

The New Negro

By Robert G. Spivack

WASHINGTON.—The leaders of the Negro community must be increasingly perplexed by all the contradictory advice they are receiving these days on the question of race relations.

Their bewilderment could lead them to wonder who are their real friends and allies in the fight for equality. And out of a sense of frustration they may seek extreme solutions for the problems which remain after 300 years of struggle for equal rights.

There is also the possibility that they will turn to demagogic politicians who play race politics for all it is worth, meanwhile enriching themselves in the name of the Negro cause.

If, on the other hand, the American Negro becomes more and more self-reliant in the struggle for equality, the end result may not be so bad after all.

The fact is that the fight for civil rights is now at a crucial point. It is difficult and perhaps fruitless to speculate on just what the pace of progress will be, but now is as good a time as any to take stock of where we are.

Many Disenchanted

In this connection there is a provocative article in the January issue of "The Atlantic" by Dr. Murray Friedman of Georgetown University, entitled "The White Liberal's Retreat." Dr. Friedman contends that there is a growing alienation between certain white liberals who played an active part in the fight for equal rights during the '30s, '40s and '50s and the new Negro leaders.

Prof. Friedman does not recommend what the Negro might do. He simply reports that he finds many white liberals disenchanted with the way the battle is going and also with some of the new Negro leaders.

What Prof. Friedman has discovered is a three-day division among those who are deeply involved in the civil-rights struggle.

Negroes are demanding equality "now." The Dixiecrats are answering "never." But many white liberals, the Friedman article says, are saying "later." This is a new development which can, as he forecasts, have important consequences.

He discusses various aspects of the problem of race relations, but he makes one point rather sharply and repeatedly.

"The Negro," he writes, "is no longer an abstraction to the white liberal but a concrete reality—in many instances a potential or actual next-door neighbor, a classmate of his child's, a co-worker at office or workbench."

This confrontation, he maintains, has created problems because the white liberal lives in a middle-class society while the Negro's world "frequently is the urban slum." White liberals, he continues, have little or no contact with the growing middle-class Negro community.

The dilemma, he finds, is to work for and morally advocate equal rights while unexpectedly discovering that some Negro children even in Northern schools hold back the others. This has caused some disturbing second thoughts among white equalitarians. They begin to wonder if

Negroes are "ready" for equal rights. Some solve their personal conflicts by moving to the suburbs.

There is a great deal to think about in Prof. Friedman's article and his facts seem solid enough. But there are several points which, it seems to me, he overlooks or underemphasizes.

One of these is the need to "re-educate" some of our white liberals in the meaning of social change. Are all Negroes alike? Of course not. Yet all through the years there has been a tendency to endow all Negroes with angelic qualities because they have suffered at the hands of brutal men.

Not in Vain

But we are not for equal rights because all Negroes are angels. We are for affording them the same opportunity for advancement that everyone else has; no more and no less.

Are all white men angels? Have white men always used good judgment in exercising the right to vote? Look at Massachusetts, with its record of political corruption, and look at some of the men they have elected recently. You don't have to go to Mississippi.

What I suspect has happened is that some Negroes have failed to live up to the inflated hopes of certain romantic white liberals and now there is a feeling of letdown. But this is not the fault of all Negroes. What it means is that, people who become involved in good causes practice self-delusion.

What it does not mean is that the cause is worthless or that the years of struggle have been in vain.