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Balance Sheet of the Negro in America

WILLIAM STUART NELSON

THERE are surface indications that the Negro in America is making significant gains in this war period. During the decade ending in 1940 the proportion of Negroes employed in most industries declined. Now their general advance in industry is marked. From an estimated 3 per cent at the beginning of 1942, the employment of non-white labor (95 per cent of which is Negro) has increased to 7.3 per cent. The percentage is larger in the ship-building trades. Even in aviation, which has stubbornly resisted the employment of Negroes, there are now 70,000 Negro workers. In one year closing October 1943, 37 firms investigated by the Committee on Democracy in Unemployment in New York State showed an increase in personnel of 33 per cent but a 357 per cent increase in Negro employees. There are now more than a million Negroes in war plants. In 1943 there were 135 Negroes in responsible government positions as compared with 5 in 1933. Negro men and women are doing work formerly reserved exclusively for whites. Pay has increased all around. Dr. Robert C. Weaver, until recently with the War Manpower Commission, writing in *The Journal of Negro Education*, Summer Number, 1943, states: "As compared to the situation in 1940, the status of Negro employment in the spring of 1943 represented a significant absolute and relative improvement."

There is improvement in the status of the Negro in the armed forces as compared with what it was in World War I. In August 1943, there were 582,861 Negro soldiers in the American Army against 404,348 in the army of the first world war, and at this time Negro strength in the Army reflects the same ratio of Negro to white soldier as obtains among registrants in the country as a whole. In August 1943, commissioned officers numbered 4,386 as compared with a total of 1,353 in World War I. Negro participation in the Navy has been widened; the Marine Corps has broken a tradition of 167 years and begun the enlistment of Negroes; Negroes have increased materially in the Coast Guard and have found there some conditions of unsegregated training. Negro and white army officers are being trained under completely unsegregated arrangements—a contrast to the Fort Des Moines Training Camp for Negro officers twenty-five years ago.

In numerous other areas of Negro life, advances can be discerned: increased health provisions, some relaxation of segregation in Pullman transportation and dining car accommodations, a significant increase in the concern of religious bodies, the organization of more than one hundred inter-racial committees to

deal constructively with racial tensions. Exceedingly significant is the deepening insight and widening perspective of Negroes in this period. They have been driven to a penetrating self analysis, to a fuller understanding of the ideals and the ways of the world, to a profounder consciousness of what is right for them and for all men.

On the other side of the picture is the fact that discrimination against the Negro still exists in many industries. *Fortune* discovered in February 1943, that fewer than 30 per cent of five thousand important business executives whom it polled employed as much as 10 per cent of Negro labor. The problem of getting Negro women employed and men upgraded has not been solved. Few Negroes participate in in-plant training. They are represented poorly on jobs requiring principally semi-skilled and skilled production workers. The bulk of Negro workers still is to be found in non-essential fields. There continues the practice of segregation in the armed forces; the restricted use of Negro personnel in the Navy; the failure to include Negro women in the Waves and the Spars; and the visitation of brutalities upon Negro soldiers by white soldiers, officers, and civilians. Generally there is frightful tautness to which numerous physical clashes have already testified. There is a hardening defiance of change by conservative elements North and South and a consequent drawing of Negro and white battle lines.

In spite of these violent eddies and cross currents it appears that the main stream of Negro life is taking an encouraging turn. The situation, however, bears closer examination. For example, to what extent are the gains which have been made permanent? Any judgment concerning the gains and losses of the Negro during the present crisis is an interim judgment and therefore tentative. Negroes have no illusions about the difficulty of retaining their present gains once the war is over. They foresee the sudden return to a peace-time economy with its reduced demands for labor and the loosing of millions of white veterans upon the country in search of work. During the war they have been the last hired and following the conflict they will probably be the first fired. Conditions following World War I suggest this. Then he not only lost his job but his life. Lynchings increased decidedly between 1917 and 1922 and post-war riots in East St. Louis, Chicago, and Washington took a severe toll in life. The depression of the thirties delivered the Negro's economic *coup de grâce*.

