

W.E.B. DuBOIS

Returning Soldiers (1919)

My Mission

I went to Paris because today the destinies of mankind center there. Make no mistake as to this, my readers.

Podunk may easily persuade itself that only Podunk matters and that nothing is going on in New York. The South Sea Islander may live ignorant and careless of London. Some Americans may think that Europe does not count, and a few Negroes may argue vociferously that the Negro problem is a domestic matter, to be settled in Richmond and New Orleans.

But all these careless thinkers are wrong. The destinies of mankind for a hundred years to come are being settled today in a small room of the *Hotel Crillon* by four unobtrusive gentlemen who glance out speculatively now and then to Cleopatra's Needle on the Place de la Concorde.

You need not believe this if you do not want to. They do not care what you believe. They have the POWER. They are settling the world's problems and you can believe what you choose as long as they control the ARMIES and NAVIES, the world supply of CAPITAL and the PRESS.

Other folks of the world who think, believe, and act;—THIRTY-TWO NATIONS, PEOPLES, and RACES, have permanent headquarters in Paris. Not simply England, Italy, and the Great Powers are there, but all the little nations; not simply little nations; but little groups who want to be nations, like the Letts and Finns, the Armenians and Jugo-Slavs, Irish and Ukrainians. Not only groups, but races have come—Jews, Indians, Arabs, and All-Asia. Great churches, like the Greek Orthodox and the Roman Catholic, are watching on the ground. Great organizations, like the American Peace Society, the League to Enforce Peace, the American Federation of Labor, the Woman's Suffrage Association, and a hundred others are represented in Paris today.

In fine, not a single great, serious movement or idea in Government, Politics, Philanthropy, or Industry in the civilized world has omitted to send and keep in Paris its Eyes and Ears and Fingers! And yet some American Negroes, actually asked WHY I went to help represent the Negro world in Africa and America and the Islands of the Sea.

But why did I not explain my reasons and mission before going? Because I am not a fool. Because I knew perfectly well that any movement to bring the attention of the world to the Negro problem at this crisis would be stopped the moment the Great Powers heard of it. When, therefore, I was suddenly informed of a chance to go to France as a newspaper correspondent, I did not talk—I went.

What did I do when I got there? First, there were certain things that I did NOT do. I did not hold an anti-lynching meeting on the Boulevard des Italiens. I would to God I could have, but I knew that France is still under martial law,—*that no meeting can be held today in France, anywhere or at any time, without the consent of the Government: no newspaper can publish a line without the consent of the Censor and no individual can stay in France unless the French consent.*

But it did not follow that because I could not do everything I could do nothing. I first went to the American Peace Commission and said frankly and openly: "I want to call a Pan-African Congress in Paris." The Captain to whom I spoke smiled and shook his head. "Impossible," he said, and added: "The French Government would not permit it." "Then," said I innocently: "It's up to me to get French consent!" "It is!" he answered, and he looked relieved.

With the American Secret Service at my heels I then turned to the French Government. There are six colored deputies in the French Parliament and one is an under-secretary in

Powerful essay -
be sure to include
Du Bois

the War Department. "Of course, we can have a Pan-African Congress," he said—"I'll see Clemenceau." He saw Clemenceau, and there was a week's pause. Clemenceau saw Pichon, and there was another pause. Meantime, our State Department chuckled and announced that there would be no Congress and refused Negroes passports. England followed suit and refused to allow the Secretary of the Aborigines Protection Society even to visit Paris, while the South African natives were not allowed to sail.

But there are six-Negroes in the French House and Clemenceau needs their votes. There were 280,000 black African troops in the war before whom France stands with uncovered head. The net result was that Clemenceau, Prime Minister of France, gave us permission to hold the Pan-African Congress in Paris.

What could a Pan-African Congress do? It could not agitate the Negro problem in any particular country, except in so far as that problem could be plausibly shown to be part of the problem of the future of Africa. The problem of the future of Africa was a difficult and delicate question before the Peace conference—so difficult and so delicate that the Conference was disposed to welcome advice and co-operation.

