racist component of the majority. But it was when Bethune’s boundless energies were directed at black voter registration she became specifically the target of the Klan. To intimidate Bethune the Klan, which had been more of a political force in Daytona in recent years, resorted to its night-rider past. One evening, horsemen, clad in the hoods and gowns which has become the symbol of this insidious movement, visited Bethune at her school.

“The leader of the procession reined up his horse and ordered Taylor (the school’s groundskeeper) to open the gate. This he did, still with his gun on his shoulder. The Klansmen encircled the building. All was quiet except for the restless beat of the hoofs and the ominous tramping feet....” (Holt, p.121)

Bethune and some of the students awakened by the horses held their ground. The standoff held until one of the students overwhelmed with fear began to sing a Negro spiritual. As Bethune, the groundskeeper and the handful of students joined the hooded horsemen departed. Not only had they withstood the intimidation the news of their courage spread through the community giving it new hope and resolution. More importantly, her efforts were not in vein, “When the votes were counted, the Klansman had been defeated and the man of their choice had been elected.” (Holt, p.123)

Like George Washington, part of Bethune’s charisma was rooted in her physical stature, in essence, her appearance. She was an impressive figure.

Mary McLeod Bethune made an impressive figure. Her rather large frame was well-proportioned, enhanced by shapely ankles and truly beautiful expressive hands. The total effect of her physical appearance was one of strength and power, carried with grace and dignity... She took pride in looking exactly as she did and
would not have wanted to change in any particular. But it was her luminous, hazel
eyes, direct and candid, that caught and held the attention of all those who met her.
(Holt, p.72)

But was not all based on these external, and often superficial, characteristics. Bethune was an
eloquent speaker. Her training as a Presbyterian missionary had resulted not just in the grasp
of articulation which often accompanies education, but it unleashed an eloquence more
common in that era among male clergy and politicians.

Nor was Mrs. Bethune, strictly speaking, a lecturer, in the sense that she was
enlightening an audience of adults who were paying in advance to be informed
upon a subject on which the lecturer has specialized knowledge. Instead she was a
gifted speaker conducting a straight publicity campaign for the express purpose of
fund raising in order to operate and maintain said school. (Holt, p.110)

And if this were not enough she had a sincere and affectionate style of interaction, honed
while fund raising for her school, which resulted in countless friends and supporters whose
assistance would be the basis of the success of both her school and her career. Even in the
segregated South Bethune’s charm would enable her to accomplish her mission. “In the final
analysis Bethune presented the public image of a woman who so affable that even southern
whites could hardly be offended by her approach, but who, at the same time, clearly expressed
a vision of racial equality.” (Franklin & Meier (editors), p. 196)

Despite her victory over the local Klan in the Daytona mayoral election Bethune, like
virtually all African-Americans residing in South, would never be free from the infliction of
humiliation and injustice that is the product of the overt practice of racism. “She understood
the far-reaching implications of the white supremacy battle. The omnipresent fear of the
Negroes for themselves and of reprisals against their fellows had to be met and eventually
conquered by the inherent courage of all beings to survive and surmount.” (Holt, p.122) Yet
at the level of society and locales where Bethune spent the last half of her life of advocacy, she was often the only African American present. In these settings she endured the form of racism dispensed by the upper classes.

Her lot being cast so much among white people from the very beginning Mary McLeod Bethune faced the problem of how she was to be addressed. She would make no concession to Southern custom of refusing to prefix the name of a Negro with “Mr.” or “Mrs.” If one had attained a certain prominence which in itself forbade publicity the familiar use of the first name, the sidestepping form of address would be “Doctor.” This condescending avoidance of the issue of the equal status of Negroes as persons in their own right, Mrs. Bethune found intolerable. (Holt, p.76)

Just as when she starred down the hooded night riders at her school, Bethune addressed racism with a resolve and grace which won her admiration among people who heretofore had little contact with African Americans besides their servants.

This school started by Bethune, the Daytona Literary and Industrial School for Training Negro Girls, would unite in 1923 with Cookman Institute to become Bethune-Cookman College. Though Bethune would remain at her school as an teacher and administrator for more than twenty years she would branch out her efforts to address broader issues than the education of young African-American women. In an era marked by the activities of both W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, Bethune focused her interest on the one group whose relationship would be closest to that of black children, that is, black women.

Only a few months after settling on Palm Street, Mrs. Bethune started cultivating the interest of women in particular, since the care and education of children seemed to be particularly within their province. The Palmetto Club was her introduction to socially conscious women as a group. (Holt, p.64)

It would be her involvement in African-American women’s issues which would catapult
Bethune in to the highest levels of American society and politics. Even when she enters
government she never loses site of the ordeal of the African-American woman, second-class
because of race and gender.

