1-1-1919

The Relation of the Negro to the Selective Draft

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WASHINGTON, District of Columbia - The following extract from the official report of the Provost Marshal General of the United States Army to the Secretary of War, gives a highly interesting and informing story of the part played, by the colored soldiers who were called to the defense of the flag of this nation through the operation of the Selective Draft Law:

"The part that has been played by the Negro in the great world drama upon which the curtain is now about to fall is but another proof of the complete unity of the various elements that go to make up this great Nation. Passing through the sad and rigorous experience of slavery; ushered into a sphere of civil and political activity where he was to match his endeavors with those of his former masters still embittered by defeat; gradually working his way toward the achievement of success that would enable both him and the world to justify his new life of freedom; surrounded for over half a century of his new life by the specter of that slavedom through which he had for centuries past laboriously toiled; met continuously by the prejudice born of tradition; still the slave, to a large extent, of superstition fed by ignorance - in the light of this history, some doubt was felt and expressed, by the best friends of the Negro, when the call came for a draft upon the man-power of the Nation, whether he would possess sufficient stamina to measure up to the full duty of citizenship, and would give to the Stars and Stripes, that had guaranteed for him the same liberty now sought for all nations and all races, the response that was its due. And, on the part of many of the leaders of the Negro race, there was apprehension that the sense of fair play and fair dealing, which is so essentially an American characteristic, would not, nay could not, in a country of such diversified views, with sectional feeling still slumbering but not dead, be meted out to the members of the colored race.

FEARS GROUNDLESS

"How groundless such fears, how ill considered such doubts, may be seen from the statistical record of the draft with relation to the Negro. His race furnished its quota, and uncomplainingly, yes, cheerfully. History, indeed, will be unable to record the fullness of his spirit in the war, for the reason that opportunities for enlistment were not opened to him to the same extent as to the whites. But enough can be gathered from the records to show that he was filled with the same feeling of patriotism, the same martial spirit, that fired his white fellow citizen in the cause for world freedom.

"As a general rule, he was fair in his dealings with draft officials; and in the majority of cases, having the assistance of his white employers, he was able to present fairly such claims for deferment or discharge as he may have had, for the consideration of the various draft boards. In consequence, there appears to have been no racial discrimination made in the determination of his claims. Indeed, the proportion of claims granted to claims filled by members of the Negro race compare favorably with the proportion of claims granted to members of the white race.

"That the men of the colored race were as ready to serve as their white neighbors is amply proved by the reports from the local boards. A Pennsylvania board, remarking upon the eagerness of its colored registrants to be included, illustrated this by the action of one registrant, who, upon learning that his employer had had him placed upon the Emergency Fleet list, quit his job. Another registrant, who was believed by the board to be above draft age, in an interview, stated that he was not married, explained why so, and declared that he was not too old to serve. In both cases, the registrants were granted a discharge.

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that he "wanted only one war at a time."

"The following description from Oklahoma and Arkansas boards are typical, the first serving to perpetuate one of the best epigrams of the war:

**EQUAL CONSIDERATION**

"We tried to treat the Negroes with exactly the same consideration as was shown the whites. We had the same speakers to address them. The Rotary Club presented them with small silk flags, as they did the whites. The band turned out to escort them to the train. And the Negroes went to camp with as cheerful a spirit as did the white men. One of them when asked if he were going to France, said, "No, sir, I'm not going to France. I'm gwine through France."

"In dealing with the Negroes, the southern boards gained a richness of experience that is without parallel. No other class of citizens was more loyal to the Government, or more ready to answer the country's call. The only blot upon their military record was the great number of delinquents among the more ignorant; but in the majority of cases this was traced to an ignorance of the regulations, or to the withholding of mail by the landlord (often himself an aristocratic slacker) in order to retain the man's labor."

