

1934

The N. A. A. C. P. and Race Segregation

There is a good deal of misapprehension as to the historic attitude of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and race segregation. As a matter of fact, the Association while it has from time to time discussed the larger aspects of this matter, has taken no general stand and adopted no general philosophy. Of course its action, and often very effective action, has been in specific cases of segregation where the call for a definite stand was clear and decided. For instance, in the preliminary National Negro Convention which met in New York May 31st and June 1st, 1909, segregation was only mentioned in a protest against Jim-Crow our laws and that because of an amendment by William N. Trotter. In the First Annual Report, January 1, 1911, the Association evolved a statement of its purpose, which said that "it seeks to uplift the colored men and women of this country by securing to them the full enjoyment of their rights as citizens, justice in all courts, and equality of opportunity everywhere." Later, this general statement was epitomized in the well-known declaration: "It conceives its mission to be the completion of the work which the great Emancipator began. It proposes to make a group of ten million Americans free from the lingering shackles of past slavery, physically free from peonage, mentally free from ignorance, politically free from disfranchisement, and socially free from insult." This phrase which I first rewrote myself for the Annual Report of 1915 still expresses pregnantly the object of the N. A. A. C. P. and it has my own entire adherence.

It will be noted, however, that here again segregation comes in only by implication. Specifically, it was first spoken of in the Second Report of the Association, January 1, 1912, when the attempt to destroy the property of Negroes in Kansas City because they had moved into a white sect on was taken up. It is here our fight on a specific phase of segregation; namely, the attempt to establish a Negro ghetto by force of law.

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This phase of segregation we fought vigorously for years and often achieved notable victories in the highest courts of the land. But it will be noted here that the N.A.A.C.P. expressed no opinion as to whether it might not be a feasible and advisable thing for colored people to establish their own residential sections, or their own towns and certainly there was nothing expressed or implied that Negroes should not organize for promoting their own interests in industry, literature or art. Manifestly, here was opportunity for considerable difference of opinion, but the matter never was thoroughly threshed out.

The Association moved on to other matters of color discrimination. The Full Crew Bill which led to dismissal of so many Negro railway employees. The Jim-Crow car laws on railway trains and street cars. The segregation in government departments. In all these matters, the stand of the Association was clear and unequivocal. It held that it was a gross injustice to make special rules which discriminated against the color of employees or patrons. In the Sixth Annual Report issued in March, 1916, the seven lines of endeavor of the Association include change of unfair laws, better administration of present laws, justice in the courts, stoppage of public expenditure, the investigation of facts, the management of distinguished work by Negroes and organizations.

Very soon, however, there came up a more complex question and that was the matter of Negro schools. The Association had avoided from the beginning any thoroughgoing pronouncement on this matter. In the resolutions of 1909, the conference asked: "Equal educational opportunities for all and in all the states, and that public school expenditure be the same for the Negro and white child." This of course does not touch the real problem of separate schools. Very soon, however, their program was presented to the Association. The exclusion of colored girls from the Oberlin dormitories in 1919, the discrimination in the School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, and the Cincinnati fight against establishing a separate school for colored children brought the matter squarely to the front. Later, further cases came; the Brooklyn Girls' High School, the

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matter of a colored High School in Indianapolis, and the celebrated Gary case.

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Gradually, in these cases the attitude of the Association crystalized. It declared that further extension of segregated schools for particular races and especially for Negroes was unwise and dangerous, and the Association undertook in all possible cases to oppose such further segregation. It did not, however, for a moment feel called upon to attack the separate schools where most colored children are educated throughout the United States and it did not do this not because it approved of separate schools, but because it was faced by a fact and not a theory. It saw no sense in tilting against windmills. It will be seen that in all these cases the Association was attacking specific instances and not attempting to lay down any general rule as to how far the advancement of the colored race in the United States was going to involve racial action and organization of Negroes for certain ends.

