



# The Immediate Function of the Negro Veteran

*By Lieutenant William N. Colson*

That the Negro has gained little benefit from his participation in previous wars, that he will gain little from the late conflict, and what his proper reconstruction program should be have been ably set forth in *The Messenger* for March 1919, in an article entitled, "The Real Status of the Negro After the War," and in a pamphlet captioned, "The Negro and the New Social Order," recently prepared by Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph. These ar-

ticles apply to the Negro in general. But the returned black veteran, by virtue of his service and experience, has a certain special function which he cannot afford to fail to press to the limit.

Various agencies and advisors have already attempted to state where the immediate activity of the Negro soldier should center. We must agree with those who have enlisted his aid in the fight against war and militarism. The soldier should support only that

military program which contains the condition precedent that every man called to the colors must possess a college education or its industrial equivalent. If such a program were a fact, illiteracy and false patriotism would be banished from the country. Then war would follow in their wake—because men trained to think for themselves make rebellious privates. They will not fight for false ideals. The black soldiers must secure for themselves all

the benefits of war service, in spite of the paucity of such advantages. These consist of compensation for injuries and state or national bonuses and benefits for services. The veteran should retain his war risk insurance, if he has none better. He must lend his support to any movement for national compensation or government loan, designed to aid him to secure an education or buy a home. Again he must organize. He can cut a wedge into the American Legion if he joins that body in sufficient numbers. The Southerners are now dictating that association's policy in respect to the Negro. It is submitted, however, that the very best opportunity that the Negro soldier has grasped and acted upon is that it is up to him to form the nucleus out of which is growing new law and order in the South. The returned soldier, by reason of his military training, can do more to stop lynch-law and discrimination in the United States than many Americans want to see. He is accomplishing it by a resolute demonstration of self defense and a growing desire to lose his life in a good cause. What is best of all, by allying himself with the labor movement, he is beginning to see the world about him through economic eyes.

These various means and instrumentalities have by no means, however, gone to the root of the matter. There is a function which antecedes all others in both force and importance. It is the one supreme and powerful desideratum upon which all others depend. It is conceded that the greatest benefit the Negro soldiers received from the war was their revolutionary appreciation of social values. These same black soldiers, held in abject ignorance so

long in the United States, returned from France with something they had not possessed before. They had learned first of all that uncompromising equality is the key to a long closed door. As they slew the Germans, they remembered that according to patriotic standards, they were the equals of the best American citizens. Another barrier was dashed away when the French people received them on terms of absolute social equality. This great experience has set in motion stirring signs of the immediate function.

And that function is, above all others, the function of mental liberty. Negroes can never be free to go where they please, work where they please, live where they please, and do what they please until their minds, unfettered by ignorance and superstition, are first free to think. Heretofore, Negroes have willingly submitted to the abuses of authority because of their mental servitude. The Negro church thrives on ignorance. The peonage masters of the South hold their black serfs in subjection by keeping them ignorant. Negroes submit to jim-crowism, disfranchisement, wage slavery and primitive religion because they slumber in the contentment of ignorance, a mental bondage worse than chattel slavery. As Lester F. Ward said: "No people ever were free to act until they were first free to think."

It is, therefore, the function of the returned soldiers with their new appreciation of social values, straightway to appropriate the desire to either revolutionize or destroy every evil American institution which retards their progress. They must first of all continue their campaign of discontent and dissatisfaction. Let them neither

smile nor sleep until they have burned into the soul of every Negro in the United States an unquenchable desire to tear down every barrier which stops their onward march. Action can be performed only at the behest of desire. Social equality is the first uncompromising goal of the New Negro. Without social equality there must necessarily be social inequality. Every racial disability which the Negro race suffers in this country, may be traced to social inequality. Disfranchisement, segregation, discrimination and degradation are directly traceable to that cause. But each black soldier, as he travels on jim-crow cars, if he has the desire, can act his disapproval. When he is insulted, he can perform a counter-action. When he is exploited economically, he can strike. The Negro soldier would thus be using his new education to a great advantage. With Negro veterans fighting back, and stirring up merited discontent and dissatisfaction on every hand, the attitude of the Bourbon South is bound to become less degenerate. Our thesis is that the policy of the white South is incorrigible. The base of Southern prejudice can be changed only by the lever of Negro desire to force a change. The Negro is therefore the hope of democracy. Social equality is the first step toward physical liberty. Physical liberty is the goal of all human endeavor. But mental liberty is forever and always the indispensable prerequisite to physical liberty. The function of the Negro soldier, who is mentally free, is to act as an imperishable leaven on the mass of those who are still in mental bondage.