

An Analysis of Negro Patriotism

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An outstanding feature of the late war was the manifest patriotism of the American Negro. Whether willingly or unwillingly, as volunteer or draftee, in France or America as fighting man or stevedore, as shipbuilder, miner or farm hand, he far surpassed every other racial group in America in his relative proportion of effectual loyalty to the United States. He likewise exceeded in patriotic expression every other oppressed group living under the same general circumstances whether in India, Ireland or Africa. And Negro women and children did their bit no whit less than the men. In household economics, in churches and in schools they went over the top just as the men did, whether in the Bois de Frehaut or in breaking labor records at Brest, at Hog Island, at Newport News or at Baltimore. They vied with each other in the purchase of Liberty Bonds. In North Carolina, as a fair example, Negroes pledged and bought War Saving Stamps more extensively in comparison with their ability than white people. Contrary to the general infamous practice in this country, it was not necessary to coerce them into buying bonds and stamps. They thought that some great good would come out of the war for them. The country promised it and their Old Crowd leaders reiterated it. Befuddled by the hysteria of the times, overwhelmed by the crush of mass opinion and sharing in the exaggerated but superficial approbation of the public,⁹ the Negro race turned itself into a vast singing army, singing at work, singing at the cantonments, singing on the march and even under the blasphemy of the guns.

In 1914, nationalistic patriotism was proved to be more potent than religion, race, a common language, Socialism or class solidarity of any other sort. It had its day in Europe and in 1917, it began its wild reign in the United States, where it flourished most readily. Patriotism is the egoistic impulse to glorify

self. It is the disposition on the part of the nation for social enlargement. Under its bias, opinion is warped in time of peace and outraged in time of war. True it is that the utility of patriotism has been in promoting the causes of nationality. Love of country may be considered one of the innate ideas of mankind. But it is an agency of moral degeneration in that it has based itself too much on the self-sufficiency of the group. Nietzsche's will to power is an example. Lord Curzon's imperialism is another. Patriotism is probably responsible for more needless deaths, the inevitable consequence of wars, than any other sentiment in history. It fosters provincialism. It is the ally of political reaction and the co-partner of class oppression. Patriotism, impeached at the bar of reason in peace, become judge and executioner in time of war. It then cries in blatant voice: "our country right or wrong," and "theirs not to reason why."

Except as to color, the Negro takes on the externals of civilization as readily as any minority class in America. When the international bankers led this country into war, the Negro exhibited the most striking reactions of his teachings and traditions. The teaching of patriotism the world over has usually been a mass of silly and mendacious fact. The average Negro is taught in the South and from a southern point of view. Jefferson Davis, Stonewall Jackson and Robt. E. Lee are still the great historical figures South of the Mason and Dixon line. All American schools naturally teach that the United States is the freest and most democratic country the world over. The entire world has been deluded into this belief since 1917. Especially are the American Negroes taught that not only the United States but the South is the best place on earth for them to live forever. There are three patriotisms abroad in the United States: a state, a sectional, and a national. All southern states project organized propaganda in

behalf of state's rights and their respective educationalists have taught the Negroes that their own particular State is the best place under the sun for the Negroes of that state. At a recent anti-lynching conference held in New York City, a white Southerner solemnly declared that he believed Mississippi to be the best state in the Union for Negroes. The Hampton-Tuskegee group are paid by Northern capitalists to advise and keep Negroes contentedly in the South. All of this teaching is done under the guise that the Negro is a common inheritor of rights and duties and that it is his common responsibility to join unqualifiedly in every burst of patriotism.