To be sure, the overwhelming and underlying thought of the N.A.A.C.P. has always been that any discrimination based simply on race is fundamentally wrong. On the other hand, they faced certain unfortunate but undeniable facts. For instance, war came. The Negro was being drafted. Negro officers were being commissioned. The N. A. A. C. P. asked for the admission of Negroes to white officer schools. This was denied. There was only one further thing to do and that was to ask for a school for Negro officers. There arose a bitter protest among many Negroes against this movement. Nevertheless, the argument for it was absolutely unanswerable, and Joel E. Spingarn, Chairman of the Board, supported by the students of Howard University, launched a movement which resulted in the commissioning of seven hundred Negro officers in the A.E.F. In all the British Dominions, with their hundreds of millions of colored folk, there was not a single officer of known Negro blood. The American Negro scored a tremendous triumph against the Color Line by their admitted policy of segregation. This did not mean that Mr. Spingarn or any of the members of the N.A.A.C.P. thought it right that there should be a separate Negro camp, but they thought a separate Negro camp and Negro officers was infinitely better than no camp and no Negro officers,

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and that was the only practical choice that lay before them. Similarly, in the question of the Negro vote, the N.A.A.C.P. began in 1920 an attempt to organize the Negro vote and cast it in opposition to open enemies of the Negro race who were running for office. This was a species of advocated segregation. It was appealing to voters on the grounds of race, and it brought for that reason considerable opposition. Nevertheless, it could be defended on the ground that the election of enemies of the Negro race was not only a blow to that race but to the white race and to all civilization. And while our attitude, even in the Parker case, has been criticized, it has on the whole found abundant justification.

The final problem in segregation presented to us is that of the Harlem Hospital. Here was a hospital in the center of a great Negro population which for years did not have and would not admit a single Negro physician to its staff. Finally, by agitation and by political power, Negroes obtained representation on the staff in considerable numbers and membership on the Board of Control. It was a great triumph. But it was accompanied by reaction on the part of whites who had opposed this movement, and an attempt to change the status of the hospital so that it would become a segregated Negro hospital, and so that presumably the other hospitals of the city would continue to exclude Negroes from their staffs. And with this arose a movement to establish Negro hospitals throughout the United States. Here was an exceedingly difficult problem. On the one hand, there is no doubt of the need of the Negro population for wider and better hospitalization, and for the demand on the part of Negro physicians for opportunities of hospital practice. This was illustrated by the celebrated Tuskegee hospital where nearly all the Negro physicians are segregated but where an efficient Negro staff has been installed. Perhaps nothing illustrates better than this the contradiction and paradox of the problem of race segregation in the United States, and the problem which the N.A.A.C.P. faced and still faces. One of the most prominent members of its Board, ~~Dr. J. M. D. Wright~~ with unflinching courage the fight to make Harlem Hospital a general hospital open to all with competent Negroes represented

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on its staff and to oppose any movement to establish specific Negro hospitals. On the other hand, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People knows and we all know that from the overwhelming majority of the best hospitals in the land Negro physicians, no matter what their attainment, are rigidly excluded because of race and Negro patients receive less than the proper care.

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But all this simply touches the whole question of racial organization and initiative. No matter what we may wish or say, the vast majority of the Negroes in the United States are born in colored homes, educated in separate colored schools, attend separate colored churches, marry colored mates, and find their amusement in colored Y. M. C. A.'s and Y. W. C. A.'s. Even in their economic life, they are gradually being forced out of the place in industry which they occupied in the white world and being compelled to seek their living among themselves. Here is segregation with a vengeance. And add to this voluntary and purposeful segregation of ourselves, as shown by this clipping from the Atlanta Constitution:

It stands as a flat and undeniable fact. What are we going to do about it? It is this problem which THE CRISIS desires to discuss during the present year in all its phases and with ample and fair representation to all shades of opinion.

negro + Jim Seal

SEGREGATION IN THE NORTH

I have read with interest the various criticisms on my recent discussions of segregation. Those like that of Mr. Pierce of Cleveland, do not impress me. I am not worried about being inconsistent. What worries me is the truth. I am talking about conditions in 1934 and not in 1910. The arguments of Walter White, George Schuyler and Kelly Miller, have logic, but seem to me quite beside the point. In the first place, Walter White is white. He has more white companions and friends than colored. He goes where he will in New York City and meets no Color Line. This is perfectly right and it is what anyone else of his complexion would do, but it is fantastic to assume that this has anything to do with the color problem in the United States. It naturally makes Mr. White an extreme opponent of any segregation based on a myth of race. But his argument does not apply to Schuyler or Miller or me. Moreover, Mr. White knows this. He moved once into a white apartment house and it went back on him. He now lives in a colored apartment house. He once took a friend to dine with him at the celebrated Lafayette Hotel, where he had often be welcomed. The management humiliated him by refusing to serve Roland Hayes.