Even when Mrs. Bethune might seem to be most deeply immersed in her school, at
no period did she lose sight of her long-time dedication to the cause of Negro
women. Her twin obsessions— the progress of women and of children— were
intertwined and inseparable. (Holt, p.180)

She began her club activity locally but within short order she had applied her dynamic energies
to her new interest. Within a few years of joining her first African-American women’s club she
was elected President of the State Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs in Florida. It was
not long before she held the national presidency. In 1924, she was elected president of the
National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs.

In this highly visible post Bethune first drew the attention of the national political
establishment. In 1928, she was invited to attend the Child Welfare Conference called by
President Calvin Coolidge. Later, during the Hoover administration she was invited to attend
the National Commission on Child Welfare. Finally, Bethune became more than just a figure
whose presence was both a symbol to her race and an indication of progress, she is appointed
to serve on the Hoover Commission on Home Building and Home Ownership.

But it will not be her service in the symbolic and largely empty gestures of these three
Republican administrations which will result her long-term participation in government. It will
be a friendship that Bethune cultivates during her tenure in the leadership of the African-
American women’s clubs. Bethune will strike up a friendship with the mother of the newly-
elected president.
In 1927 Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt gave a luncheon at the Roosevelt home in New York City for representative leaders of the National Council of Women of the U.S.A. Among the thirty-five guests, Mrs. Bethune was the only Negro. The last Mrs. Sara Delano Roosevelt noted the apprehensive glances cast in the way of Mrs. Bethune by the Southern women about to be ushered to the table... (Sara Roosevelt) took the arm of this particular guest (Mrs. Bethune) and placed her at the right of their hostess, her daughter-in-law... From that moment the heart of Mary McLeod Bethune went out to Sara Roosevelt. Subsequently, they visited together many times at the home of Mrs. Roosevelt who, among other tokens of her sympathies, accepted the Honorary Chairmanship of the Bethune-Cookman College Endowment Campaign. Their friendship became a treasured relationship. As a direct result of this affection, the friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt ripened. (Holt, p.178)

The senior Mrs. Roosevelt will introduce Bethune to her daughter-in-law, the First Lady. It would be these relationships which results Bethune’s appointment to positions in the administration and eventually grants her access to the president himself. Bethune’s first appointment was in 1933, when she was appointed to the Planning Committee established by the Federal Office of Education of Negroes.

Bethune’s next appointment within the Roosevelt administration would be the one which most impacted upon the lives of the rank-and-file African American. In 1934, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order No. 7086 which created the National Youth Administration. Bethune would be appointed this new agency’s director of Minority Affairs. This position would offer Bethune her greatest vantage point to advocate for the issues which had been so important to her, but it would present her with challenges which would both tax her talents and expose her to uncharacteristic criticism.

Not since Bethune had first taught under the Presbyterian School Board had she been subordinate to anyone. She always had been the most dynamic force behind any project she
was involved with, and usually the guiding force. The closest group she may have ever been accountable to after those earliest years was her own school’s board of directors which was comprised of notable individuals recruited by Bethune herself. Working in Washington, as one of the first African Americans to hold an appointed office, as a women, and as someone accountable to a whole chain of authority above her, Bethune was out of her element. Her charismatic, hands-on, pro-active approach, which had been the engine of her success, did not translate well to the bureaucratic office setting. That part of the criticism levied against her is, in part, justified. She can be held accountable for the gaps in her skills, just as she received so many accolades for her qualities. “While supposedly representing black interests, the member of the ‘black cabinet’ all found themselves working under serious constraints imposed by membership in the federal bureaucracy.” (Franklin & Meier, editors, p. 191)

What she should not be held accountable for is the criticism that she did not do enough personally to move President Roosevelt and his administration to act on issues of injustice and bigotry against African Americans. “The most important was the failure of Bethune’s division in many instances to challenge the Roosevelt administrations’s reluctance to demand a desegregated society.” (Franklin & Meier, p. 195) The Roosevelt administration was constrained by the political realities of the day. The Southern racist politician was still a significant part of the Democratic party.

Since Reconstruction Days the solid South had been the foundational constituency of the Democratic Party. The South’s peculiar racial sensitivities provided the occasion in early 1938 for a stunning demonstration of the power of that region’s elected representatives to stymie the legislative process and to write finis to the New Deal chapter in American history. (Kennedy, p. 341)

Even the admonitions of the First Lady to the president on the issue of race had little impact,
what pressure could a dozen conspicuously-placed African Americans do?

Even if the racist Southern politicians were not a critical part of Roosevelt’s Democratic constituent base, the one-party system of the South produced a juggernaut on Capitol Hill. The all-powerful committee chairmanships were still being decided by seniority alone. With African-Americans effectively eliminated from the vote, and poor whites voting in low percentages, and no Republican presence outside eastern Tennessee, election to a seat in Congress seat was virtually guaranteed for a lifetime. Almost every major committee on Capitol Hill was chaired by a Southern Democrat. “And thanks to seniority rules, representatives and senators from the one-party South were in possession of a disproportionate share of committee chairmanships. From those pivotal seats, they could see to it that very little legislative product left Capital Hill in 1937.” (Kennedy, p. 339) What sort of substantive changes could a mid-level political appointment advocate in light of these political realities.

