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What is the Negro Thinking in War Time?

The Negro in America faces in this war one of the most grievous ironies of his entire history. He is called upon to fight a war which he believes ought to be fought, which he wants to fight, which he is fighting, and at the same instant he is being subjected to experiences which belie the great promise of the enterprise and wantonly violate his spirit. He is confronted with the cruel dilemma of a possible Axis victory and no hope on the one hand and on the other of giving himself for the United Nations' cause when his history is the patent denial of much for which he is said to be fighting and which he has spare hope of realizing even in victory. Or put the matter in other terms: he has volunteered in numbers larger than his ratio to the general population demands, he has behaved with courageous aggression on the fighting front, he has labored hard and efficiently, when permitted to labor, on the home front but with a leadness of heart best revealed in the questions he continuously raises. He asks, "Is it really freedom for which we fight?" "Can men carry to others a freedom which they themselves do not possess?" "When shall we know freedom?"

He asks these questions because he has seen announced the plan to

organize in Alabama a League to Maintain White Supremacy; he has heard that Mark Ethridge, selected by the President to help guarantee fair employment practices in the country, predicts that "all the armies of the world, both of the United Nations and the Axis, could not force upon the South the abandonment of racial segregation;" he is

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told that "Cracker fascists" are asking "why win the war from the Japs abroad and give it to the Niggers at home?" He reads the admission of Jonathan Daniels of North Carolina that ". . . a large part of the white South indicated that, despite the enlistments and heroism of its sons, it was not giving up its old race notions in terms of amendments to them offered by the more eloquent statements of the cause of the United Nations."¹ He is told by one of his leading spokesmen, A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, that "Vested political interests in race prejudice are so deeply entrenched that to them winning the war against Hitler is secondary to preventing Negroes from winning democracy for themselves."² He knows that as a soldier he is confronted with exclusion from much of the navy and segregation in the army, intimidation at home, and insult on foreign soil, because of his race. He knows that as a

laborer he is not being employed in any approximate relation to his numbers and his intelligence.

There is no mystery then in the sadness of this man even as he goes about the business of fighting and working; in the heavy undertones of his conversation in restaurant, poolroom, barber shop, classroom, church; in the assertion of one of his spokesmen that Negroes are "fed up with this democracy stuff" and question "whether there is a great deal of difference between the code for Negroes under Hitler and the code for Negroes under the United States of America—the leading democratic nation of the World."³

None need resort to foreign propaganda as an explanation for this turmoil of mind in the Negro. It is true the Japanese are colored people, but the Negro knows he cannot look to them for his emancipation. The color of the Chinese has not seemed to appeal especially to the sympathy of the Japanese. Further, it requires no clairvoyance for the Negro to guess that the Japanese do not wish to strike up any brotherly associations with a people of our recent social history and current status. On the other hand, while attempts of Japanese agents have fallen on barren soil, American acts and utterances have inclined some Negroes quite sympathetically toward the Japanese. They attribute to color the mass removal of Japanese from the West Coast in contrast to the treatment of other enemy aliens. They do not like the constant references on the radio and in the press to those "yellow Japs." They listen with no little misgiving to one white American officer as he speaks of American prisoners

in Japanese hands: "It makes me sick to think of my friends being in the hands of those yellow dogs."

It is not strange under these circumstances to hear a Detroit Negro ask when beaten by the police, "Is that the way you treat us and we got to fight the Japs?"⁴ Or to hear another say when being drafted, "Just put on my tombstone: 'Here lies a black man, killed fighting a yellow man for the protection of a white man'."⁵ Or to read of the musings of a northern Negro taxi driver shortly after Pearl Harbor; "I know its gonna be a long war. But one thing you've got to give to those Japs, they showed the white man that a brown hand could handle a plane and a machine gun too."⁶

The tragedy of the Negro's plight never appears clearer than when his expressions of deepest bitterness in one quarter are followed by a refrain of mixed loyalty and resignation in another. Thus President James E. Shepard of the North Carolina College for Negroes writes to *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*: "In spite of the immemorial denials of so many democratic blessings to him the Negro will be loyal because he knows that at our worst he has higher hopes here than any other land will offer him at its best." Joe Louis is reported to have said, "There may be a whole lot wrong with America, but there's nothing that Hitler can fix,"⁷ and as I write the Southernaires appeal by radio to Negroes to invest in the Four Freedoms, to help keep democracy alive, by the purchase of war stamps and bonds. The Negro press and platform burn with indignation at the injustices from which the race suffers but the Negro knows

there is no hope elsewhere. Thus he goes on volunteering, fighting like a demon when he is given the chance or seizes it, and working as hard as any other loyal American. For him also "V is for Victory."

While A. Philip Randolph reports in *Survey Graphic* for November that he has found no Negroes who want to see the United Nations lose the war, he has found "many who, before the war ends, want to see the stuffing knocked out of white supremacy and of empire over subject peoples." If for the Negro *V* stands for victory by the United Nations, *Double V* symbolizes the further victory of democracy over the fascist spirit within this nation.

