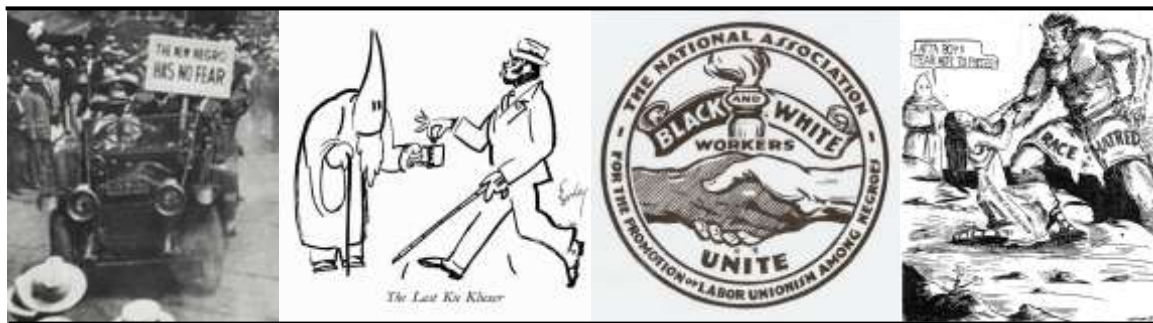


THE TWENTIES IN CONTEMPORARY COMMENTARY



— Black & White in America —

As black soldiers returned from Europe after World War I, and southern blacks migrated to northern cities by the thousands; as black writers and artists in Harlem spawned the New Negro movement, and black political leaders commanded national attention, “race” announced itself as a rapidly changing factor in postwar America. How black and white commentators viewed the phenomenon is sampled in the excerpted commentary presented here.

An educator and clergyman, Mordecai Johnson delivered “The Faith of the American Negro” as the commencement address for the 1922 graduating class of Harvard Divinity School. Four years later he was appointed the first black president of Howard University in Washington, DC.

Mordecai Wyatt Johnson
 “The Faith of the American Negro”
The Crisis, August 1922

When the United States Government set forth its war aims, called upon Negro soldiers to stand by the colors and Negro civilians, men, women, and children, to devote their labor and earnings to the cause, and when the war shortage of labor permitted a quarter million Negroes to leave the former slave States for the better conditions of the North, the entire Negro people experienced a profound sense of spiritual release. For the first time since emancipation they found themselves comparatively free to sell their labor on the open market for a living wage, found themselves launched on a great world enterprise with a chance to vote in a real and decisive way, and, best of all, in the heat of the struggle they found themselves bound with other Americans in the spiritual fellowship of a common cause. . . .

At the close of the war, however, the Negro’s hopes were suddenly dashed to the ground. Southern newspapers began at once to tell the Negro soldiers that the war was over and the sooner they forgot the better. “Pull off your uniform,” they said, “find the place you had before the war, and stay in it.” “Act like a Negro should act,” said one newspaper, “work like a Negro should work, talk like a Negro should talk, study like a Negro should study. Dismiss all ideas of independency or of being lifted up to the plane of the white man. Understand the necessity of keeping a Negro’s place.” In connection with such admonitions there came the great collective attacks on Negro life and property in Washington, Chicago, Omaha, Elaine, and Tulsa. There came also the increasing boldness of lynchers who advertised their purposes in advance of their victims. There came vain appeals by the colored people to the President of the United States and to the houses of Congress. And finally there came the reorganization and rapid growth of the Ku Klux Klan. . . .

From those terrible days until this day the Negro’s faith in the righteous purpose of the Federal Government has sagged. Some have laid the blame on the parties in power. Some have laid it elsewhere. But all the colored people, in every section of the United States, believe that there is something wrong, and not accidentally wrong, at the very heart of the Government.

Walter F. White
The Fire in the Flint
 novel, 1924

In his first of two novels on race in America, Walter White, an NAACP official who investigated race riots and lynchings, gave voice to his speculations on "the problem of race in America" through his protagonist, Dr. Kenneth Harper, a black physician in a small Georgia town.

What was the elusive solution to this problem of race in America? Why couldn't the white people of the South see where their course was leading them? Ewing was right. No white man of

Tom Ewing: white business leader of the town who opts to "let well enough alone" in race relations

Rev. Ezekiel Wilson: pastor of the black Baptist church

the South had ever come out in complete defiance of the present regime which was so surely damning the South and America. Kenneth saw his people kept in the bondage of ignorance. Why? Because it was to the economic advantage of the white South to have it so. Why was a man like Reverend Wilson patted on the back and every Negro told that men of his kind were "safe and sane leaders"? Why was every Negro who too audibly or visibly resented the brutalities and proscriptions of race prejudice instantly labelled as a radical—a dangerous character—as one seeking "social equality"? What was this thing called "social equality" anyhow? That was an easy question to answer. It was about the only one he could answer with any completeness. White folks didn't really believe that Negroes sought to force themselves in places where they weren't wanted, any more than decent white people wanted to force themselves where they were not invited. No, that was the smoke-screen to hide something more sinister. Social equality would lead to intermarriage, they thought, and the legitimatizing of the countless half-colored sons and daughters of these white people. Why, if every child in the South were a legitimate one, more than half of the land and property in the South would belong to colored owners.

Did the white people who were always talking about "social equality" think they really were fooling anybody with their constant denunciation of it? Twenty-nine states of America had laws against intermarriage. All these laws were passed by white legislators. Were these laws passed to keep Negroes from seizing some white woman and forcing her to marry him against her will? . . . No, the laws were passed because white men wanted to have their own women and use colored women too without any law interfering with their affairs or making them responsible for the consequences.

Langston Hughes
 "Question"
The Crisis
 March 1922

When the old junk man Death
 Comes to gather up our bodies
 And toss them into the sack of oblivion,
 I wonder if he will find
 The corpse of a white multi-millionaire
 Worth more pennies of eternity,
 Than the black torso of
 A Negro cotton picker?

"WHAT IS
 RACE PREJUDICE?"

Definition Contest, *The Forum*, 1928

Inviting readers' definitions for terms looming large in current discussion was a regular feature of the periodical *The Forum*. In February 1928, five definitions chosen by the editors were published, inviting readers to vote for their favorites.

Race Prejudice is the snobbishness of the mob. The snob as an individual is hostile or unsociable or patronizing in his attitude, and unjust, unkind, and discourteous in his actions toward those who by reason of heredity or environment differ from himself. When such an attitude is assumed and such actions pursued and advocated by large classes of people toward alien races, thus impairing the social, economic, or political opportunities of individuals of any race to complete on equal terms in all aspects of the game called Life—then we have Race Prejudice.

-Dr. William R. Tymms, Fairfield, Maine

Race Prejudice—one's dominant mental attitude when:

My country, habits, prayers, my folks, my skin
 Make me a better man than Gunga Din.

-Dr. Con O. Lee, Tampa, Florida

Race Prejudice—instinctive recognition of biologic incompatibility.

-James Bond, Tarentum, Pennsylvania

Race Prejudice—a people's presumably proper pique at pigment.

-Minnie Hite Moody, Columbus, Indiana

Every race has its salient characteristics of color and physiognomy, emotions, and mentality, which differentiate it from all others. **Race Prejudice** is an innate sense of the fitness of things which recognizes the inherent incompatibility of certain races, on account of such differences, to enter into marital relations or mingle socially with certain others. It is the conviction that such ineradicable differences oblige these races, when dwelling together, to move on parallel lines. "Never the twain shall meet," yet in economic mutual respect is the rule, and sincere affection often exists between their respective members.

-R. T. Fullwood, Los Angeles, California

W. E. B. Du Bois
 "Ten Phrases"
The Crisis, July 1922

As editor of the *Crisis*, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Du Bois frequently inserted biting satirical pieces.

The following ten phrases are recommended to white students in Southern colleges as quite sufficient for all possible discussions of the race problems:

1. The Southerner is the Negro's Best Friend.
2. Slavery was Beneficial to the Negro.
3. The Races will Never Mix.
4. All Negro Leaders are Mulattoes.
5. The Place for the Negro is in the South.
6. I love My Black Mammy.
7. Do you want your sister to marry a Nigger?
8. Do not disturb the present friendly relations between the races.
9. The Negro must be kept in his place.
10. Lynching is the defense of Southern womanhood.



Library of Congress



W. E. B. Du Bois

Schomburg Ctr.

Countee Cullen
 "Near White"
Color, 1925

Ambiguous of race they stand,
 By one disowned, scorned of another,
 Not knowing where to stretch a hand,
 And cry, "My sister" or "My brother."

Jessie Redmon Fauset
There Is Confusion
 Novel, 1925

Literary editor of the *Crisis*, Fauset published four novels exploring the emerging black middle class in America. In this scene from her first novel, the character Brian blames the breakup of Joanna (Jan) and her fiancé Peter, both from northern black middle-class families, to their disparate accommodations to the "complex of color."

"Of course what Joanna doesn't realize is that she's up against the complex of color in Peter's life. It comes to every colored man and every colored woman, too, who has any ambition. Jan will feel it herself one day. Peter's got it worse than most of us because he's got such a terrible 'mad' on white people to start with. But every colored man feels it sooner or later. It gets in the way of his dreams, of his education, of his marriage, of the rearing of his children. The time comes when he thinks, 'I might just as well fall back; there's no use pushing on. A colored man just can't make any headway in this awful country.' Of course, it's a fallacy. And if a fellow sticks it out he finally gets past it, but not before it has worked considerable confusion in his life. To have the ordinary job of living is bad enough, but to add to it all the thousand and one difficulties which follow simply in the train of being colored—well, all I've got to say, Sylvia, is we're some wonderful people to live though it all and keep our sanity."



Countee Cullen

Schomburg Ctr.



Jessie Redmon Fauset

Robert S. Lynd & Helen Merrell Lynd
Middletown: A Study in American Culture
 1929

Selected in 1924 as a typical town of "middle America," Muncie, Indiana, was the focus of two sociologists' research into the changes wrought in modernizing America since the late 1890s.

News of the Negroes is given separately in the papers under the title "In Colored Circles." The sense of racial separation appears in widely diverse groups. At a meeting of school principals held at the Y.M.C.A. to arrange for interschool basketball games, one of the Y.M.C.A. secretaries said that any school having a Negro on its team could not play in the Y.M.C.A. building, but would have to play in the high school. In answer to mild protest he said simply, "Well, you know, it's the sentiment here." And so it stood.



State Library & Archives of Florida

Ruins of a burned African American home, Rosewood, Florida, 1923

Editorials on the Rosewood, Florida, race riot White & black newspapers, January 1923*

After a white woman accused a black man of assault, white mobs in the hundreds attacked the black residents of Rosewood over seven days, killing six, injuring many, and leaving the town destroyed.

Words cannot express the horror of the tragedy at Sumner and Rosewood in Levy [County]. A brutish negro made a criminal assault on an unprotected white girl. As a result of this, two officers of the law were killed and another wounded. Five or six negroes were killed and many others wounded. Houses were burned, indignation, vengeance and terror ran riot. We do not know how to write about it. We feel too indignant just now to write with calm judgment and we shall wait a little while. One thing, however, we shall say now—in whatever state it may be, law or no law, courts or no courts—as long as criminal assaults on innocent women continue, lynch law will prevail, and bl[ood] will be shed.

___ *Daily Sun*, Gainesville, Florida, Jan. 6, 1923
WHITE

We do not write in justification of lynch law for offenses like murder or arson or crimes like that. We believe the law should take its course and that patience should prevail even with what [we] are pleased to call “the law’s delays.” Preach and admonish and warn as you may, however, the crime of rape will never be tolerated for one single moment. Congressmen may rave and froth and pass laws as they please but the time will never come when a southern white man will not avenge a crime against innocent womanhood. Nor will the men of the north tolerate it any more than the men of the south.

___ *Daily Sun*, Gainesville, Florida, Jan. 7, 1923
WHITE

We have visited the crime of one on the members of a race. . . . Now that the senseless passion has been gratified, and an awful revenge has been taken, we are content to settle down to a period of quiet. But we will not admit that we are anything but a Christian and civilized people.

___ *Tampa Daily Times*, Florida, Jan. 9, 1923
WHITE

Three hundred years of slavery did not drive all slaves into abject submission, nor will continued oppression kill out our determination to sell life dearly, even down in Florida. . . . Man created in God’s image will always choose to die face to the fore—whenever it is sufficiently clear that he may not live in peace. . . . We cannot establish rights by fighting. But how under Heaven can we urge our people to die like sheep. . . . How can we ask them to be cowards? We cry aloud for mercy and the answer is the torch! We call for justice and are answered by the yells of the mob! Maybe it is the will of Providence that we shall be spared the worst working out of hate, but we fear it is not to be!

___ *The Call*, Kansas City, Jan. 12, 1923
BLACK

Things have come to the place in this country that the only course for the Negro is armed resistance. The states refuse to protect us against the mob and the federal Congress has washed its hands of all anti-lynching legislation. Lynchers are free to prowl the earth and butcher any Negro who gets in their path. The only way for the black man then is to keep his powder dry and shoot back. . . . It was a much needed lesson in race solidarity that these southern Negroes at Rosewood gave to their brothers in the North.

___ *Pittsburgh American*, Jan. 19, 1923
BLACK

* Maxine D. Jones, et al. [Florida A & M University, Florida State University, University of Florida], *Documented History of the Incident Which Occurred at Rosewood, Florida, in January 1923. Submitted to the Florida Board of Regents, December 22, 1993, 1993.*

— “IS LYNCHING EVER DEFENSIBLE?” —

THE FORUM ■ December 1926 ■ EXCERPTS

The Forum, a monthly magazine of commentary, regularly invited essays on controversial issues of the day. In December 1926 it published essays by two Tennessee white men on the question “Is lynching ever defensible?” While not defending the crime, attorney George Chamlee (later a defense attorney for the Scottsboro Boys) attempted to explain “Judge Lynch” to nonsoutherners—the lynch mentality stoked by southern whites’ deep-seated racial fears. Newspaperman John Fort countered that lynching is never defensible, destroys racial progress, and threatens the “thin veneer” of human civilization.

“The Motives of Judge Lynch”

GEORGE W. CHAMLEE
Tennessee county prosecutor

At the very outset I must say by way of further preface that in my term of office I have on four different occasions assisted sheriffs in the prevention of the formation of mobs. . . .

. . . the crime of lynching must be approached carefully or else discussion turns into incessant invective, so bitter than it overlooks the frequent and more ghastly crime perpetrated by the individual against whom “swift vengeance” was launched. Frequently this unreasoning criticism is carried to such an extent that it would make a martyr of a foul murderer or ravisher [rapist]. . . .

. . . I suspect that underneath all such outbursts there smolders the lurking, ever-present fear of violation (legal or forcible) of white womanhood by the Negro. . . . Such antagonism, so far as the real Southern man is concerned, is not economic, though that assertion is sometimes made. The statement might be true of East St. Louis, but not of Milledgeville, