

The Negro's Challenge

BY HORACE R. CAYTON

[Last week James Boyd, a Southern liberal, urged the Negroes to be patient and to avoid policies which might provoke explosions. Below, a well-known Negro newspaperman replies in an article which, although completed some time before the riots in Detroit, provides a significant commentary on those and other recent racial disturbances. Our own views on the problems discussed in these two articles and on the recrudescence of mob violence directed against minorities will be found in the editorial section.—EDITORS THE NATION.]

THE United States stands frozen and paralyzed before its Negro problem. The divergent and contradictory streams of thought in its culture prevent it from even conceiving of a rational approach to a solution. The United States thinks of itself as a political democracy but knows that it maintains a semi-caste system within its social order. It believes itself to be a good nation, dedicated to the brotherhood of man, but it has never fully included the Negro in its political, economic, and social system. Now, facing the problem in an acute stage, it is unable to plan or to act to meet the impending crisis.

The Negro problem is not new in this country. But since the war, as a result of the conflict of ideologies, it has become a world problem, and the United States must now do something about it. It must act not merely for moral reasons, to right the social injustices involved, but for motives of self-interest, indeed, of self-preservation.

We are fighting a yellow nation which has challenged white imperialism and ridiculed the so-called democracies for clinging to the notion of white superiority. We have a yellow nation as an ally, and we are desperately trying to hold in check the brown people of India. Japanese references to our treatment of the American Negro embarrass all of our attempts at psychological warfare. Every time a Negro is lynched here, the Japanese broadcast the event to China, India, and South America. The stupid racial policy of the Anglo-Saxon nations was an important factor in their defeat in the Pacific. The United Nations will have the task after the war of setting up a new balance of power based upon a moral order which, to be workable, must include yellow, brown, and black people. How can America share in this when it does not include its own black citizens in the moral order prevailing within its own boundaries?

There is another reason why the contradiction of caste and democracy must be resolved. To develop its maximum striking power, in the factories, the fields, and the

armed forces, the nation cannot ignore one-tenth of its people. The sheer need for man-power is opening more and more opportunities to Negroes. But though many advances have been made, millions of Negroes are still idle or working in non-essential industries because Northern farmers refuse to employ them, many defense plants limit their participation by a quota system, and the armed forces relegate them to limited services.

And how about the Negroes; how do they feel? Many white persons who have inquired have been frightened by the answers they obtained. A change so profound that few persons realize its fateful meaning is taking place in the mentality of the American Negro. He has experienced of late an upsurge of feeling which has given him a new sense of his own dignity and of his relationship to world events.

The forces bringing about this change antedate our participation in the war. Negroes throughout the United States were aware and resentful of the rape of Ethiopia. Haile Selassie was to them a hero, and relatives of his in this country addressed numerous Negro audiences. Various Negro newspapers first developed mass circulation through the appeal of the Ethiopian issue and the rise of Joe Louis.

In the present conflict the Negro is finding the problems of the Chinese, the Indians, and the Burmese strangely similar to his own. In this sense the Negro has become more international-minded than the rest of the population. His sympathy with other colored peoples was aroused long before the general population had begun to question America's policy of isolationism. He came to have a certain respect for the Japanese, who had successfully fought three white nations, though his hope for the representation of dark people in the Allied peace rests with the Chinese. Realizing more acutely than whites the global significance of a guaranty of democratic rights and privileges to all peoples of the world, he has broken out of his caste-bound mentality, transcended his purely racial point of view (which led him only to despair), and now sees his position in society as identified with that of the darker races of the world.

The war has confronted the Negro with a situation which has forced him to sharpen his thinking and define for himself the role which he wishes to play in American civilization. The conflict between the pressure which was forcing him into a caste position and the slogans for democracy which raised his expectation of complete citizen-

ship have developed in him a new critical consideration of his position in the social structure of the country and a new attitude toward the theory and practice of democracy. At first this new capacity for critical analysis seemed to be expressed in a series of complaints. Brought up sharply against the paradoxes of democracy, the Negro in this initial stage of the development of a line of action could do little more than articulate his discontent. But in the crucible of frustration and despair he is developing a new and positive line of thought which holds hope for black people and for the institution of democracy. He is adopting a point of view that is not inconsistent with the expressed aims of the United Nations.

