

The Race Problem in the United States

By BOOKER T. WASHINGTON,

PRINCIPAL OF THE TUSKEGEE NORMAL INSTITUTE.

I HAVE been asked a number of times during the last few months the cause of and the cure for the riots that have taken place recently in North Carolina and South Carolina. I am not at all sure that what I shall say will answer these questions in a satisfactory way, nor shall I attempt to narrow my expressions to a mere recital of what has taken place in these two States. I prefer to discuss the problem in a broader manner.

In the first place, in politics I am a Republican, but have always refrained from activity in party measures, and expect to pursue this policy in the future; so in this article I shall refrain, as I always have done, from entering upon any discussion of mere party politics, in the narrow and usual sense. What I shall say of politics will bear upon the race problem and the civilization of the South in the larger sense. In no case would I permit my political relations to stand in the way of my speaking and acting in the manner that I believe is going to be for the permanent interest of my race and the whole South, regardless of mere party name and organization.

In 1873 the negro in the South had reached the point of greatest activity and influence in public life, so far as the mere holding of elective office was concerned. From this date those who have kept up with the history of the South have noticed that the negro has steadily lost in the number of elective offices held. In saying this I do not mean that the negro has gone backward in the real and more fundamental things of life. On the contrary, he has gone forward faster than has been true of any other race in history, under anything like similar circumstances.

If we can answer the question as to why the negro has lost ground in the matter of holding elective office in the South, perhaps we shall find that our reply will prove to be our answer also as to the cause of the recent riots in North Carolina and South Carolina. Before beginning a discussion of the question I have asked, I wish to say that this change in the political influence of the negro has continued from year to year, notwithstanding the fact that

for a long time he was protected politically, by force of Federal arms and the most rigid Federal laws, and still more effectively, perhaps, by the voice and influence in the halls of legislation of such advocates of the rights of the negro race as Charles Sumner, Benjamin F. Butler, James A. Garfield, Oliver P. Morton, Carl Schurz, and Roscoe Conkling; and on the stump and through the public press by those great and powerful negroes, Frederick Douglass, John M. Langston, Blanche K. Bruce, John R. Lynch, P. B. S. Pinchback, Robert Browne Elliot, and many others; but the negro has continued for twenty years to have fewer representatives in the State and national legislatures. The reduction has continued until now it is to the point where, with few exceptions, he is without representatives in the lawmaking bodies of the State and of the nation.

Now, let us find, if we can, a cause for this. The negro is fond of saying that his present condition is due to the fact that the State and Federal courts have not sustained the laws passed for the protection of the rights of his people, but I think we shall have to go deeper than this, because I believe that all agree that court decisions, as a rule, represent the public opinion of the community or nation creating and sustaining the court.

At the beginning of his freedom, it was unfortunate that those of the white race who won the political confidence of the negro were not, with few exceptions, men of such high character as would lead them to assist him in laying a firm foundation for his development. Their main purpose appears to have been, for selfish ends in too many instances, merely to control his vote. The history of the reconstruction era will show that this was unfortunate for all the parties in interest.

It would have been better, from any point of view, if the native Southern white man had taken the negro, at the beginning of his freedom, into his political confidence, and exercised an influence and control over him before his political affections were alienated. In the light of present experience, I think all will now agree that the ballot would have meant more to the negro and would have been more lasting in its results, would have caused less opposition, if it had been given to him gradually, as he came into possession of education.

The average Southern white man has the idea to-day that if the negro were permitted to get any political power all the mistakes of the reconstruction period would be repeated. He forgets or ignores the fact that thirty years of acquiring education and property and character have produced a higher type of black man than existed thirty years ago.

But to be more specific for all practical purposes, there are two political parties in the South - a black man's party and a white man's party. In saying this, I do not mean that all white men are Democrats, for there are some white men in the South of the highest character who are Republicans, and there are a few negroes in the South of the highest character who are Democrats. It is the general understanding that all white men are Democrats, or the equivalent, and that all black men are Republicans. So long as the color line is the dividing line in politics, so long will there be trouble.

The white man feels that he owns most of the property, furnishes the negro most of his employment, that he pays most of the taxes, and, besides, has had years of experience in government. There is no mistaking the fact that the feeling which, in some way, has heretofore taken possession of the negro - that to be manly and stand by his race he must oppose the Southern white man with his vote - has had much to do with intensifying the opposition to him.