It must be asked also whether the gains to the Negro are basic? Has the spirit of white Americans

changed or have their concessions been made grudgingly? In June 1942, the Bureau of Employment Security pointed out that in the ordnance industry: "Virtually every important employer has indicated that hiring of non-whites will begin 'when necessary,' that is, when the supply of white workers is exhausted." This lack of conscience is typical. The fundamental framework of Negro-white relations has not changed. Roi Ottley in the concluding chapter of his *New World A-Coming* asks whether the South can be persuaded to end its segregation and discrimination against the Negro and states that this is the crux of the matter in the opinion of most people. The South has answered with an emphatic "No." "All of the armies of the world, both of the United Nations and the Axis" could not alter that answer, says Mark Ethridge. In one editorial, Virginius Dabney, editor of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, deploras segregation on the Richmond street cars and in another advocates a regional provision for the professional and graduate education of Negroes that will crystallize segregation in this important area for an indeterminate period. To provide a man with work and good pay and then leave him to inordinate proscription in the use of that pay is to touch but half of his problem. The gains of the Negro appear especially inconsequential when it is remembered that they have been coerced in a period of the most fervent exaltation of human freedom and when prodigious sacrifices of life and treasure are being made presumably in behalf of those freedoms. The gains represent, moreover, the maximum Negroes and their friends have been able to wring out of a people which at times stood in critical need of the last services of the last man. They are all we have to show after bitter, courageous efforts in behalf of Negroes by the President, Mrs. Roosevelt, and other liberals in our government. When we reflect on the elections of last November and the frequent coalition of conservative Democrats and conservative Republicans to the Negro's disadvantage, we wonder whether these modest gains may not soon be swept away by an avalanche of reaction.

It is increasingly obvious that there is a definitely debit side to the picture. First, Negroes have not escaped the prevalent and virulent disease of self interest concerning the war. George S. Schuyler concludes his article "A Long War Will Aid the Negro" in the *Crisis* of November 1943, with these sobering words: "If the war should end now through a negotiated peace or the sudden collapse of the Axis enemies, it would not have lasted long enough to have effected the economic, social and psychological changes necessary to the elimination of the color line in this country. We would not exactly be back to 1918-1919 but the sudden interruption of the process of education-through-experience would find

both colored and white citizens insufficiently changed to abandon the old racialistic totems and taboos. . . . But let the struggle last for many years and there will be interracial little resemblance left to the United States of December 7, 1941." Arthur P. Davis, writing in the weekly *Norfolk Journal and Guide* expresses the belief that the following statement reflects a common feeling among Negroes: "I don't care how long this war lasts—the longer it is, the better for us." Davis himself believes reluctantly that only in emergencies like this one can the Negro make appreciable progress toward American citizenship. There are voices to the contrary. *The Chicago Defender* declares: "Grim and stark racial suicide faces the Negro people in the spurious, dangerous and too-widely-supported theory that a long war will aid the thirteen million Americans with black skins." Benjamin Quarles, writing in *The Crisis* of September 1943, warns: "In an international struggle the Negro has a community of interest with his fellow-Americans; he must take care lest his segregation become spiritual." A recent poll conducted by *Negro Digest* on the question, "Will a Long War Aid the Negro?" found 54 per cent of the Negroes queried answering "Yes"; 33 per cent "No"; and 13 per cent "Undecided."

This is a tragic picture. One can understand the feeling of those denied their rights through the long years. On the other hand no conceivable gains of an economic, political, or social nature can compensate for such impiety. This is chauvinism in a most brutal form. It is the very antithesis of the Christian spirit. When it is remembered that every single day the war lasts thousands of lives are lost, vast properties are destroyed, and the world is plunged just one day deeper into its bitter hatreds, how can any one, except unthinkingly, wish it prolonged even in the seeming interest of his own race? This bitterness is too high a price for any war gains. It is a Mephistophelian exchange. There is vast difference between saying the longer the war lasts the better for the Negro, with its hard implications, and holding that the Negro should strive now for those rights which the war is being fought to guarantee.

Hate which is rising in America against its enemies is also deepening within the Negro's breast but, ironically, not against the common enemy but against fellow Americans. The frustration the Negro feels is at the hands of his compatriots. It is they who insult, segregate, abuse him. He has heard about enemy atrocities. He is the victim of domestic brutality. He hears and reads about hated ideologies abroad. He was born in a fascist state so far as his rights are concerned. Often he has been denied an education, a job, and the treatment which is the right of the lowliest citizen. He has not hated; he has laughed and hoped. Now, in common with other Americans, he is being taught to

hate but he is hating the enemy he sees and knows. Here again is spiritual tragedy. Nothing on the credit side of the book can compensate for this. If it persists, the Negro will prove another people whose redemptive possibilities for the world have been lost.