The Negro not only believes in a double victory; he is prepared to fight for it. He is under no illusions as to the possible fruits of his participation as a soldier and worker in the war in spite of the optimism on this point of William H. Hastie, civilian aide to the Secretary of War, and he is fully aware of certain gains which have already been made. At the same time he recalls too vividly the first World War and the guns that were turned on him once it was won. In the minds of many Negroes it is now or never. They reason that if labor, management, the Government, the public deny him his obvious rights at a critical stage of the war there is no sound ground for expecting these rights once the war is won and the danger is past.

The Negro senses, moreover, that he is rendering the Nation a real service in urging his claims now. When Roland Hayes was subjected to indignities in Rome, Georgia, Sterling Brown heard the following

prediction by one of Mr. Hayes' colored brothers: "Well, Europe is gonna hear of them peckerwoods."⁸ Alain Locke writes in November *Survey Graphic* "of Western color prejudice, corroding with suspicion the confidence of India, China, and other non-white peoples in the common democratic cause" and affirms that ". . . a lynching in Mississippi, over and above its enemy echo on a Tokyo short-wave, has as much symbolic meaning in Chungking, Bombay, and Brazzaville as it has in tragic reality in the hearts of Negro Americans."⁹ The Negro reads with understanding and approval Pearl Buck's opinion expressed in a letter to the editor of *The New York Times* in November 1941; "The importance of facing the situation between white and colored people in our own country is two-fold—it is upon this rock that our ship of democracy may go down first, and upon this rock, too, that all peoples may divide into the ultimate enmity."

The Negro sees, further, that denying him labor means denying weapons to American and Allied soldiers. Charles S. Johnson, Negro sociologist, states "There can be no final success . . . for the Nation's war effort if it leaves any class of labor enslaved, or exploited, or rejected."¹⁰ Earl Brown in "The Negro and the War" recalls that when a New Orleans shipyard was reprimanded by the Maritime Commission for failing to maintain its production schedule, it pleaded that there was not enough skilled labor. It needed seven or eight hundred additional skilled workers while 7,000 local Negroes who had regis-

tered for defense training had been turned down.

Whether or not white America is convinced by these considerations, the Negro is prepared to struggle for his rights to the bitter end. He is not to be deterred by the view of John Temple Graves expressed in the Autumn number of *The Virginia Quarterly Review* that the *Double V* means a *Double X*, that is "a double-crossing of hopes for the very arena in which domestic crusades are waged." His mood is seen in mass meetings of five to twenty thousand Negroes in cities across the country. The March on Washington has not been abandoned. Negro newspapers, Negro leaders on the platform, committees, other groups large and small, individuals are voicing every argument and employing every other legitimate means they can devise to secure what they feel is justly theirs.

What does the Negro want? Earl Brown, publicist, asks in November *Survey Graphic* for five improvements to conditions affecting Negro soldiers:

1. Protection against intimidation and molestation away from army camps.
2. More Negroes trained as officers.
3. More Negroes trained and appointed as military police.
4. The same treatment accorded to Negro troops abroad as to white troops.
5. A permanent policy of enlistment of Negroes in the Navy.

John A. Davis, professor, presents what he calls the present profile of Negro hopes and expectations:¹

1. A federal anti-poll tax law.

2. A federal anti-lynching law.
3. Negro representation on the policy-making level in federal administration.
4. Democracy in the armed forces.
5. Democracy in employment.
6. Democracy in social services.
7. International democracy.

Langston Hughes, poet, summarizes the answer in the Autumn number of *Common Ground*: "We want nothing not compatible with democracy and the Constitution, nothing not compatible with Christianity, nothing not compatible with sensible, civilized living. We want simply economic opportunity, educational opportunity, decent housing, participation in Government, fairness at law, normal courtesy, and equality in public services."

This is what the Negro is thinking in war time. In addition to the battle which he is determined to help America fight abroad there is a battle of democracy at home to which he is dedicated. I can foresee nothing which in his view will bring these two battles to a close except victory in both.

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1. "New Patterns for Old," in *Survey Graphic*, November 1942, p. 485.
 2. "Why Should We March," *Ibid.*, November 1942, p. 489.
 3. Roy Wilkins in *The Crisis*, March 1941.
 4. Louis Martin, "Fifth Column Among Negroes," in *Opportunity*, December 1942, p. 358.
 5. Horace R. Clayton, "Fighting for White Folks," in *The Nation*, September 26, 1942, p. 268.
 6. Sterling A. Brown, "Out of Their Mouths," in *Survey Graphic*, November 1942, p. 482.
 7. Sterling A. Brown, *Op. Cit.*, p. 483.
 8. *Op. Cit.*, p. 481.
 9. "The Unfinished Business of Democracy" in *Survey Graphic*, November 1942, p.p. 457, 458.
 10. "Striking the Economic Balance" in *Survey Graphic*, November 1942, p. 556.