

## Letter from Kelly Miller to Woodrow Wilson, August 04, 1917

By *KELLY MILLER*

August 4, 1917.

Hon. Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States, The White House, Washington, D. C.

Mr. President:

I am taking the liberty of intruding this letter upon you because I feel that the issues involved are as important as any questions now pressing upon your busy attention. The whole civilized world has been shocked at the recent occurrences in Memphis and East St. Louis. These outbreaks call attention anew to the irritating race problem of which they are but eruptive symptoms which break forth ever and anon with Vesuvian violence. For fully a generation American statesmanship has striven to avoid, ignore or forget the perplexing race problem. But this persistent issue will not down at our bidding, and cannot be shunted from public attention by other questions however momentous or vital they may seem to be.

I know that I am taking unwarranted liberties with the ceremonial proprieties in writing such a letter to the President of the United States at the present time. It may seem to partake of the spirit of heckling after the manner of the suffragists. Nothing is further from my purpose. No right-minded American would wish to add one featherweight to the burden that now so heavily taxes the mind and body of the President of the United States who labors under as heavy a load as human nature is capable of sustaining. Every citizen should strive to lighten rather than to aggravate that burden. It is, nevertheless, true that any suppressed and aggrieved class must run athwart the established code of procedure in order that their case may receive a just hearing. Ceremonial codes were enacted by those who are the beneficiaries of existing order which they wish to perpetuate and make unchangeable. They would estop all social and moral reform. The ardent

dent before or since his time. During the administration of President McKinley, an atrocious riot occurred in Wilmington, N. C., the city in which you spent your boyhood as the son of a minister of the Gospel. Scores of innocent Negroes were killed and hundreds were driven from their homes. But it was maintained that the President had no authority to interfere. A horrible lynching took place at Alexandria, Virginia, a few miles from the White House, which the President might possibly have observed through his field glasses. And yet it was looked upon as a purely local affair for which the Federal Government had no responsibility nor concern. You recall the atrocities of the riot in Atlanta, a city in which you spent your young manhood as a practitioner of law. But here again even President Roosevelt could find no ground for interference.

These outbreaks are not limited to the Southern States, although they occur there more frequently than elsewhere because of the relatively larger number of Negroes in the total population. There have been lynchings and burnings in Illinois, Kansas, Delaware, Ohio, Indiana, Colorado and other Northern States. The evil is indeed national in its range and scope, and the nation must provide the remedy. Striking indeed is the analogy between the spread of lawlessness today and the extension of the institution of slavery two generations ago. Like slavery, lawlessness cannot be localized. As the nation could not exist half slave and half free under Abraham Lincoln, so it cannot continue half law-abiding and half lawless under Woodrow Wilson. The evil tendency overcomes the good, just as the darker overlaps the

brighter phase in the waning moon. If the Negro is allowed to be lynched in the South with impunity, he will soon be lynched in the North, so easy is the communicability of evil suggestion. The lynchings of Negroes has become fashionable in some parts of the country. When a black man is accused of wrongdoing, "Lynch the Negro!" is the cry that springs spontaneously to the lips of man, woman and child. The fashion is rapidly spreading throughout the whole nation. If slavery could have been isolated and segregated in the South

Lynching cannot be confined to the Negro race. Hundreds of white men have been the victims of lawlessness and violence. While these words are flowing from my pen, news comes over the wire that a labor agitator has been lynched in the State of Montana. Although the Negro is at present the chief victim of lawlessness, like any other evil disease, it cannot be limited by racial lines.

It is but hollow mockery of the Negro, when he is beaten

of human perfection, is of the same order of ironical cruelty as shown by the barbarous Teutons in Shakespeare, who cut off the hands and hacked out the tongue of the lovely Lavinia, and then upbraided her for not calling for perfumed water to wash her delicate hands. The Negro is neither angelic nor diabolical, but merely human, and should be treated as such.

The vainglorious boast of Anglo-Saxon superiority will no longer avail to justify these outrages. The contact, adjustment and attrition of various races of mankind constitute a problem which is coterminous with the ends of the earth. The lighter and stronger races are coming into contact with the weaker and darker ones. The stronger breeds of men are relating themselves to the weaker members of the human family in all the ends of the earth. How does it happen that in the United States alone, of all civilized lands, these atrocious outrages are heaped upon the helpless Negro? The English nation has the largest colonial experience and success since the days of the Roman empire, and has come into relationship with the various weaker breeds of men in all parts of the world. But everywhere under English jurisdiction law and order prevail. In the West Indies, where Negroes outnumber the whites 20 to 1, rape and lynching have scarcely yet found a place in the local vocabulary. In Brazil, under a Latin dispensation, where a more complex racial situation exists than in the United States, racial peace and goodwill prevail. Belgium furnishes the only parallel of civilized nations, in the atrocious treatment of a helpless people placed in their charge. But even the Belgians were forced to modify the rigors of their outrageous regime in the Congo, under the bombardment of moral sentiment of the more enlightened nations of the world. America enjoys the evil distinction among all civilized nations of the earth of taking delight in murder and burning of human beings. Nowhere else do men, women and children dance with ghoulish glee and fight for ghastly souvenirs of human flesh and mock the dying groans of the helpless victim which sicken the air, while the flickering flames of the funereal pyre lighten the midnight sky with their lurid glare.

