
MEDICAL HISTORY

A DOCTOR'S LEGACY: DR. JOHN E.T. CAMPER AND THE MEDESOS

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Washington, DC

We have had for leaders men who have become discouraged by the long fight for full status for the Negro people, men whose vision has dimmed, men who say we can't win and therefore let's do the bidding of our oppressors and in that way salvage something for ourselves—"peace in our time" men. But the generations of black Americans, with their knowledge of the struggle of their black brothers in Nigeria, with their knowledge of his struggle in Panama, with their knowledge of the struggles of the oppressed peoples all over the world, will not have it so. They recognize that struggle is but a part of that great struggle for freedom for millions of human beings and will not let them down. They will not accept peace in our time, but will bring forth new leadership. That leadership must come from the masses, who are constantly feeling the lash of segregation and discrimination, whose toiled broken bodies are not too weary to fight for the most sacred thing on earth—freedom.

John E.T. Camper, MD
On the Struggle for Equality, 1948

E. Franklin Frazier may have been correct when he wrote in *Black Bourgeoisie* that America's black elite live in a fragile fantasy world. Afraid of their blackness, he says, they do not help other blacks.

The civil rights movement, especially in the early years, found most black doctors afraid to risk their hard-earned social and financial status to

respond to the call for equality. This article, however, is the story of Dr. John E.T. Camper and a group of doctors who used their status, education, and money to confront injustice.

From the 1940s, through the 1960s, the MeDeSo, a Baltimore club for black physicians and dentists, bankrolled many of the local NAACP activities. Its members held key positions in many civil rights organizations. And the club took stands on issues when it was necessary.

From 1942, until his recent death, the MeDeSo doctors rallied around Dr. John Emory Toussaint Camper. A brilliant tactician and courageous spokesman, Camper was one of the founders of the MeDeSo. Together he and the Club authored a tradition of hard-nosed activism that black professionals can appreciate today.

On January 9, 1954, the MeDeSo gathered to record what was to become one of the most important chapters in the annals of civil rights history. That chilly evening, the doctors made their way from various parts of Baltimore to the MeDeSo clubhouse at 1800 Eutaw Place. The clubhouse was a relic from the days when the rich had owned and ruled the flourishing port of Baltimore and had built even the smallest row house using marble steps. A small mansion, the richness of the clubhouse's rosewood and mahogany interior starkly contrasted with the crumbling tenements up and down Eutaw Place that seemed to stoop with the weight of the winter's snow. As the doctors took off their coats and seated themselves

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around the club's long mahogany table, a cigar or cigarette came to life and filled the room with smoke.

Camper had called the meeting to report on the progress of the Supreme Court case of *Brown v the Topeka Board of Education*. Months before, he had received a telegram from Walter White and Thurgood Marshall that had read:

UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT TODAY DEFERRED JUDGMENT ON FIVE HISTORIC CASES CHALLENGING RACIAL SEGREGATION IN ELEMENTARY AND HIGH SCHOOLS . . . HIGHEST COURT NOW REQUESTS PREPARATION OF ANSWERS WITHIN THREE MONTHS TO MANY BROAD QUESTIONS REQUIRING LEGAL ARGUMENT ON HISTORIC CONSTITUTIONAL FACTORS, SOCIOLOGICAL DATA AND AUTHORITATIVE OPINION. NO MONEY AVAILABLE MEET EMERGENCY. \$15,000 NEEDED IMMEDIATELY TO FORESTALL POSSIBILITY THESE YOUNGSTERS MUST WAIT DECADES. . . .

The NAACP's coffers were empty and the Legal Defense Fund's war chest exhausted. When the telegram arrived, Camper knew that the only blacks in Baltimore who could help the NAACP were the city's black underworld or its doctors, for they were the only groups who had large amounts of money quickly available. Camper had turned to the doctors.

When the MeDeSos met that January, their money had already helped determine the outcome of the case. It would take only until May before the new Chief Justice, Earl Warren, newly nominated, confirmed, and sworn in, would wield the Court's unanimous support for the historic decision. Yet few people truly understood the importance of the *Brown* case at the time, for in the past the NAACP's lawyers had always fallen short of defeating segregation, and *Brown* could easily have been a replay of former rulings. The MeDeSo minutes are therefore low-key, and record:

First, that the MeDeSo had raised and sent \$15,000 through the local NAACP to the National Office "to aid in its legal defense."