The Southern white man says that it is unreasonable for the negro to come to him, in a large measure, for his clothes, board, shelter, and education, and for his politics to go to men a thousand miles away. The Southern white man argues that when the negro votes he should in a larger measure try to consult the interests of his employer, just as the Pennsylvania employee tries to vote for the interests of his employer.

The Southern white man argues, further, that much of the education which has been given the negro has been defective in not preparing him to love labor and to earn his living at some special industry, and has, in too many cases, resulted in tempting him to live by his wits as a political creature, or by trusting to his "influence" as a political timeserver.

Then there is no mistaking the fact that much opposition to the negro in politics is due to the circumstance that the Southern white man has not got accustomed to seeing the negro exercise political power, either as a voter or as an officeholder. Again, we want to bear it in mind that the South has not yet reached the point where there is that strict regard for the enforcement of the law against either black or white men that there is in many of our Northern and Western States. This laxity in the enforcement of the laws in general, and especially of criminal laws, makes such outbreaks as those in North Carolina and South Carolina of easy occurrence.

Then there is one other consideration which must not be over-looked: it is the common opinion of almost every black man and almost every white man that nearly everybody who has had anything to do with the making of laws bearing upon the protection of the

negro's vote has proceeded on the theory that all the black men for all time are going to vote the Republican ticket, and that all the white men in the South are going to vote the Democratic ticket; in a word, all seemed to have taken it for granted that the two races are always going to oppose each other in their voting.

In all the foregoing statements I have not attempted to define my own views or position, but simply to describe conditions as I have observed them, that might throw light upon the cause of our political troubles.

As to my own position in all these matters I do not favor the negro's giving up anything which is fundamental and which has been guaranteed to him by the Constitution of the United States. It is not best for him to relinquish any of his rights; nor would his doing so be best for the Southern white man. Every law placed in the Constitution of the United States was placed there to encourage and stimulate the highest citizenship. If the negro is not stimulated and encouraged by just State and national laws to become the highest type of citizen, the result will be worse for the Southern white man than for the negro. Take the State of South Carolina, for example, where nearly two thirds of the population are negroes. Unless these negroes are encouraged by just election laws to become taxpayers and intelligent producers, the white people of South Carolina will have an eternal millstone about their necks.

In addressing the Southern white people at the opening of the Atlanta Exposition, in 1895, I said:

"There is no escape through law of man or God from the inevitable:

'The laws of changeless justice bind
Oppressor with oppressed;
And close as sin and suffering joined
We march to fate abreast.'

Nearly sixteen millions of hands will aid you in pulling the load upward, or they will pull against you the load downward. We shall constitute one third and more of the ignorance and crime of the South, or one third of its intelligence and progress; we shall contribute one third to the business and industrial property of the South, or we shall prove a veritable body of death, stagnating, depressing, retarding every effort to advance the body politic."

Subsequently, in an open letter to the State Constitutional Convention of Louisiana, I wrote:

"I am no politician; on the other hand, I have always advised my race to give attention to acquiring property, intelligence, and character, as the necessary basis of good citizenship, rather than to mere political agitation. But the question upon which I write

is out of the region of ordinary politics: it affects the civilization of two races, not for to-day alone, but for a very long time to come; it is up in the region of duty of man to man, of Christian to Christian.

Since the war no State has had such an opportunity to settle for all time the race question, so far as it concerns politics, as is now given to Louisiana. Will your convention set an example to the world in this respect? Will Louisiana take such high and just grounds in respect to the negro that no one can doubt that the South is as good a friend to the negro as he possesses

elsewhere? In all this, gentlemen of the convention, I am not pleading for the negro alone, but for the morals, the higher life of the white man as well; for the more I study this question, the more I am convinced that it is not so much a question as to what the white man will do with the negro as to what the negro will do with the white man's civilization.

The negro agrees with you that it is necessary to the salvation of the South that restriction be put upon the ballot. I know that you have two serious problems before you: ignorant and corrupt government on the one hand, and on the other a way to restrict the ballot, so that control will be in the hands of the intelligent, without regard to race. With the sincerest sympathy with you in your efforts to find a good way out of the difficulty, I want to suggest that no State in the South can make a law that will provide an opportunity or temptation for an ignorant white man to vote and withhold the opportunity or temptation for an ignorant colored man without injuring both men. No State can make a law that can thus be executed without dwarfing for all time the morals of the white man in the South. Any law controlling the ballot that is not absolutely just and fair to both races will work more permanent injury to the whites than to the blacks.

