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# THE NEGRO IN AMERICA

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BY  
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WITH A FOREWORD  
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Foreword by Gunnar Myrdal

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# America at the Crossroads

## I. THE PROBLEM

All through this inquiry we have pointed out that what is important in the Negro problem is what is in the minds of white people, and that changes for good or evil in the Negro problem depend primarily on changes in people's beliefs and values. We have also seen that there is a great struggle in white people's minds—the struggle between the democratic ideals of equality in the American Creed and the obvious lack of equality in the treatment of the American Negro. This struggle we have called “an American dilemma.” It has been going on since Revolutionary times; steadily, although with long periods when no gains were made and there were actually losses, the ideals of the American Creed have been winning out. Parallel with this internal struggle in the white man's mind has grown the Negro demand for equal treatment and integration into the nation.

In this postwar era filled with grave and complicated problems, both domestic and international, America is at the crossroads. The decisions she makes in regard to strengthening democracy, particularly in regard to the colored peoples within her borders, will be of far-reaching importance.

## 2. SUMMARY OF THE NEGRO'S POSITION IN THE NORTH

Since the Civil War, Negroes in the North have enjoyed full equality in political matters and, due to their concentration in a few large cities, they have recently been able to exert some political power especially in regard to their own needs. Negroes also have full equality before the law. On the whole, public services have been granted to Negroes as to other citizens in similar circumstances.

While the sudden influx of Southern Negroes of low educational and cultural attainments during and after World War I increased racial prejudice and social discrimination, Negroes have a measure of protection against social discrimination in the eighteen Northern and Western states with civil rights laws. The rising educational and cultural attainments of Northern Negroes plus the activities of the Negro betterment organizations have succeeded in enforcing many of these laws. At the same time it must be remembered that to an upper- or middle-class Negro, whose moral and living standards are at least equal to those of the white middle classes, the constant fear of social discrimination and the necessity of fighting for civil rights are sources of cynicism toward and hatred for whites.

The two areas in which Northern Negroes suffer most are housing and employment. While all America is today suffering from a housing shortage, the Negro is the worst sufferer. In every large Northern city, where most Northern Negroes live, they are restricted to certain areas which were run-down and overcrowded long before the war. Very few new areas are being made available to them in spite of their increased needs. Like social discrimination, the housing shortage bears most heavily on the upper- and middle-class Negroes, whose standards demand decent housing which they have never been able to get even though they are able and willing to pay for it. Among these are many veterans, who, like white veterans, feel that the least they are entitled to is decent housing for themselves and their families.

The employment situation is, at the present time, not clear. As we have pointed out, Negroes made tremendous gains during the last two years of the war. They were able to break into new industries, to enter skilled work, and to join unions. Unemployment, which, during the Great Depression had been disproportionately heavy among Negroes, had almost disappeared. Postwar prosperity enabled the Negroes to hold most of their gains, at least to the point of avoiding unemployment. Since Congress failed to pass a national FEPC law, however, Negroes have met with increasing discrimination both in hiring and in layoffs. Furthermore, Negroes in general have less seniority than whites do, and they are concentrated more in the over-expanded wartime industries. Six states, and several cities, however, have passed FEPC laws and in general the unions have protected their Negro members from discriminatory discharge. The real test of whether Negroes have been granted equal economic opportunity will come if and when America again faces mass unemployment. If we allow unemployment to be concentrated on the Negro masses, thus reducing them to a group unable to support themselves, we will have

failed in one of the basic ideals of the American Creed—to allow each individual, regardless of race, creed, or color, the opportunity to raise himself as far as he is able.

### 3. IN THE SOUTH

The Negro's position reached its lowest level in the South around 1900. Since then it has been rising steadily. The increasing industrialization and urbanization of the South, rising educational and cultural standards among both Negroes and whites, and disapproval of the South's attitudes toward the Negroes on the part of the rest of the country are all factors in this rise.

In the field of social relations we traced a slow but visible decrease of discrimination in the South during recent decades up to the outbreak of World War II. The racial etiquette has been weakening, even if ever so little. White people are beginning to recognize distinctions in education and class within the Negro community and are becoming prepared to treat Negroes somewhat differently according to their individual worth. The "no social equality" theory is not quite so rigid as in earlier generations. The entire Jim Crow apparatus is maintained, but its motivation is no longer so unquestioned. Southern liberals have been demanding with increasing courage and determination that the "separate but equal" doctrine should be followed out in its "equality" aspect as well as in its "separateness" aspect.

The separation of the two groups in the South is, meanwhile, becoming more and more perfected. There seems to be a growing mental isolation between whites and Negroes. Behind this potentially dangerous development is not only the exclusionist policy of the whites but also the sullen dissatisfaction and bitter race pride of the Negroes themselves.