The change in the Negro's mentality has come about so rapidly that few people—even Negroes—realize its extent. It is expressed in his refusal to accept segregation without complaint even in the armed forces—numbers of Negroes have gone to prison rather than fight in a Jim Crow army—in impetuous individual defiance of cultural patterns of racial subordination, in the hysterical oratory of excited speakers for Negro rights. But underneath all this is a determination to become a full citizen, to plan and think for himself regardless of past friends and old leaders.

The basic issues in the Negro's struggle have changed. While at first Negro demands were simply for Negro rights, now they are for democratic rights for all peoples throughout the world. While at first many Negroes were sullen and wished to see this country brought to its knees and made to realize that without them the war could not be won, and while at first they wished to withhold their participation until certain concessions were granted, now they are demanding the right to participate in every phase of the war so that they can also participate in the peace. Demands for concessions have given way to demands for equality.

As for the white people, many are reacting to the Negro's new attitude with fear or hate. In the South, and often in other parts of the country too, they fear that their prerogatives are being challenged. They are infuriated by the Negro press and in terror of the emotions which they sense behind the mask-like countenance of their once humble black servants. Southern Congressmen form alliances with reactionary Northern Tories to stifle all legislation which might help ease racial tensions; middle-class people form leagues to maintain white supremacy; the former Southern liberals caution Negroes to be patient; and the *Lumpenproletariat* whips itself up into a lynch mood. Of course, the Wendell Willkies, the Pearl Bucks, and the Bishop Sheils are trying to cope with the problem, but they are a minority.

In the face of these conflicts and tensions the Administration is bankrupt. As a matter of fact, the government cannot openly take cognizance of the Negro problem.

The logic of our democratic culture forbids definitely assigning to the Negro a subordinate status, while the Southern poll-tax Congressmen block any positive propaganda of action for national unity. Officially the Negro cannot be given even a promise of liberation which will make him willing to wait and hope as the English expect the people of India to wait and hope. The myth of democracy is, indeed, often used to prevent the employment of the most elementary mechanisms for racial adjustments. A case in point was the attempt of Southern Congressmen to eliminate the race-relations division of the Federal Housing Agency, because "this is a democracy and we don't need to consider the Negro as different from anyone else."

Many white liberals, North and South, appalled at the situation, have counseled the Negro to be patient. They have pointed out the gains which have accrued to him during the last three Administrations and reviewed the progress the Negroes have made in the past three hundred years. They assume that because of their past friendship Negroes should have faith in them and in their analysis of the possibilities and dangers of aggressive action by Negroes at this moment.

What many white liberals do not realize is that they are measuring the gains with an obsolete yardstick. At a time when peoples are being liquidated or given equality overnight, gradualism has little meaning. With a world revolution in progress one group of people cannot be held apart from the stream of thought and told to have faith in education and good-will. To ask the American Negro to go slowly is to attempt either to slacken the international pace of social change or to isolate the Negro from the world forces in which he is engulfed.

The direct antithesis of this so-called gradualism should not be thought of as an eruption of violence. Such an eventuality may result from too rapid change, but if it does, the explosion is not the measure of the pressure exerted by the Negro to rise in status; it is the measure of the reaction of whites against his rise. Changes in race relations should be thought of as a continuum, and to make gradualism, which is a rate of speed of change, and explosion, which is a possible result of too rapid change, opposite poles is to confuse the analysis of race relations.

The likelihood of success for a non-violent change is determined to a large extent by the social circumstances prevailing when the change is attempted. A minority finds its best opportunity to advance at a time when its claims for equal rights and privileges are in accord with the social aims of the dominant group. Since America is just now deeply concerned not only with living up to democratic principles at home but, together with other United Nations, with guaranteeing democracy to all peoples everywhere, the present is a logical time for the Negro to seek to improve his position. Those who want

Negroes voluntarily to relinquish their claims to democratic rights and privileges are either not willing to put their ideologies to the test of reality or are denying by inference that this global war is being fought for the right of peoples everywhere to be free.