There were many who appreciated the symbolism and visibility of Bethune and the other members of the so-called “black cabinet” for what it was. The status of the African American was still hampered by prejudice, segregation and other forms of discrimination, yet it was improving. Other administrations had not had African-American advisors in the same number and stature as Roosevelt had. Furthermore, through the efforts of Bethune and her peers, the programs of the Roosevelt administration to meliorate the impact of poverty were being made available to African Americans, if not to the same degree as the white majority.

To black Americans the New Deal offered jobs with the CCC, WPA, and PWA and, perhaps as important, the compliment of respect from at least some federal officials. The time had not come for direct federal action to challenge Jim Crow and put right at last the crimes of slavery and discrimination, but more than a few New Dealers mad clear where their sympathies lay and quietly prepared for a
Like so many critiques of the figures of history, omitting essential considerations regarding what were the conditions in which these figures functioned, is fundamentally unfair.

Yet some of the criticism of Bethune originated during her own time. Even then, there were those critics who did not appreciate the environment in Bethune survived, if not thrived, and how she had taken those skills and used them in a national political forum. The long-term survival of Bethune’s school was essentially because her constant efforts at fund raising proved to be successful. She knew how to beg for oranges so her students could eat, and she knew how to plead for money from a Rockefeller and the other rich winter residents of Daytona. Yet in Washington, these skills were perceived as being too supplicant. In an era of debate about the style and substance of W.E.B. DuBois verses that of Booker T. Washington, Bethune was criticized as being more like Washington. One reason for this was her personal style.

When addressing bi-racial groups, her appeals for racial equality often were couched in terms which could only be flattering to white people, while her demeanor was usually that of a supplicant whose primary approach lay in appeals to white people’s consciences and sense of fair play. (Franklin & Meier, p. 195)

Yet she was not supplicant behind the scenes. Using the skills she had a her disposal, she was not someone who would seek to anger an opponent. Like the teacher that she was she knew that she had to educate her adversaries, that can’t be done in a state of hostile confrontation. “The forcefulness of Bethune in her private behind-the-scenes official and interpersonal relationships with white and black administrators more than atones for her public shortcomings.” (Franklin & Meier, p. 196)
It is in just this same interpersonal, behind-the-scenes approach that Bethune did the most to advance the various causes she made so much a part of her life. By virtue of her relationship with the two Roosevelt women she had access to the President. In one instance her intervention averted a potential racial confrontation. African-American workers, usually the last hired and the first fired, had found the unions largely unsympathetic to their plight. Historically, poor African American from the South had been used by the industrialists to replace striking workers and to generally keep wages down for all workers. During a strike with Ford Motors it was made known to Bethune that the auto producer planned to play off black workers against white workers in an effort to end the strike.

Ford’s immediate plan, Bethune had learned, was to use these Negro workers as the vanguard of a back-to-work movement sometime after the weekend. If this was attempted, Bethune predicted, it would result in “one of the bloodiest race riots in the history of the country.” Bethune closed by saying she was sending this confidential information to Eleanor in the hope that Eleanor would use her influence to prevent an occurrence “which would set race relations back a quarter of a century.” (Goodwin, p. 228)

With this information in hand Bethune approached the President through her relationship with Eleanor. Bethune wrote her friend a long memorandum explaining the bind the African-American worker finds himself. The memorandum explained to the president the perspective of the African-American works and pleaded that he take steps to avoid a racial confrontation which would ultimately set back the cause of civil rights. Eleanor passed on the memorandum to her husband.

Eleanor sent Franklin a copy of a long memo she had received from civil-rights leader Mary McLeod (sic) Bethune. In this memo, Bethune explained that, though it was true that Ford had earned the loyalty of Negroes by employing “more Negroes in skilled and semi-skilled capacities than any other auto manufacturer in the company,” the policy was rooted in opposition to the union. Over time,
Bethune explained, “the ford Negro workers have been propagandized very strongly against trade unionism of any kin and it was expected that in any labor dispute these workers would form the backbone of the Ford anti-union forces.” (Goodwin, p. 228)

What role the memorandum played in the final steps taken by the Roosevelt administration is unclear but in any event the President thanked Bethune for her intervention. “Armed with the information Bethune provided, Roosevelt appreciated the terrible bind in which the Negro workers found themselves, caught between their past loyalty to Ford and their hopes for the future.” (Goodwin, p. 228) Any intelligence could be vital in charting a course during those frenetic days of the New Deal.