In the administration of justice there was a definite improvement, even if Negroes were still far from enjoying equality before the law. In the political sphere, the South continued up to the war to disfranchise the Negro contrary to the clear precept of the American Creed and the Constitution. The masses of whites also have been kept from political participation. Real issues are kept out of politics and there is a great amount of corruption. But these things prove increasingly difficult to keep up. In the enjoyment of public services the Negro has been discriminated against severely in the South in blunt repudiation of the Constitution and the state laws. But even in this sphere there has been a slow improvement of his status.

While in all these spheres the trends at the outbreak of the war were definitely in the direction of a rise in the status of the Negro,

the same cannot be said about those relating to his occupational status. In Southern agriculture the Negro's plight has been becoming continually worse and shows no prospects for a brighter future. The new unions in the mass production industries gave Negro workers hope by organizing them together with whites in fields in which Negroes were already working. But with few exceptions they did not open up new industries for Negro employment during the thirties. Neither did they pave the way for Negroes to rise by promotion from the level of unskilled workers to that of the semiskilled and skilled. Negro business did not flourish either, and the small gains made in a few professions were insignificant.

The situation changed rapidly during and after the war. While some of the gains seem spectacular, it must be remembered that they were the result of decades of tedious and expensive litigation and propaganda. First was the revitalization of the democratic ideology, which quickened the consciences of the whites toward the Negroes. Coupled with this were the economic gains made by Negroes due to the tremendous need for manpower, the national FEPC, and the policies of the national unions. But as Negroes made economic gains and became more independent, white Southerners again began to fear the rising Negro. The increased activities of the Negro protest organizations in the South, demands for more equality from the returned veteran, and the generally increased hostility toward whites on the part of Southern Negroes added to this feeling. As a result, Negroes have had both gains and losses in the South. As in the North, they have made substantial gains in industry, many of which they have been able to hold. National policies and the attitudes of the unions will be important in deciding how long they will be able to hold these gains.

Great gains have been made in the educational system. The long-continued campaign of the N.A.A.C.P. to win equal facilities has at last borne fruit in the series of Supreme Court decisions requiring educational facilities, if separate, to be equal. Noteworthy also is the increased use of Negro police throughout the South, an important step in establishing fair and equal justice for the Negroes.

By far the most important gain in the sense that it has far-reaching effects on Southern politics and, consequently, national politics, is the extension of the franchise. This has been accomplished by the final outlawing of the "white primary." This has always been the most efficient barrier to Negro voting and, while there are other barriers, we can expect a gradually increasing number of Negroes to vote during the next decade. Several consequences can be expected from this: (1) increasing interest in voting on the part of the poor whites; (2)

growth of a two-party system; (3) end of a distinction between the South and the rest of the nation in federal politics.

On the other hand, there has been a sharp increase in antagonism and violence toward the Negroes manifested in lynchings, beatings, and killings of Negroes by sheriffs; agitation against veterans and sometimes refusal to grant them GI rights; the raising of the "white supremacy" demand in political campaigns; and a flood of apologetic literature from the South.

The truth is that the South is at present under terrific pressure to change her ways and, since her ways are bound up in all respects with the Negro problem, her attitudes toward the Negro are undergoing drastic changes. The pressures include the South's own needs for increased industrialization and economic efficiency, for more and better education, for incorporation into the rest of the nation both economically and culturally rather than remaining a backward region, and the general American need for vitalizing democracy, both at home and abroad, and for increasing the security of her citizens. Therefore, in so far and as quickly as the South succeeds in bringing her standards up to the rest of the nation's, to that extent will she succeed in solving the Negro problem in terms of the American Creed. Contrary to the opinion usually expressed by Southerners, disapproval on the part of the rest of the nation forces the South to conform more to Northern standards.<sup>1</sup> The more the North cleans its own house and the higher it raises its own standards of equality in regard to the Negro the clearer will its conscience be, the more indignant it can then be with the South, and the quicker will the South conform to the American Creed.