If the Negroes of the world could have maintained in Paris during the entire sitting of the Peace Conference a central headquarters with experts, clerks and helpers, they could have settled the future of Africa at a cost of less than \$10,000.

As it was the Congress cost \$750. Yet with this meagre sum a Congress of fifty-eight delegates, representing sixteen different Negro groups, was assembled. This Congress passed resolutions which the entire press of the world has approved, despite the fact that these resolutions had two paragraphs of tremendous significance to us:

Wherever persons of African descent are civilized and able to meet the tests of surrounding culture, they shall be accorded the same rights as their fellow citizens; they shall not be denied on account of race or color a voice in their own Government, justice before the courts, and economic and social equality according to ability and desert.

Whenever it is proven that African natives are not receiving just treatment at the hands of any State or that any state deliberately excludes its civilized citizens or subjects of Negro descent from its body politic and cultural, it shall be the duty of the League of Nations to bring the matter to the attention of the civilized world.

Precisely the same principles are being demanded today by the Jews and the Japanese. And despite the enormous, significance of these demands, Colonel House of the American Peace Commission received me and assured me that he wished these resolutions presented to the Peace Conference. Lloyd George wrote me that he would give our demands "his careful consideration." The French Premier offered to arrange an audience for the President and Secretary of the Conference. Portugal and Belgium, great colonial powers, offered complete co-operation.

The League for the Rights of Man, which freed Dreyfus, appointed a special commission to hear not only of the African, but the facts as to the American Negro problem.

We got, in fact, the ear of the civilized world and if it had been possible to stay longer and organize more thoroughly and spread the truth,—what might not have been accomplished?

As it was we have organized the "Pan-African Congress" as a permanent body, with M. Diagne as president and myself as secretary, and we plan an international quarterly *Black Review* to be issued in English, French, and possibly in Spanish and Portuguese.

The world-fight for black rights is on!

Robert R. Moton

Neither R.R. Moton nor W.E.B. DuBois had the slightest idea that the other was planning to sail for France, December 1, until they met in Washington on a quest for passports, November 30. They sailed together on the *Orizaba* and frankly discussed their agreements and disagreements. When they reached France, each went about his own business.

Dr. Moton was sent by the President of the United States and the Secretary of War to see and talk to Negro troops. Dr. DuBois was sent by the N.A.A.C.P. and *The Crisis* to gather the historical facts concerning Negro troops and to call a Pan-African Congress.

On the night before Dr. Moton started out, a colored man of national reputation and unquestioned integrity who had been in France six months took him aside and told him frankly the situation: the rampant American prejudice against black troops and officers and the bitter resentment of the victims. Dr. Moton's letters gave him every opportunity. A special Army Order preceded him which read.

Dr. R. R. Moton, President of Tuskegee University, will be present in the Divisional area for the next few days. The Division Commander directs that commanding officers render all possible assistance in any visit or inspection Dr. Moton desires to make. They will also see that he is accorded every opportunity to make any observation he may wish to make.

What did Dr. Moton do? He rushed around as fast as possible. He took with him and had at his elbow every moment that evil genius of the Negro race, Thomas Jesse Jones, a white man. Dr. Moton took no time to investigate or inquire. He made a few speeches, of which one is reported by a hearer as follows:

The address delivered by Dr. Moton to the men consisted of one or two jokes by a colored preacher, the assurance that the people at home were proud of them, and the manner in which they should act upon their return to the United States dwelling almost entirely upon the phrase "Not to be arrogant." After he had spoken to the men the major informed the officers that Dr. Moton desired to hold secret conference with them. All officers congregated in the office. After being presented to the officers Dr. Moton stated that he had been sent to France by President Wilson and Mr. Baker for the purpose of speaking to the colored

troops. He also stated that he had just left Paris where he had been in conference with President Wilson and had asked the president his views as to the practical application of democracy toward the colored man in the United States, but ending by saying: "I was very much pleased with his reply; but, gentlemen, I cannot quote the President."