Second, Dr. Camper said that in his talk with Roy Wilkins of the National NAACP, they had not the slightest idea of what the outcome of the recent Supreme Court hearing would be.

It is some measure of the distance Dr. Camper

had brought the MeDeSo that such matters would be routinely recorded in the minutes, for it had been quite a courageous act to bet on that kind of legal longshot. Yet less than a dozen years earlier, the NAACP was regarded by Baltimore's black physicians and professional classes as too controversial and too radical to be associated with.

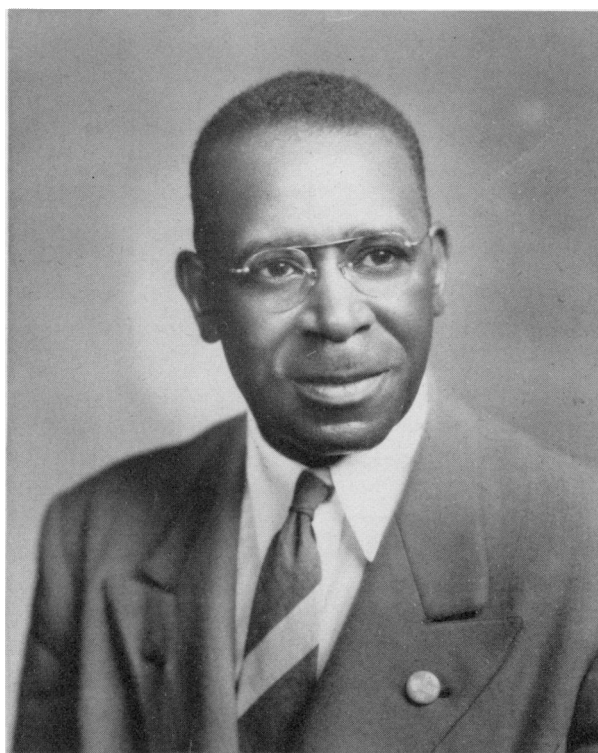
The turning point for Camper and Baltimore's other black doctors came in 1942, during World War II. As America declared war against Nazism abroad, the doctors declared war against rascism at home.

By 1942, the war effort was in full swing and black men were being drafted into a segregated armed forces. Camper, a soldier in World War I, still remembered what a sham that war had been. When "the war to make the world safe for democracy" had ended, he had returned home from training camp on a segregated train. Yet America needed the black soldier in World War II, and so in Baltimore, draft board examiners gave no deferments to black draftees no matter how unfit they were for duty. When Camper learned about this he volunteered as a medical examiner and began giving exemptions to any candidate even vaguely unfit for duty.

Already embittered by sending black soldiers to fight on foreign soil for a Jim Crow America, it is ironically fitting that Camper would be propelled into action by the death of a black soldier on the streets of Baltimore.

On February 1, 1942, Dr. Camper strolled toward the heart of Baltimore's black business district. Turning onto Pennsylvania Avenue, he caught sight of a white policeman arguing with a black soldier. It was common practice for civilian police to harass the black GIs, and it angered the doctor. Camper started toward the crowd that had begun gathering around the two men. The soldier turned and began entering one of the Avenue's numerous taxis. Without warning, the policeman suddenly drew his pistol and shot the soldier in the back.

The trauma of that moment pervaded Camper's consciousness for the rest of his life. He disregarded the crowd that began kicking and beating the policeman, and ran to help the soldier. The young man's wrist was limp as Camper felt for the pulse that no longer existed. The young soldier was Baltimore's ninth unprovoked police killing in three years.



John E. T. Camper, MD

Other men might have felt helpless or morally paralyzed by the killing, but Camper found the strength to act. He went to “Ma” Jackson, the Baltimore NAACP President, and to Dr. Carl Murphy, owner of the *Afro-American* newspaper. These leaders were already worried about the police brutality that had followed the appointment of Robert Stanton as Police Chief of Baltimore. If they did not do something, Camper told Jackson and Murphy, Baltimore would riot just as blacks had recently done in Detroit. “March on the State Capitol!” Camper pushed.