It is much easier now to make the South change than it used to be. For one thing, leading Southerners themselves now publicly state that the South ought to change. As Federal Judge J. Waties Waring of Charleston, S.C., said in his 1947 decision outlawing the white primary, "It is time for South Carolina to rejoin the Union. It is time to fall in step with the other States and to adopt the American way of conducting elections." For another thing, the popular theory behind

<sup>1</sup> A striking though minor example of this is shown in a recent incident in Ahoskie, N.C.: The local Kiwanis club held a drawing, offering a Cadillac as the winning prize. When a Negro won, the club refused to award him the car, gave him back the price of his ticket, and held a second drawing. A young singer from the North who drew the tickets was the first to protest, refusing to make the second drawing. The Kiwanis club attempted to suppress the whole incident (thereby revealing a guilty conscience), but news of it leaked out. Protests arose immediately from all over the country and the national Kiwanis organization ordered the local group to make proper restitution to the Negro, which it finally did. In all the subsequent publicity, the heads of the Ahoskie Kiwanis denied having any prejudice against Negroes.

race prejudice is breaking down. In the South three generations ago, white people had for their defense a consistent and respectable theory, endorsed by the church and by all sciences, printed in learned books and periodicals, and expounded by the South's great statesmen in the Capitol at Washington. The Negro was regarded as a completely different species of mankind: undeveloped, "childlike," amoral, and much less endowed with intellectual capacities than the white man; he was meant by the Creator to be a servant forever; if kept in his "place" he was tolerable, and there he was also happy; "social equality" was unthinkable as it implied intermarriage which would destroy the white race and Anglo-Saxon civilization. Most of this theory remained until a couple of decades ago. But now it is almost destroyed for upper-class and educated people. Its maintenance among lower-class and uneducated people meets increasing difficulties. It is significant that today even the white man who defends discrimination frequently describes his motive as "prejudice" and says that it is "irrational." The popular beliefs rationalizing caste in America are no longer intellectually respectable. This makes the prejudiced white man nearly as pathetic as his Negro victim. It also makes his attitudes more susceptible to change.

#### 4. THE NEED FOR DOMESTIC UNITY

It may be thought that the changing situation in both North and South is proof that the Negro problem is well on its way to solution. And it is true that the whites have not been so consciously disturbed about the Negroes or the Negroes so successful in their protest for a long time. There are hundreds of white organizations and thousands of individuals holding discussions on the problem, arranging interracial meetings, making protests to Congress, writing books, and in many ways trying to promote better relations between the two groups. At the same time the Negroes are pressing their needs, with great success, through the government, local, state and national; through their press and the white press; and through the courts. All this activity, however, affects only a tiny portion of the deeply rooted prejudice and discrimination. It does not reach enough people; it does not move fast enough. The end result is that 14,000,000 Americans are not sharing fully in the rights and privileges guaranteed to every American. No country at a crucial moment in its history can stand to have such a substantial portion of its citizenry relegated to a second-class place. Especially is this true when the subordinate group is filled with the same ideals as the dominant group, when a substantial portion of its members have risen educationally and culturally to

the standards of the dominant group, and when the rest are striving to raise their standards. Continual frustration is bound to make the subordinate group bitter, cynical, and eventually, disaffected. At the same time, since the dominant group's strongest ideals and traditions support equality, that group is bound to suffer from a guilty conscience and a weakening of morale.

America, in common with other mature, industrialized nations, is facing a series of problems that arise from the complexity, competitiveness, and urban character of her culture. One aspect of this, of which almost all Americans are well aware, is economic—there is a need to cushion a competitive system so that the weak or unfortunate need not suffer. Toward this end Americans have made much progress and have plans for more. Disregarding the moral problem, which we have already mentioned, it is obvious that a nation cannot afford such luxuries as social security, aid to its dependents, and relief grants, much less have a high general standard of living, if it is going to dispense with the full productive capacity of 10 per cent of its citizens. If, furthermore, Negroes are not allowed to rise economically to the full extent of their individual abilities, most of them will be in the dependent category during economic crises. This means that a disproportionately large share of relief will be spent on this portion of the population through no fault of their own—a highly inefficient and wasteful process and one bound to cause friction and hatred.

Another major problem America faces is that of integrating its citizens into its social and political life. The immense geographical spread of our country, the concentration of a large proportion of our population in large impersonal cities, and the highly specialized and increasingly centralized nature of our governments and our industries have resulted in people's feeling that they are no longer an important part of our government or of the businesses they work for, and hence in indifference toward government and business. Low productivity, poor quality work, labor strife, and corrupt and inefficient government are some of the many problems that result. A third result of both economic insecurity and inability to cope with the size and complexity of government and industry is a feeling of isolation, of insecurity, and of frustration.

It is in this situation of fear, bewilderment, and insecurity that internal disunity can arise. Instead of blaming the real causes, the white majority may put the blame for their difficulties on groups from whom they have traditionally been separated. This is all the easier if there are leaders who, for their own selfish reasons, encourage such splits. Such leaders can rise easily in a free democracy and only an

alert and interested citizenry can choose between these and honest leaders. Much of European history shows us the internal quarreling, lack of progress, and general weakness that can result from having a sizable minority not integrated into the nation or not treated as equals. It is also of prime importance in America to remember that the Negroes are not her only minority group; while, at present, they are the group that suffers the greatest deprivations, it is conceivable that if America abandoned her principle of integrating minorities within the nation on terms of equality, a situation might result in which a third of her population would be separated from the rest. We need only look at the Nazi period in Germany to see how fast such a development can proceed once it is started.