The negro does not object to an educational and property test, but let the law be so clear that no one clothed with State authority will be tempted to perjure and degrade himself by putting one interpretation upon it for the white man and another for the black man. Study the history of the South, and you will find that where there has been the most dishonesty in the matter of voting, there you will find to-day the lowest moral condition of both races. First, there was the temptation to act wrongly with the negro's ballot. From this it was an easy step to act dishonestly with the white man's ballot, to the carrying of concealed weapons, to the murder of a negro, and then to the murder of a white man, and then to lynching. I entreat you not to pass a law that will prove an eternal millstone about the necks of your children.

No man can have respect for the Government and officers of the law when he knows, deep down in his heart, that the exercise of the franchise is tainted with fraud.

The road that the South has been compelled to travel during the last thirty years has been strewn with thorns and thistles. It has been as one groping through the long darkness into the light. The time is not far distant when the world will begin to appreciate the real character of the burden that was imposed upon the South when four million ex-slaves, ignorant and impoverished, were given the franchise. No people has ever been given such a problem to solve. History has blazed no path through the wilderness that could be followed. For thirty years we have wandered in the wilderness. We are now beginning to get out. But there is only one road out, and all makeshifts, expedients, profit-and-loss calculations, but lead into swamps, quicksands, quagmires, and jungles. There is a highway that will lead both races out into the pure, beautiful sunshine, where there will be nothing to hide and nothing to explain, where both races can grow strong and true and useful in every fiber of their being. I believe that your convention will find this highway; that it will enact a fundamental law that will be absolutely just and fair to white and black alike.

I beg of you, further, that in the degree that you close the ballot box against the ignorant you open the schoolhouse. More than one half of the population of your State are negroes. No State can long prosper when a large part of its citizenship is in ignorance and poverty, and has no interest in government. I beg of you that you do not treat us as an alien people. We are not aliens. You know us; you know that we have cleared your forests, tilled your fields, nursed your children, and protected your families. There is an attachment between us that few understand.

While I do not presume to be able to advise you, yet it is in my heart to say that if your convention would do something that would prevent for all time strained relations between the two races, and would permanently settle the matter of political relations in one Southern State, at least, let the very best educational opportunities be provided for both races; and add to this an election law that shall be incapable of unjust discrimination, at the same time providing that in proportion as the ignorant secure education, property, and character, they will be given the right of citizenship. Any other course will take from one half your citizens interest in the State, and hope and ambition to become intelligent producers and taxpayers, to become useful and virtuous citizens. Any other course will tie the white citizens of Louisiana to a body of death.

The negroes are not unmindful of the fact that the white

people of your State pay the greater portion of the school taxes, and that the poverty of the State prevents it from doing all that it desires for public education; yet I believe that you will agree with me that ignorance is more costly to the State than education; that it will cost Louisiana more not to educate the negroes than it will to educate them. In connection with a generous provision for public schools, I believe that nothing will so help my own people in your State as provision at some institution for the highest academic and normal training in connection with thorough training in agriculture, mechanics, and domestic economy. The fact is that ninety per cent of our people depend upon the common occupations for their living, and outside of the cities eighty-five per cent rely upon agriculture for support. Notwithstanding this, our people have been educated for the most part since the war in everything else but the very thing most of them live by. First-class training in agriculture, horticulture, dairying, stock raising, the mechanical arts, and domestic economy would make us intelligent producers, and not only help us to contribute our proportion as taxpayers, but would result in retaining much money in the State that now goes outside for that which can be as well produced at home. An institution which will give this training of the hand, along with the highest mental culture, would soon convince our people that their salvation is largely in the ownership of property and in industrial and business development, rather than in mere political agitation.

The highest test of the civilization of any race is in its willingness to extend a helping hand to the less fortunate. A race, like an individual, lifts itself up by lifting others up. Surely no people ever had a greater chance to exhibit the highest Christian fortitude and magnanimity than is now presented to the people of Louisiana. It requires little wisdom or statesmanship to repress, to crush out, to retard the hopes and aspirations of a people, but the highest and most profound statesmanship is shown in guiding and stimulating a people, so that every fiber in the body and soul shall be made to contribute in the highest degree to the usefulness and ability of the State. It is along this line that I pray God the thoughts and activities of your convention be guided."