After Dr. Moton finished his talk no opportunity was given to the officers to inform him of the conditions that had existed in France, and he did not seek any information relative to same from any of the officers after the conference ended.

Dr. Moton then returned to Paris and met Colonel House, General Pershing, and others. Colonel House told the writer that he urged Dr. Moton to remain in Paris and that if he would, Colonel House would give him an opportunity to appear in person before the Peace Conference to speak for the black world. Dr. Moton refused to stay, but promised to return. He then went to England and secured an audience with Lloyd George, prime minister of England. The destiny of the black race today is in the hands of England and the destiny of England is in the hands of Lloyd George. Yet, Dr. Moton did not keep his appointment; but rushed to catch his boat in order to be present at the Tuskegee Conference. He sailed, with Thomas Jesse Jones still watching him, and did not return to Paris or to the Pan-African Congress, which he said he favored and promised to support.

No one questions the personal integrity of Robert Russa Moton or his kindly disposition, but no one, friend or foe, can look these facts in the face and not feel bitter disappointment.

To Mr. Emmett Scott

The Negro world and you will bear us witness that *The Crisis* and its editor has given you loyal and unselfish co-operation, even at the cost of suspicion and criticism. We have done this,

FIRST, because the war demanded, and had a right to demand, unswerving loyalty and unity on the part of the nation and its constituent groups; and, SECONDLY, because we believed that you were doing all that was possible under very difficult circumstances. A visit to Europe has, however, revealed to the editor a state of affairs in regard to Negro troops which is simply astounding! Some of these facts we are publishing this month and others we shall reveal later. Meantime, we are withholding judgment in your case and simply asking you publicly three questions:

1. Did you know the treatment which black troops were receiving in France?
2. If you did NOT know, why did you not find out?
3. If you DID know, what did you do about it?

The League of Nations

A League of Nations is absolutely necessary to the salvation of the Negro race. Unless we have some supernational power to curb the anti-Negro policy of the United States and South Africa, we are doomed eventually to *fight* for our rights. The proposed international will have overwhelming influences around it which will oppose the doctrines of "race" antagonism and inferiority. It will from the beginning recognize Negro nations. It will be open to the larger influences of civilization and culture which are ineffective in the United States because of the prevailing barbarism of the ruling classes in the South and their overwhelming political power. What we cannot accomplish before the choked conscience of America, we have an infinitely better chance to accomplish before the organized Public Opinion of the World. Peace for us is not simply Peace from Wars like the past, but relief from the spectre of the Great War of Races which will be absolutely inevitable unless the selfish nations of white civilization are curbed by a Great World Congress in which black and white and yellow sit and speak and act. The refusal to adopt the Japanese race-equality amendment is deplorable, but it is an argument

for and not against a Nation of Nations. It is the Beginning of a mighty End.

History

Most American Negroes do not realize that the imperative duty of the moment is to fix in history the status of our Negro troops. Already subtle influences are preparing a fatal attack. It is repeated openly among influential persons: "The black laborers did well—the black privates can fight—but the Negro officer is a failure." This is not true and the facts exist to disprove it, but they must be marshalled with historical vision and scientific accuracy.

Sensing this some months ago, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People commissioned Dr. DuBois to prepare a history and appropriated \$2,000 toward the expense. Dr. DuBois immediately sought to associate with him—not as subordinates, but on terms of full equality—a board of three or four editors and a large consulting board of colored men. It immediately developed that co-operation was impossible.

A white man, Mr. F.P. Stockbridge of New York had already planned and was preparing a popular history and had secured the co-operation of Mr. Emmett Scott and others. Neither he nor Mr. Scott wished to change their plans and neither would accept co-operation, except upon terms which we deemed impossible. Mr. C.G. Woodson, editor of *The Journal of Negro History*, refused to co-operate except as Editor-in-Chief.

Unity being thus plainly impossible, Dr. DuBois disposed to drop the project as far as he was personally concerned and leave the work to others.

The Executive Officers of the N.A.A.C.P., however, thought it best for Dr. Du Bois to proceed to France and look over the field especially with regard to a Pan-African Congress and the facts obtainable there concerning Negro troops.