The Negro is in many respects making a more rational analysis of contemporary events than many who would give him counsel. The struggle in which we are engaged is one against oppression—whether from the tyrannical forces of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito, or from the colonial imperialism of the British Empire, or from the racial imperialism of the United States. To win a cheap military victory over the Axis and then to continue the exploitation of subject peoples within the British Empire and the subordination of Negroes in the United States is to set the stage for the next world war—probably a war of color.

The manner in which the present war is prosecuted will determine the peace which is achieved and the new world order which is established. Writing the peace is not a process that begins with the declaration of an armistice. The movement of men, the opening of fronts, the political deals made during the war shape the peace long before the diplomats sit around a table. The participation of China, of India, and of all the dark peoples, including the American Negro, will constitute a moral claim which cannot be ignored by the United Nations.

When two worlds are at war—the world of fascism and the world of democracy—any hope for the brotherhood of man can arise only out of the struggle of people united for a common end. To insure a victory for the common man, who has too often been mobilized to fight for a noble objective only to find himself cheated by selfish interests when a military victory was won, the essential elements of brotherhood must be achieved during the struggle itself. Brotherhood is both the means and the end of the struggle. This to many people is as rational as is the theory of gradualism or counting small gains. The Negro by refusing to accept gradualism may be helping America to save itself, helping to establish the new world order which must eventually come if Western civilization is not lost to fascist reaction.

This is not a program of action except in the most general sense. Any "pat" solution—any formula—should be regarded with great caution. Perhaps the first step toward a solution should be the realization that the problem of the American Negro is a world problem, that it is part of the problem of all the common people of the world. Somehow, through some mechanism, there must be achieved in America and in the world a moral order which will include the American Negro and all other oppressed peoples. The present war must be considered as one phase of a larger struggle to achieve this new moral order. Nothing must blind us to the necessity of

securing the larger victory. In terms of the safety and welfare of our country and of our way of life, the struggle for the rights of the American Negro is as important as the struggle for military victory over the enemy.

75 Years Ago in "The Nation"

THE BILL passed the other day by the Senate, . . . making eight hours a legal day's labor in all government yards and workshops, is not particularly important as regards its effect on the government service. . . . Its real object is to lend the influence and authority of the United States Senate . . . to the theory that employers should be forced, either by legislation or workmen's combinations, into accepting eight hours as a day's labor and treating it as worth as much as a day of ten hours.—*July 2, 1868.*

"THE SPANISH GYPSY: A POEM." By George Eliot. The appearance of a new work by George Eliot is properly a cause of no small satisfaction to the lovers of good literature. . . . In her novels she had never struck us as possessing the poetic character. But at last, today, late in her career, she surprises the world with a long poem which, if it fails materially to deepen our esteem for her remarkable talents, will certainly not diminish it.—*July 2, 1868.*

THE NEWS from the European continent is meager and unimportant, and is mostly made up of newspaper rumors. The real makers of news are off at the watering-places or in the mountains seeking repose and health, and the correspondents are thrown back on their wits for wars and alliances and threats and intrigues and coolnesses.—*July 16, 1868.*

THE POPE has at last opened his spiritual batteries on the Austrian reformers. . . . He says the Austrian government has passed "an odious law, establishing free liberty for all opinions, liberty of the press, of all faith, and no matter what confession or doctrine; it grants to the members of every confession the right of establishing public schools and colleges, and members of every confession are allowed to be admitted on the same footing with the sanction of the state."—*July 16, 1868.*

NOTES. LITERARY. . . . We have not previously mentioned as being in preparation by Messrs. Roberts Brothers . . . "Little Women: A Girl's Book," by Miss L. M. Alcott.—*July 16, 1868.*

THOSE WHO DENY the authority of Congress to regulate the railway traffic among the states must, of necessity, deny its power to regulate the railway or other land traffic with Canada or with Mexico. In fact, the opponents of the proposed measure are driven to the position that the Constitution was only framed for the state of things, physical as well as political, which existed at the time of its adoption, and that it contains no quality of elasticity, no faculty of adaptation to the changes in the forms of conducting the activities of life, and to the progress in the material arts.—*July 30, 1868.*

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