"On October 1, 1917, in order that there might be no question of the full protection of the rights of the Negroes, and that thorough examination might be made into all matters affecting their relation to the war, and its many agencies, there was announced the appointment of Emmett J. Scott as Special Assistant to the Secretary of War. Having been for 18 years confidential secretary to the late Booker T. Washington, and being at the time of his appointment Secretary of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute for Negroes, he was peculiarly fitted to render necessary advice to the War Department with respect to the colored people of the various States, to look after all matters affecting the interests of the Negro selectives and enlisted men, and to inquire into the treatment accorded them by the various officials connected with the War Department. In the position occupied by him, the Special Assistant to the Secretary of War was thus enabled to obtain a proper perspective both of the attitude of selective service officials to the Negro, and of the Negro to the war, and especially to the draft. As the representative of his race, his expressions, therefore, have great weight. In a memorandum address to this office, on the subject of the relation of the Negro to the war and especially the draft, on December 12, 1918, Mr. Scott wrote:

**EAGER TO ACCEPT TERMS**

"The attitude of the Negro to the war, and especially to the draft, was one of complete acceptance of the draft, in fact, of an eagerness to accept its terms. There was a deep resentment in many quarters that he was not permitted to volunteer, as white men, by the thousands, were permitted to do in connection with National Guard units and other branches of military service which were closed to colored men. One of the brightest chapters in the whole history of the war is the Negro's eager acceptance of the draft and his splendid willingness to fight. His only resentment was due to the limited extent to which he was allowed to join and participate in combatant or "fighting" units. The number of colored drafted accepted for military duty, and the comparatively small number of them claiming exemptions, as compared with the total number of white and colored men called and drafted, presents and interesting study and reflects much credit upon this racial group.

"Many influences were brought to bear upon the Negro to evade his duty to the Government. Some effort in certain sections of the country was made to induce them not to register. That the attempt to spread German propaganda was a miserable failure may be seen from the statement of the Chief of the Bureau of Investigation of the Department of Justice to the United States Senate committee:

"The Negroes didn't take to these stories, however, as they were too loyal. Money spent in the South for propaganda was thrown away."

**HOW MORALE WAS PROMOTED.**
A special committee of 100 colored speakers was appointed to deliver public patriotic addresses all over the country, under the auspices of the Committee on Public Information, stating the war aims of the Government and seeking to keep unbroken the spirit of loyalty of colored American citizens.

A special conference of Negro editors was called to meet in Washington in June, 1918, under the auspices of the Committee on Public Information, in order to gather and disseminate the thought and public opinion of the various leaders of the Negro race. Such has been only a part of the work of the department of the Special Assistant to the Secretary of War in the record of the marshaling of the man power of the American Nation.

The appreciation of this representative of the colored race for the cooperation shown by the Selective Service administration, especially as it affected members of the colored race, in reference to occasional complaints received, will appear from the following extract from a memorandum written to this office on September 12th by the Special Assistant to the Secretary of War:

MR. SCOTT TELLS OF DRAFT FAIRNESS.

Throughout my tenure here I have keenly appreciated the prompt and cordial cooperation of the Provost Marshal General's Office with that particular section of the office of the Secretary of War especially referred to herein. The Provost Marshal General's Office has carefully investigated and has furnished full and complete reports in each and every complaint or case referred to it for attention, involving discrimination, race prejudice, erroneous classification of draftees, etc., and has rectified these complaints whenever it was found, upon investigation, that there was just ground for the same. Especially in the matter of applying and carrying out the Selective Service Regulations, the Provost Marshal General's Office has kept a watchful eye upon certain local exemption boards which seemed disinclined to treat Negro draftees on the same basis as other Americans subject to the draft law. It is an actual fact that in a number of instances, where flagrant violations have occurred in the application of the draft law to Negro men in certain sections of the country, local exemption boards have been removed bodily and new boards have been appointed to supplant them. In several instances these boards so appointed have been ordered by the Provost Marshal General to reclassify colored men who had been unlawfully conscripted into the Army or who had been wrongfully classified; as a result of this action hundreds of colored men have had their complaints remedied and have been properly reclassified.

It is also valuable to note the opinion of this representative of the colored race as to the results of the Negro's participation in the war:

In a word, I believe that the Negro's participation in the war, his eagerness to serve, and his great courage and demonstrated valor across the seas, have given him a new idea of Americanism and likewise have given to the white people of our country a new idea of his citizenship, his real character and capabilities, and his 100 per cent Americanism. Incidentally, the Negro has been helped in many ways, physically and mentally and has been made into an even more satisfactory asset to the Nation.