All patriotism is spontaneous in proportion to the thoughtlessness of the people. In 1917, white and colored leaders harangued the colored population, while they in their reaction and spontaneity made quick response to aid in the perpetuation of their own undoing. Conscription drove the situation home. Once in the army and navy, once in the government employ, it was like an incident that took place in Richmond, Virginia, several years ago. It was the annual football game between the Universities of Virginia and North Carolina. Negroes are prohibited by law from attending either these state schools. Special excursion trains were run to the scene of the conflict from all over the two states where those institutions were situated. Many ignorant and gullible Negroes took advantage of the popular enthusiasm to travel to the game on the trains. They bought huge pennants and streamers but when they presented themselves for admission at the ball park they were refused entrance on account of their color. Some remained, however, to view the spectacle through the holes in the fence, others still merrily flaunted in the public streets their pennants marked with the names of the two schools, but a few, the disillusioned, had the good sense to

burn their banners up. Negro patriotism is much like that of those silly and unsuspecting folk who came to see the football game.

Here we are principally concerned with the disillusioned, the new Negro and his new patriotism. The Negro soon found that the treachery of the white American was infinitely more damaging to him than that of the Hun. He was refused a square deal in the army and navy, and discriminations became more gruelling in the South. There was more exploitation of labor, more personal insult, more segregation, more degradation of women, more racial limitation and restriction than ever before. Now this state of affairs multiplies race antagonism. Class antagonism is destructive of national unity, which is one of the necessary elements of the new patriotism. Therefore, any lack of patriotism on the part of the Negro was and is the natural and logical consequence of unjust practices perpetrated against him.

It is noteworthy that this new patriotism was born during the time of the Negroes active participation in all forms of war work, military and otherwise. Nor does it exist solely in the hearts of officers and true leaders for it is a sentiment which has gained its widest currency among the rank and file of the black soldiery and working class. Before the embarkation overseas of the 92d Division, it was frequently a matter of difficulty to instill the qualities of dash and vim into the enlisted personnel. The men asked without hesitation the reason for their fighting in the war. "Safe for democracy" became to them a mere mockery. They had no faith in their white officers and not much in the colored in that emergency. When discriminations were practiced at the cantonments like the customary equipping of white organizations before colored units and the assignments of the whites to the best camp locations, the most unlettered and provincial Negro soldiers often spent hours in discussing the justice of American military authority. In the 92d Division, the enlisted men as a whole were more outspoken and overt in their resentments than their colored officers. A few of

them manifested their qualified loyalty by expressing sentiments of conscientious objection, nor was their conscientious objection always based on religious scruples. It was often a challenge to a mischievous patriotism. When black officers taught black men bayonet practice they usually substituted the picture of the rabid white Southerner for that of the Hun. This method often times inspirited the soldier with the necessary dash and form.

What was the soul of the Negro in war-time? In the mood of seriousness it was the most usual thing for the Negroes to turn in their discussions to the fitness of their participation in the business of war. And in trench or camp, factory or school, the undeniable fact is that Negroes felt that they were fighting for false ideals.

While in France, the Negro soldiers got their bearings. They discovered that the only white men that treated them as men, were native Europeans, and especially the French with their wider social experience and finer social sense. The Frenchman was unable to comprehend American color prejudice. The Englishman was much more democratic than the American. Then the soldiers began to get letters from home. They brought the news that conditions in the States were no better than before; they were worse! For instance, a successful business man from the South wrote that he felt relieved that his son was fighting on French soil for France, because France was at least democratic. A Negro clergyman whose church members subscribed \$10,000 worth of Liberty Bonds wrote that he had no patriotism whatever. He had promoted the subscription in a spirit of hypocritical public service. A leading Negro banker, who had bought many thousands of dollars worth of bonds stated in confidence that he joined in the public movement merely for the sake of retaining the good-will of his white business friends. But there was not one of these persons who would not have been glad to have given his all if he had felt that the war was fought for freedom and opportunity at home. Some Negro officers, just as many white officers did, largely volunteered and trained

for commissions, not because of any real patriotism but because they wished to escape the draft and because they sought the distinction and remuneration which went with the officership. In all fairness, however, it may be said that many of the colored men trained for commissions out of a sense of race pride and prospect. Many of the black soldiers were divested of the little patriotism they possessed on their return from France. Their hearts sank as they hove in sight of these shores. The only reason for their joy in seeing America, was the fact that it meant speedy discharge from a brutal military system and a meeting with home folks and friends. The way soldiers were discharged from the army and navy without prospective employment, is one of the national disgraces. The colored officer, maltreated and thrust aside, has cursed the flag and the country for which it stands a thousand times. Thousands of these soldiers now possess weapons to demonstrate if need be their legal right to self-defense against Southern encroachments and lynch-law.