Juanita Jackson Mitchell, Ma Jackson’s daughter, supported Dr. Camper in this plan. A firebrand in her own right, Juanita Mitchell had led Baltimore’s youth in protest against the discriminatory hiring practices of the city’s white-owned stores, and had originated the City-Wide Youth Forum which brought leaders like W.E.B. Dubois, Walter White, and Mary McLeod Bethune to speak to the city’s black community.

As Camper and Mitchell fleshed out plans for the march, Murphy and Jackson also warmed to the idea and together they created the Citizen’s Committee for Justice as an umbrella organization to represent the entire community; its first act

would be to plan and execute the March on Annapolis.

One of Camper’s main tasks on the Committee was to bring Baltimore’s black physicians in behind the civil rights movement. Their prestige and financial support were essential.

Camper’s reputation springs from that 1942 march. At that point, the earlier plans of A. Phillip Randolph to march on Washington had not materialized, hence the March on Annapolis came to be known as the “granddaddy of all the marches that were yet to come.” Never seeking credit or vying for the top position, Camper used his network as a doctor and his innate organizing ability to procure the cars and buses necessary to transport the thousands of demonstrators to the State Capitol. It was a task for a seasoned organizer, a general. Camper’s troops were his patients and fellow doctors. From seemingly nowhere, the cars, trucks, buses—anything with wheels—turned up at his command.

Camper had also enlisted a little known black preacher, a state assemblyman from New York, to speak to those troops. The choice was inspired, though Camper later had to bear the criticism for his decision. The “radical” speaker was none

other than Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. The evening before the march, Powell spoke to a church full of people, and from that meeting spread the word, "Be in Annapolis, tomorrow." Powell's oratory helped mold what was to become the most powerful weapon of the civil rights movement. From Birmingham and Selma, finally in 1963 to the very citadel of discrimination, Washington, DC, blacks would replay the scene that took place in Annapolis in 1942.

On April 24th, 2,000 angry black faces surrounded the State legislature. Their demands were sweeping. They wanted equal opportunity for education, employment, and housing; an end to police brutality; the resignation of Police Chief Stanton; hiring of black police officers; representation on the State's boards and legislative committees. And they wanted a new committee to investigate the problems of blacks in Baltimore—and representation on that committee as well.

The sea of black humanity traumatized the capitol city of Maryland; it ceased to be "business as usual" for the legislators, as Adam Clayton Powell kept the crowd simmering just short of the boiling point.

The march produced tangible results. Governor O'Connor created an interracial legislative committee to study the problems of Baltimore's blacks, and appointed the leadership of the March not only to that committee but to various legislative committees on housing, employment, and health in Baltimore. Police Chief Stanton eventually resigned and black police officers were hired.

Camper was the first black ever appointed to the State board that administered Crownsville State Mental Institution. He was also appointed to the Governor's committee.

Camper's reputation as a hard-nosed fighter who acted on his convictions spread quickly from these committees. He used his knowledge and position as a physician to spring spot inspections at Crownsville and demand health reforms. By the time he was appointed to the Prison Board (also the first black), the other members of the Board said they would rather resign than accept Camper. They knew he could not be intimidated and they could not publicly ignore what he had to say. Camper held his seat on the prison board for quite some time.

With Camper as Chairman and Juanita Mitchell as Director, the Citizen's Committee for Justice

initiated voter registration drives and pressured area retail stores to employ black salespersons. As Chairman of the Total War Employment Committee, another citizen's group, Camper also began to force the desegregation of Baltimore industries holding government contracts, thereby enforcing Roosevelt's Executive Order #8802 which banned segregation in war industries.

Some of Baltimore's doctors still say Camper pulled them into a fight in which they did not wish a role. History, though, is fairly clear. Once pushed, the doctors needed only occasional prodding. After the March on Annapolis, many doctors became purchasers of NAACP Life Memberships. The Watts twins, members of MeDeSo, became NAACP Treasurer and Chairman of the NAACP's Life Membership Committee. Known for their ability to pull the local NAACP out of a financial crisis single-handedly with their own checkbooks, they bought life memberships for themselves, their wives, deceased relatives, almost anyone, in order to keep their contributions inconspicuous.