Our problem now, knowing the facts, is to exercise ourselves thoughtfully and determinedly in the interest of the future. We have it in our power as a country still to guarantee that the net shall be on the credit side of the ledger. The most obvious step is officially and privately to accede in spirit to the concessions that have been made under duress, and graciously to push on to even more fundamental reforms. It is extremely costly to force Negroes to battle for every inch of ground they gain. Wounds made in such a struggle heal slowly and sometimes never. Whenever we can decide upon what is just and effect it amicably we have all gained.

One of the great obstacles to the solution of this race problem is the general social economy of which we are all victims. So long as men live on the margin of existence they are going to oppose any group that threatens to narrow that margin. Our economy is one of struggle—struggle to survive, to succeed, to dominate and the timid and the weak are the certain victims. Speaking of the South, David L. Cohn writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* of January 1944, says: "In this area the economic struggle is often of the most pathetic and pitiless kind, because it is of the poor against the poor, the dispossessed against the dispossessed, the hungry against the hungry, the poor farmer against the poor farmer, the poor white man against the poor Negro. They snarl and fight over marrowless bones already picked clean." Economic democracy and a more serious essay at political democracy are indicated.

Even within the framework of our present imperfect order, men of liberal spirits should work incessantly for justice to all the people. The Negro can take heart then in the consciousness that he does not stand alone. Speaking of the North's new attitude toward the South on the race problem, Gunnar Myrdal says: "There has not been such a great distance in the views of the Negro problem between the white majority groups in the two regions since Reconstruction. Though it is seldom expressed clearly, the outside observer feels convinced that an increasing number of white Northerners mean business this time. . . . The North cannot well afford any longer to let the white Southerners have their own way with the Negroes as completely as they have had."* It should be added that the liberal North can no longer afford to remain silent and inert on this problem in the presence of the conservative North or the liberal South vis à vis

* *An American Dilemma*, Vol. II, p. 1014. New York: Harper and Brother, 1944.

the conservative South. To compromise the issue is to compromise all America. Here especially is opportunity for the highest missionary strategy on the part of men and women of religion. If the Negro can see those who profess the religion of his fathers rise unequivocally to the defense of his cause, he will be arrested in his impulse to hate, by no insipid platitudes of a safe and comfortable Christianity.

Whether or not gains of the war period prove permanent will depend in a decisive measure upon Negroes themselves. They must prepare with the utmost skill and assiduity for the consolidation and retention of their improvements. Every valid instrument—legal, political, economic, moral—must be surveyed and employed to its utmost possibilities. There will be always the familiar fear that the application of pressure will induce tension and may set the cause back. Surgery is always painful, and the catharsis unpleasant. But when more normal processes do not avail there is no alternative but to employ extreme measures if life and health are to be saved. There is enough of the sporting nature in the American people ultimately to accept graciously the results of a game played fairly.

It is essential that Negroes provide against just criticism of their performance in new roles. New jobs, money, increased recognition demand the highest inner discipline. Negro workers with unaccustomed dollars and in unaccustomed demand can easily develop a spirit and habits that will neutralize their advances. This is true with any people. It is probable, however, that judgment of the Negro in the use of his new found opportunity will be as severe as if he had been accustomed to it for generations. The double V has become a generally accepted symbol among Negroes—one V for victory against the enemy abroad and the second V for victory against the enemy at home, meaning the white enemy in America. There is now a place for the third V symbolizing victory over the inner self—victory over temptation to take new job opportunities lightly and to employ the financial fruits unwisely. There should be no underestimate of the problem of the Negro proving in the presence of bias that he is a capable, willing, consistent worker.

It is not given to any to foresee what finally shall be the results to the Negro of this cataclysm. It can be said that whatever his gains, if there be any, they will have been long overdue and that it is a mark of great shame that they should have been forced to wait upon a war. One day we may come to understand that the ultimate solutions of moral problems lie in the realm of moral decision. For men to leave to the contingencies of a great struggle such as this the gains that simple justice long since dictated reflects either the most tragic misunderstanding of our common obligations or the most calculating and fateful apostasy.