The result of this trip is that we are convinced:

1. That the truth concerning Negroes in this war must be told impartially and entirely.

2. That no person in official position dare tell the whole truth.

3. That notwithstanding the unfortunate duplication of effort and multiplying of histories, it is the plain duty of the N.A.A.C.P. and *The Crisis* to compile and publish a complete history of "The Negro in the Revolution of the Twentieth Century."

Such a history is, therefore, projected in three volumes, preceded by a brief forecast. The forecast will be issued as a supplement to the June *Crisis*. It will be a short but complete history of the Negro in the war. It will be followed this year by Volume I of the full history; Volumes II and III will appear in 1920 and 1921.

Every reader of *The Crisis* is asked to help in the compilation of this history. Please write us immediately and let us know what co-operation we may expect.

Rape

The charge of rape against colored Americans was invented by the white South after Reconstruction to excuse mob violence. No such wholesale charge was dreamed of in slavery days and during the war black men were often the sole protection of white women.

After the war, when murder and mob violence was the recognized method of re-enslaving blacks, it was discovered that it was only necessary to add a charge of rape to justify before the North and Europe any treatment of Negroes. The custom became widespread. In vain have Negroes and their friends protested that in less than *one-quarter* of the cases of lynching Negroes has rape been even *alleged* as an excuse. And in the alleged cases guilt has not been even probable in the vast majority of cases.

We do not for a moment deny or seek to deny that Negroes are guilty of rape and of other horrible crimes. What we do deny and what the facts overwhelmingly prove is that *as a race they are less quality of such crimes* of violence than any other group similarly oppressed by poverty and compulsory ignorance.

Today the nasty and absolutely false charge returns to justify the outrageous treatment of Negroes by Americans in France.

What is the truth?

I have written to twenty-one mayors of towns and cities in all parts of France where Negro troops have been quartered asking them as to the conduct of black troops. These are some of their replies:

Montmorillon (Vienne)

"They have earned our high regard by their discipline and their faultless behavior."

Le Mans (Sarthe)

"They have been accused of no crimes or misdemeanors."

St. Die (Vosges)

"Very excellent conduct."

Bourbonne les Bains (Haute-Marne)

"Pleasant remembrances and irreproachable conduct."

Livernon (Meurthe-et-Moselle)

"Excellent conduct—no complaints."

Rayon l'Etape (Vosges)

"Fine character and exquisite courtesy."

Fresne (Haute-Marne)

"No complaints concerning their conduct."

Domfront (Orne)

"Won the esteem and sympathy of all the population."

Marbache (Meurthe et Moselle)

"No complaint—well disciplined,"

Bordeaux (Gironde)

"No unfavorable comments."

Serqueux (Haute-Marne)

"Well-conducted—no crimes."

Chamberey (Savoie)

"Proud to welcome them."

Brest (Finistere)

"Not qualified to give information."

St. Nazaire (Loire Inferieure)

"Cannot give any information."

Docelles (Vosges)

"Good conduct, good discipline and fine spirit."

Couptrain (Mayenne)

"Perfect propriety without complaint."

Gezoncourt (Meurthe-et-Moselle)

"No complaint as to conduct or morals."

Frouard (Meurthe-et-Moselle)

"Well regulated conduct."

We have, too, official figures covering the Ninety-second Division, consisting of Negro troops, with largely Negro company officers:

Only ONE soldier of the Ninety-second Division in France was convicted of rape, while two others were convicted of intent to rape.

It is doubtful if another division of the U. S. Army in France has a better record.

What was the real animus back of this wholesale accusation? It was the fact that many Americans would rather have lost the war than to see a black soldier talking to a white woman. For instance, the Mayor of Bar-sur-Aube issued this Order, on June 26, 1918:

According to orders given by American Military authorities, it is strongly recommended that no French women receive visits from colored soldiers or talk with them on the streets.

On the other hand, what is the official American opinion of Negro troops?