Bethune’s way of working surreptitiously to accomplish her goals contributed to the impression she was doing little or nothing. Many of her contemporary critics would not know what she was doing out of the limelight. It would require the time consuming research of historians to discover Bethune’s “...behind-the-scenes correspondence with NYA white administrators regarding the inclusion of black youth in NYA work projects that afforded training aimed at the skilled and semi-skilled positions in the job market yields the portrait of an aggressive and often outspoken woman.” (Franklin & Meier (editors), p. 197) Aware of her critics Bethune did not alter her style. She would not respond to critics, even those that ultimately supported the same broad goals as she had all her life. But she would, on occasion, within the confines of her advisory role as a member of the so-called Black Cabinet, speak frankly. In one instance when the group was discussing how racism was compounding the impact of the Great Depression on African Americans Bethune offered her own solution. “The only solution to the racial problem, Mary McCleod (sic) Bethune observed, is “a straight
forward statement and program of action from the President.” (Goodwin, p. 447)

Like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Bethune would have to wait for the judgement of history to determine whether she did not do enough to end racism, or she did not challenge the white establishment as effectively and as directly as was necessary. But her demonstrable contributions were significant. “The value of her tenure as NYA director of Negro Affairs was her unyielding demand, especially in her private contacts with colleagues, upon absolutely co-equal, albeit often separate, consideration of blacks.” (Franklin & Meier (editors), p. 196) For her courage was required to stay the course, to do what she did best, despite the criticism of friend and foe.

... it is not an exaggeration to state that her constant pressure in regard to the appointment of increasing numbers of black NYA officials on the state and local levels was perhaps her most outstanding administrative accomplishment and, in itself, justified the existence of her office and the Division of Negro Affairs. (Franklin & Meier (editors), p. 197)

In the South she had learned that African American best functioned in stealth. She did not have the resources to launch a frontal assault on a culture produced by three hundred years of racism. Furthermore, as a woman, she was not supposed to challenge those strictures regarding gender which women of both races endured. “In the final analysis it would.... appear that Bethune’s subdued public approach probably was not an engrained part of her personality, but, rather, was a deliberate act, consciously and adeptly performed.” (Franklin & Meier (editors), p. 197)

Bethune would make what would be a final gesture to move the administration on issues of racial justice. In 1937 and again in 1939 she calls for a national conference on the problems of black Americans. Delegates came from around the nation in a forum which did
attract attention from both the media and politicians. Bethune would use her fame to bring forth issues without directly challenging the President. What she did not know at the time these two conferences were the highlight of her government career.

As World War II approached Bethune’s role would revert to being one more of symbolism than practice. She, and the other members of Roosevelt’s black cabinet, would direct their attention to the war effort. Believing that the South was essential to the President’s desire to maintain social programs while preparing for world war, his African-American advisors found themselves even more hamstrung. The military was segregated and there was little hope of changing that fact. Nevertheless, Bethune, more marginalized than ever, in 1942 unsuccessfully lobbied the U.S. War Department to commission black women officers in the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (later known as the WAC). In 1944, Bethune appointed national commander of the Women’s Army for National Defense, an all-black women’s organization founded in 1942 to allow for segregation among women in service to the country.

With the death of President Roosevelt, Bethune would continue her role as a symbol of the African American in government. Unlike Roosevelt, Truman had worked with African Americans during his private life and was less inclined to defer to the racist mentality. On April 25, 1945 she was sent by President Harry Truman to the organizing meeting of the United Nations. She would be among a handful of African Americans sent to the organizational meeting as observers. Their presence was intended to send a message to the world about changes in America, and also to show African members of the international organization how America reflected the world.
Following her participation in the formation of the United Nations Bethune’s remaining years would be limited to accolades and ceremonial appointments. In 1949 she was awarded the Medal of Honor and Merit by President Dumarsais Estime of Haiti. That year she represented President Truman at the inauguration of President William V.S. Tubman of Liberia. In 1954 she attended the World Assembly for Moral Re-armament. Eventually, she would be named a vice president of the NAACP. Mary McLeod Bethune died at Daytona Beach, Florida, May 18, 1955.

Bethune’s legacy was a testimony to courage. The courage to challenge racism. The courage to face down the Ku Klux Klan. The courage to take on the responsibility of feeding, housing and educating children. The courage to approach the elite for support, the courage to challenge a president. And all the while Bethune considered herself first and foremost an educator.

Mrs. Bethune’s quite justified appraisal of herself as an educator was more than proved through her intuitive, administrative sense, and power as a lecturer. In this field she was not excelled. She had the uncanny knack of retaining and using aptly words and phrases, and in creating object lessons by turning personal experiences into richly adorned parables. (Holt, p. 162)

She was a teacher who had the courage and the determination to leave the world a better place than she found it.

**Bibliography**


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