The white man's guilty conscience toward his violations of the American Creed in regard to the Negro may make easier the process of blaming the Negro for personal insecurity feelings. It is always easier to blame the victim of one's evil deeds than one's self. If, on the other hand, America rights injustices done the Negro, she will gain not only the political strength that comes from unity but also the creative and productive values that a satisfied minority group will be able to contribute to the nation. There is no doubt that a large part of America's phenomenal growth and success in the past has been due to the high morale that comes from a sense of righteousness, the feeling of everybody's working together toward a common goal, and the great freedom of opportunity. When today we face new and serious problems we can do no better than to look to the American Creed for a moral guide and follow our traditional path of seeking unity within the nation.

##### 5. THE EFFECT OF THE NEGRO PROBLEM ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

International affairs today are confused and bewildering. All we hope to do here is to point out several ways in which the Negro problem in America has a direct effect upon America's relations to the rest of the world.

In all this confusion one fact is startlingly clear. America is now, for better or for worse, and despite her wishes, a world power. She shares this position with Russia, and she is a competitor with Russia for world leadership. Furthermore, in this day of movies, radio, and a mass press, every nation in the world is aware of what is going on in America, her black spots as well as her white ones. America's treatment of the Negro is rapidly becoming known throughout the entire world.

For a century America has stood to all the world as the most demo-

cratic nation, one to be admired and followed. When the late Wendell Willkie returned from his "One World" trip he reported that "America has a reservoir of good will" upon which to draw. Undoubtedly the war-torn nations of Europe desire to follow democratic ways. While they need our economic aid, they, like most people who have to accept help and are thereby indebted, do not love us for that. They love us because we have stood as the nation in which men were free, free to speak, think, and worship as they pleased and to rise economically according to their own efforts, unhandicapped by class or caste barriers. This is our strongest appeal against the Russians and one which we need to propagandize. The American Creed must, however, be lived up to if other nations are to believe what we say, and lived up to in regard to the Negroes as well as other groups. Europeans, after their recent experiences, well realize that failure to extend equality to one group may mean failure later to extend it to other groups.

Our handling of the Negro problem has much more effect on Asia and Africa than it does on Europe, however. Most of the inhabitants of these continents are colored (in appearance if not in race). Hatred of "white" people is intense in Asia and Africa, not only because the whites have set themselves up as racially superior but also because the whites are seen as conquerors and as tyrants. Hatred against whites is identified with the struggle for national freedom. The colored peoples of the world have always had divided feelings about America; they have admired our treatment of the Philippine Islands, our attitude after the Boxer Rebellion in China, our lack of imperialistic aims, and our democratic government at home. At the same time they have resented deeply our treatment of the Negroes and our theories of the racial inferiority of darker peoples.

Until recently, what the colored peoples thought of us did not make much difference. Now it has become of crucial importance to us. Whatever Russia's faults may be, she has no color prejudice. Again and again she has demonstrated that she does not regard colored people as inferior, that she respects their culture. Laws against discrimination or the manifestation of prejudice are strictly enforced. To the colored peoples of the world, suffering under the double yoke of prejudice and colonial exploitation from white people, this attitude of Russia's has strong appeal. It is doubtful, however, if it is as appealing as the promise of real democracy America can hold out—provided we can hold out also the promise of equality to the individual regardless of color.

Much of the future lies in Asia and Africa. The

whose period of greatest growth lies ahead of them. The white peoples of the earth began to reduce their death rate a century ago and, as a result, experienced a tremendous increase in population. They are now, with the discovery and widespread use of birth control, entering a period of population decline (except the Russians, whose population is still growing). The colored peoples, especially the Asiatics, starting with an even larger base population, are just now entering the period of a declining death rate. We can expect their populations to expand for a considerable time yet before they begin to use birth control widely. Moreover, since they are just beginning to build up their industrial plants, they will have the advantage of new equipment and methods and will be industrial competitors of the United States. In other words, the colored peoples of the world, because of their huge populations and the newness of their productive equipment, will be factors to be reckoned with in the next century.

It is to our own advantage both now and for the future to live on friendly terms with the rest of the world. At the moment we are the strongest economically, the most advanced technologically, and we own the atomic bomb. But these are temporary advantages. If we are to live at peace in the world (and peace may mean having these great colored nations as our allies), we will have to win them by ideas and not by force. Today, as always, the ideals of the American Creed, the ideals of freedom and equality, if lived up to, are our strongest tools in building the international future.