Mr. President, the American conscience has been touched and quickened by the East St. Louis outbreak as it has never been before. Press and pulpit have tried to forget these outrages. At each fresh outbreak they would lash themselves into a spasm of virtue and exhaust the entire vocabulary of denunciation, but, forthwith, would lapse into sudden silence and acquiescent guilt. By some fatuous delusion they seem to hope that the atrocities of Springfield, Wilmington, Waco, Atlanta, Memphis and a thousand other places of evil report would never be repeated, nor the memory rise up to condemn the nation. But silence and neglect merely result in compounding atrocities. The East St. Louis outbreak convinces the nation, as it has

never been before, that the time for action has come. The press is not content with a single editorial ebullition, but by repeated utterances insists that the nation shall deal with its most malignant domestic evil. Reproach is cast upon your contention for the democratization of the world, in face of its lamentable failure at home. Ex-President Roosevelt, who is the greatest living voice now crying aloud for individual and national righteousness, has openly proclaimed, in dramatic declaration, that these outbreaks make our moral propaganda for the liberation of mankind but a delusion and a snare. Mr. President, can this nation hope to live and to grow in favor with God and man on the basis of a lie? A nation with a stultified conscience is a nation with stunted power.

Democracies have frequently shut their eyes to moral inconsistencies. The democracy of Greece conferred privilege upon a mere handful of freemen in the midst of ten times their own number of slaves. The Greek philosophers and statesmen were supremely unconscious of this moral obliquity. The Declaration of Independence which declared for the equality of all men was written by a slaveholder. The statesmen of the period, however, hoped that slavery would be of shortlived duration, and would effect its own solution in the process of time. But Thomas Jefferson was keenly sensitive of the moral inconsistency of this attitude, and declared that he trembled when he considered that God is just, and that His justice

so happened that it was an American Negro who proved to be the first victim of ruthless submarine warfare, after you had distinctly announced to Germany that such outrage would be considered tantamount to war. In all of these ways has the Negro shown, purposely or unconsciously, his undeviating devotion to the glory and honor of the nation. Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his country.

In the midst of the world war for the democratization of mankind the Negro will do his full share. I have personally always striven to urge the Negro to be patriotic and loyal in every emergency. At the Reserve Officers' Training Camp in Fort Des Moines there are over one hundred young colored men who have come under my instruction. The devilry of his fellow men cannot devise iniquities horrible enough to drive him from his patriotic devotion. The Negro, Mr. President, in this emergency, will stand by you and the nation. Will you and the nation stand by the Negro?

I believe, Mr. President, that to the victor belong the spoils, especially if these spoils be human liberty. After this war for the liberation of mankind has been won through the Negro's patriotic participation, he will repeat the lines of the old familiar hymn somewhat louder than ever:

"Behold a stranger at the door,  
He gently knocks, has knocked before,  
Has waited along, is waiting still,  
You treat no other friend so ill."

As a student of public questions I have carefully watched your attitude on the race problem. You have preserved a lukewarm aloofness from the tangled issues of this problem. In searching your writings one finds little or no reference to this troubled phase of American life. It seems that you regard it as a regrettable social malady to be treated with cautious and calculated neglect. There is observable, however, a passive solicitude. You have kept the race problem in the back part of your mind. Your letter to Bishop Walters during your first campaign for the Presidency, expressing a generous

it was willingly granted. The people have willingly placed in your hands more power than has ever been exercised by any member of the human race and are willing to trust you in the use of that power. I am sure that they will grant this additional authority during the continuance of the present war in order to secure the unqualified patriotic devotion of all of the citizens and to safeguard the honor of democracy and the good name of the republic.

Mr. President, Negroes all over this nation are aroused as they have never been before. It is not the wild hysteria of the hour, but a determined purpose that this country shall be made a safe place for American citizens to live and work and enjoy the pursuits of happiness. Ten thousand speechless men and women marched in silent array down Fifth Avenue in New York City as a spectral demonstration against the wrongs and cruelties heaped upon the race. Negro women all over the nation have appointed a day of prayer in order that righteousness might be done to this people. The weaker sex of the weaker race are praying that God may use you as the instrument of His will to promote the cause of human freedom at home. I attended one of these 6 o'clock prayer meetings in the city of Washington. Two thousand humble women snatched the early hours of the morning before going to their daily tasks to resort to the house of prayer. They literally performed unto the Lord the burden of their prayer and song, "Steal Away to Jesus." There was not a note of bitterness nor denunciation throughout the season of prayer. They prayed as their mothers prayed in the darker days gone by, that God would deliver the race. Mr. President, you can help God answer their prayer. May it not be that these despised and rejected daughters of a despised and rejected race shall yet lead the world to its knees in acknowledgment of some controlling power outside of the machinations of man? As I sat there and listened in reverent silence to these two thousand voices as they sang, -

"On Christ, the Solid Rock, I stand,  
All other ground is sinking sand -

I could not but think of the godless war which is now convulsing the world -a war in which Christian hands are dyed in Christian blood. It must cause the Prince of Peace to groan as in His dying agony when He gave up the ghost on the cross. The professed followers of the Meek and Lowly One, with heathen heart, are putting their trust in reeking tube and iron shard. God uses the humbler things of life to confound the mighty. It may be that these helpless victims of cruelty and outrage will bring an apostate world back to God.

Mr. President, ten million of your fellow citizens are looking to you and to the God whom you serve to grant them relief in this hour of their deepest distress. All moral reforms grow out of the people who suffer and stand in need of them. The Negro's helpless position may yet bring America to a realizing sense that righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.

Yours truly,

KELLY MILLER.