The attitudes of Schuyler and Kelley Miller are based on the amiable assumption that there is little or no segregation in the North, and that agitation and a firm stand is making it disappear. This, of course, is a fable. The difference between North and South in the matter of segregation is largely a difference of degree, if we accept the prevalence of mob law and political and social disfranchisement in the South. In the North, neither Schuyler or Kelley Miller nor anyone with a feasible admixture of Negro blood can frequent hotels or restaurants. They have difficulty in finding dwelling places in white neighborhoods. They occupy Lower 1. on Pullmans and they do not go into dining cars when any number of white people are there. Their children either go to colored schools or to schools nominally for both races, but actually attended almost exclusively by colored children. In other words, they are confined by unyielding public opinion to a Negro world. And no matter how much they may fulminate about no segregation, there stand the flat facts. Moreover, this situation has been steadily growing worse. Mr. Spingarn may ask judiciously

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as to whether or not the N. A. A. C. P. should change its attitude toward segregation. The point that he does not realize is that segregation has changed its attitude toward the N. A. A. C. P. That does not mean that segregation is not just as evil today as it was in 1910 or that anyone denies the fact. But today the pressing problem is: What are we going to do about it? In 1910, colored men could be entertained in the best hotel in Cleveland, Detroit and Chicago. Today, there is not a single Northern city, except New York, where McNegro can be a guest at a first-class hotel. Not even in Boston is he welcomed, and in New York, the number of hotels where he can go is very small. Roland Hayes was unable to get hotel accommodations, and Booker T. Washington and Dr. Moton only succeeded by powerful white influence and by refraining to use the public dining room or the public lobbies. These are unpleasant facts. We do not like to voice them. The theory is that by maintaining certain fictions of law and administration, we can stand on the principle of no segregation and wait until public opinion meets our position. But can we do this? Remember that meantime, we are not living in times of prosperity, when we were making post-war incomes, and our labor was in demand, and we perhaps could afford to wait. But today, faced by starvation and economic upheaval and by the very question of being able to survive in the reconstruction that is upon us, it is ridiculous not to see and criminal ~~not~~ to tell the colored people that they can base their salvation upon the reiteration of a slogan. What then can we do? The only thing that we not only can but must do is to organize our economic and social power. Remember to associate with ourselves and train ourselves for executive association. Organize our consuming strength. Train ourselves in methods of democracy. Run our own institutions. We are doing this partially now, only we are doing it under a peculiar attitude of protest. A number of excellent young gentlemen in Washington, having formed a Negro alliance, proceeded to read me out of the congregation of the righteous because of my attitude toward segregation. But who are these young men? The products of a segregated school system. The talent selected by Negro teachers. The persons who can only today, in nine cases out of ten, earn a living through Negro social institutions. These are the men that are yelling against segregation. If most of them had been educated in the mixed schools in New York

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instead of the segregated schools of Washington, they never would have seen college, because Washington picks out and sends ten times as many Negroes to college as New York does. It would, of course, be full easy to call this voluntary association for great social and economic ends by another name than segregation, and if I had done so in the beginning of this debate, many people would have been easily deceived, and would have yelled no segregation with one side of their mouths and race pride and race effort with the other side. No such distinction can rightly be drawn. Segregation may be compulsory by law or it may be compulsory by economic or social condition. Or it may be a matter of free choice. At any rate, it is the separation of people. And that separation is evil and leads to nationalism and war, and yet it is today inevitable. Inevitable because without it the American Negro and other world groups would suffer evils greater than the evil of separation. They would suffer the loss of self-respect, the lack of faith in themselves, the lack of knowledge about themselves, the lack of ability to make a decent living.

This situation has been plunged into crisis and precipitated an open demand for thought and action by the depression and the New Deal. The government, national and state, is helping and guiding the individual. It has entered and eterne for good into social and economic organization of life. We could wish, we could pray, that this entrance could absolutely ignore lines of race and color, but we know perfectly well it will not, and with present American opinion, it cannot. The question is then, are we going to stand out and refuse the inevitable and inescapable government aid because we first wish to abolish the Color Line? We are not simply tilting at windmills. We are, if we are not careful, committing race suicide.

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