Intelligent Negroes have all reached the point where their loyalty to the country is conditional. The patriotism of the mass of Negroes may now be called doubtful. The new Negro has put the question: "What will the shot of my bolt mean?"

It was on last November tenth, that a black platoon lay near the crest of a hill overlooking the placid Moselle. With their faces towards the battlements of mighty Metz, the soldiers awaited the order to attack. There was less singing and more thought. In one tense and bloody moment, the voice of a real doughboy, a new patriot, was heard amid the uncanny hiss of hot steel. It was the fervent wish that across the lines were the Huns of America, the convict leasers, the slave drivers, their domineering white American officers, the lynchers, their oppressors, instead of the Boches. The sentiment was that with the Huns of America over there the incitement necessary to the proper dash and courage would be forthcoming. They would then be fighting to make America safe for all classes. Shortly after the armistice mem-

bers of this same platoon were anticipating the return home. Most of them were from the South. An ingenious fellow caused an endless round of merriment, when he cleverly placed each Southern state on an imaginary map of military operations. Georgia, Mississippi, Texas and Alabama were put in No Man's Land. The border states like Virginia and Kentucky, were the third line trenches, etc. The soldiers, all seated beneath an old apple tree, scarred by four years of German shrapnel, finally concluded that their next war for "democracy" would be in the land of "THE STAR SPANGLED BANNER."

War has never given a race its rights. Rights must be worked out along social and economic lines. But before the participation in a war of an oppressed group, a part of a nationality, that group can bargain collectively like the Irish are doing or like the Soviets. The Negro race in America is now beginning to learn that its loyalty has been of little avail. True loyalty permits of no mental reservation. The Negro does possess and will possess a mental reservation until this country is made safe for him and for every other class. Patriotism needs moralization. "Intelligent self-interest is the basis of all morality." For the Negro

to be patriotic under the present circumstances would be unmoral. To be nationalistically patriotic the group must will national social enlargement. Many Negroes wished to see America humbled in the war, because America needs to learn the lesson of justice within its own borders before it can vaunt itself as the proponent of world ideals of democracy. A patriotism is moral when the country to which it is subject recognizes and provides for the interests of all classes within its national scope. Nationalistic patriotism is based upon common interests set in motion through common methods to meet the common need. The new Negro is beginning to realize that he is not identified with the common ends, except as to his exclusion from economic, social and political benefits. He is not a party to the conclusion. In short, patriotism should be the expression of free peoples who are ready and willing to lay down their lives in the defense of those things which they enjoy to the whole end of human betterment.

The most enlightened view is that the American Negro can best attack his problem from without. The Irish are using this method with success. White America fears any criticism by foreigners of its policy toward classes within

its bounds. This country is committed to a policy of race repression. Evolution is too slow a process to secure the Negro his rights from within the United States. This must be secured by the force of international judgment and injunction as a substitute for physical force. The Negro must appeal to the outside world for justice and opportunity at home. William Monroe Trotter has hit the nail on the head. He is appealing the Negro problem from the lower court of barbaric America to the supreme court of the civilized world.

While black leaders continue to make compromises, the Negro embodying the new patriotism becomes an appreciator of social values. A few months ago a giant Cunarder swung up New York Harbor jammed to the rails with black soldiers returning from la belle France. As the ship hove past that unproved symbol, the Statue of Liberty, one of the soldiers reverentially snapped a salute to Bartholdi's emblematic creation. An officer standing near, curious to know the reason for such an action, made the query why. "Because France gave it" came back the firm reply. The new patriotism will see the Statue of Liberty a proved symbol—and proved even in America.