As to the cure for such outbreaks as have recently hurt North Carolina and South Carolina, I would say that the remedy will not come by the Southern white man's being merely cursed by the Northern white man or by the negro. Again, it will not come by the Southern white man merely depriving the negro of his rights and privileges. Both of these methods are but superficial, irritating, and must in the nature of things be short-lived. The statesman, to cure an evil, resorts to enlightenment, to stimulation; the

politician to repression. I have just remarked that I favor the giving up of nothing that is guaranteed to us by the Constitution of the United States, or that is fundamental to our citizenship. While I hold to these views as strongly as any one, I differ with some as to the

method of securing the permanent and peaceful enjoyment of all the privileges guaranteed to us by our fundamental law.

In finding a remedy, we must recognize the world-wide fact that the negro must be led to see and feel that he must make every effort possible in every way possible to secure the friendship, the confidence, the co-operation of his white neighbor in the South. To do this, it is not necessary for the negro to become a truckler or a trimmer. The Southern white man has no respect for a negro who does not act from principle. In some way the Southern white man must be led to see that it is to his interest to turn his attention more and more to the making of laws that will in the truest sense elevate the negro. At the present moment, in many cases, when one attempts to get the negro to co-operate with the Southern white man, he asks the question, "Can the people who force me to ride in a Jim Crow car, and pay first-class fare, be my best friends?" In answering such questions, the Southern white man as well as the negro has a duty to perform.

In the exercise of his political rights I should advise the negro to be temperate and modest, and more and more to do his own thinking, rather than to be led or driven by a political "boss" or by political demagogues.

I believe the permanent cure for our present evils will come through a property and educational test for voting that shall apply honestly and fairly to both races. This will cut off the large mass of ignorant voters of both races that is now proving so demoralizing a factor in the politics of the Southern States.

But most of all it will come through industrial development of the negro! It is for this reason that I have believed in General Armstrong's theory of industrial education. In the first place, industrial education makes an intelligent producer of the negro, who becomes of immediate value to the community rather than one who yields to the temptation to live merely by politics or other parasitical employments. In the next place, industrial development will make the negro soon become a property-holder, and when a citizen becomes a holder of property he becomes a conservative and thoughtful voter. He is going to think about the measures and individuals to be voted for. In proportion as the negro increases his property interests he becomes important as a taxpayer. When the negro becomes a large taxpayer, he will see that it is to his interest to consult with his white neighbor about the measures to be voted for.

There is little trouble between the negro and the white man as to matters of education, and when it comes to the negro's business development the black man has implicit faith in the advice of the Southern white man. When the negro gets into trouble in the courts, which require a bond to be given, in nine cases out of ten he goes to a Southern white man for advice and assistance. Every one who has lived in the South knows that in many of the church troubles among the colored people the ministers and other church officers apply to the nearest white minister for assistance and instruction. As soon as we have grown to the point where we shall consult the Southern white man about our politics as we now consult him about our business, legal, and religious matters, there will be a change for the better in the situation.

The object lesson of a thousand negroes in every county in the South owning neat and comfortable homes, possessing skill, industry, and thrift, with money in the bank, who are large taxpayers and co-operate with the white men in the South in every manly way for the development of their own communities and counties, will go a long way in a few years toward changing the present status of the negro as a citizen as well as the attitude of the whites toward the blacks.

In proportion as the negro grows along industrial and business lines he will divide in his politics on economic issues, just as the white man in other parts of the country now divides his vote.

In proportion as the South grows in business prosperity the whole South will divide its vote on economic issues, just as other portions of the country divide their vote. When we can enact laws that result in honestly cutting off the large ignorant and nontaxpaying vote, and when we can bring both races to the point where they will co-operate with each other in politics in matters of business, religion, and education, the problem will be in a large measure solved, and political outbreaks will cease.

Colonel George Earl Church, speaking of the Indians of the country of the Amazons, relates of the chief of a horde of Yocaré savages whom he met among the falls of the Madeira, a young fellow twenty-five years old, that "he appeared to know everything that was going on around him. He seemed to have eyes in the back of his head, so acute were his senses. His hearing appeared to indicate, and his mind to define, the thousand things which were occurring in the tropical forest around us. Instinctively, he classified and estimated them at their true value as if they were under close and accurate analysis. As he sat dining with me at my camp table, in the simplicity of his nature and modesty of his nakedness, I could not help thinking that, in the evolution of man, many magnificent qualities have been sacrificed upon the altar of civilization."