General Pershing in his address to the Ninety-second Division at Le Mans, France, January 29, 1919, said:

The Ninety-second Division has without a doubt, been a success in its work at the front, and I desire to compliment the officers and men upon the discipline and morale which has existed in this command during its stay in France.

Brigadier-General Hay, 184th Brigade, Ninety-second Division, said:

I have been with colored troops for twenty-five years, and I have never seen a better soldier.

Captain Willis, Supply Officer, 365th Infantry, said:

The troops of the Ninety-second Division are the best disciplined and best saluting soldiers I have seen in France.

Brigadier-General Sherburne said:

The Brigade Commander wishes to record in General Orders the entire satisfaction it has given him to have commanded the first brigade of Negro Artillery ever organized. This satisfaction is due to the excellent record the men have made.

Allen J. Greer, Colonel, General Staff, signs this order of General Ballou:

Five months ago today the Ninety-second Division landed in France.

After seven weeks of training it took over a Sector in the Front Line and since that time some portion of the Division has been practically continuously under fire.

It participated in the last battle of the War with creditable success, continually pressing the attack against highly organized defensive works. It advanced successfully on the first day of the battle, attaining its objectives and capturing prisoners. This in the face of determined opposition by an alert enemy and against rifle, machine guns and artillery fire. The issue of the second day's battle was rendered indecisive by the order to cease firing at eleven a.m., when the Armistice became effective.

A report from the officer in charge of Leave Area, November 6, 1918, says:

Nothing but the highest praise can be given the colored soldier for the manner in which he conducted himself while in France. He conducted himself in a gentlemanly manner in every sector in which the Division operated, and won for himself the love and commendation of the French people.

Returning Soldiers

We are returning from war! *The Crisis* and tens of thousands of black men were drafted into a great struggle. For bleeding France and what she means and has meant and will mean to us and humanity and against the threat of German race arrogance, we fought gladly and to the last drop of blood; for America and her highest ideals, we fought in far-off hope; for the dominant Southern oligarchy entrenched in Washington, we fought in bitter resignation. For the America that represents and gloats in lynching, disfranchisement, caste, brutality, and devilish insult—for this, in the hateful upturning and mixing of things, we were forced by vindictive fate to fight, also.

But today we return! We return from the slavery of uniform which the world's madness demanded us to don to the freedom of civil garb. We stand again to look America squarely in the face and call a spade a spade. We sing: This country of ours, despite all its better souls have done and dreamed, is yet a shameful land.

It lynches.

And lynching is barbarism of a degree of contemptible nastiness unparalleled in human history. Yet for fifty years we have lynched two Negroes a week, and we have kept this up right through the war.

It disfranchises its own citizens.

Disfranchisement is the deliberate theft and robbery of the only protection of poor against rich and black against white. The land that disfranchises its citizens and calls itself a democracy lies and knows it lies.

It encourages ignorance.

It has never really tried to educate the Negro. A dominant minority does not want Negroes educated. It wants servants, dogs, whores, and monkeys. And when this land allows a reactionary group by its stolen political power to

force as many black folk into these categories as it possibly can, it cries in contemptible hypocrisy: "They threaten us with degeneracy; they cannot be educated."

It steals from us.

It organizes industry to cheat us. It cheats us out of our land; it cheats us out of our labor. It confiscates our savings. It reduces our wages. It raises our rent. It steals our profit. It taxes us without representation. It keeps us consistently and universally poor, and then feeds us on charity and derides our poverty.

It insults us.

It has organized a nation-wide and latterly a world-wide propaganda of deliberate and continuous insult and defamation of black blood wherever found. It decrees that it shall not be possible in travel nor residence, work nor play, education nor instruction for a black man to exist without tacit or open acknowledgment of his inferiority to the dirtiest white dog. And it looks upon any attempt to question or even discuss this dogma as arrogance, unwarranted assumption, and treason.

This is the country to which we Soldiers of Democracy return. This is the fatherland for which we fought! But it is *our* fatherland. It was right for us to fight. The faults of *our* country are *our* faults. Under similar circumstances, we would fight again. But by the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that that war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land.

We return.

We return from fighting.

We return fighting.

Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.