Indeed, it was Dr. William Watts who convinced Dr. Camper to go to a Progressive Citizens of America (PCA) meeting in 1947 and propelled Camper into politics. After FDR's death, the federal government had backed off its former commitments to desegregation and international peace. Henry Wallace, FDR's former Vice-President, who was successfully maneuvered out of the Democratic presidential slot by party bosses, still seemed to many to be the heir apparent to FDR's legacy.

The PCA therefore decided to draft Wallace for the Presidency on a third-party ticket. Watts and Camper had attended several PCA meetings together. Enthusiastic about breaking the color line, the PCA made Camper State Party Chairman and finally urged him to run for Congress in Maryland. To win, Camper would have to beat the white political machine controlling Baltimore's black wards.

Watts became Camper's campaign treasurer and both doctors campaigned while running full-time practices. In the evenings after their offices closed, Camper and Watts went from door to door soliciting contributions from patients and neighbors, giving out receipts that read "I helped send a Negro to Congress." Many of the other doctors also supported Camper, regardless of their formal party affiliation.

When Wallace's candidacy forced Democratic and Republican parties to adopt civil rights planks in their presidential campaigns, Baltimore's black community cheered Camper on against the white machine.

Paul Robeson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Elenore Gimble, Lena Horne, Joe Louis, and others famous in the national arena came to Baltimore to secure votes for Camper. In her inimitable way Juanita Mitchell roused, cajoled, and demanded audiences to vote for Camper, collecting campaign funds as she went.

But not even those funds could protect the voting booths. The Pollack machine saw its opportunity and moved in, rigging the machines, intimidating and buying voters.

Camper understood the race was over when he saw thugs buying voters with free liquor at one voting booth. Remembering how his father had fought similar political tactics on Maryland's Eastern Shore by taking an axe and smashing the barrels of corn liquor, Camper pulled off his dress coat, rolled up his shirt sleeves and charged the hoodlums. The doctor's size and reputation for physical competence prompted their hasty retreat. Camper had been an All-American in football; his build showed it.

The thugs returned, however, bringing a truckload of compatriots. Instead of backing down, Camper advanced promising to inflict wounds that even he as a doctor would find difficult to minister to. "I come from the country, boys," he smiled, "and we're real good at this," he said rubbing his right fist.

The next day, both the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Afro-American* reported that vote fixing had led to Camper's defeat. They said Camper's empty war chest, not the other candidates, had defeated him—and had done that by only a few percentage points.

In later years, the political blows Camper rained on the white Pollack machine finally freed Baltimore's black wards. By 1954 Camper had guided several black local and state candidates to precedent breaking victory. As their treasurer he made certain they had the money to prevent what had happened to him. In each election, doctors played an important role in campaigning and supporting the candidates.

As the civil rights movement advanced, Camper became known as "The NAACP Doctor." Most

of the poor who came to him somehow forgot to pay their bills—which he seemed to make a point of forgetting to collect. Giving of his time and money, he was also known as an unshakeable expert witness in the police brutality cases that Juanita Mitchell brought.

Camper fully understood that most doctors would never march the picket line; he was the exception. Yet he also understood that the black doctor was and is in a unique position. Black teachers and others who are salaried by the white establishment expose themselves to a direct financial threat if they speak out. Doctors have far less basis for such fear. The only reason for their inaction, he believed, was their failure to act on their convictions. Camper understood it was important for doctors to speak out against injustice and for their people because they were powerful role models in the black community. Doctors were more than medical practitioners; they were trusted as counselors of the aged and young alike.

Dr. Camper died on November 21, 1977. But he would have been proud to believe this tradition of principled activism was a kind of legacy to his people and his profession. The collective courage that he and his colleagues demonstrated still stands as an example and a challenge. The human and financial price was high; but so were the gains. The MeDeSos continue. They have financed low-rent housing in Baltimore, sponsored health seminars for the community, and moved politically when necessary. It is perhaps to our advantage and pride that they were and are men of privilege who understand the responsibility which that privilege confers, and so have moved with a sense of urgency on behalf of their people and their profession.

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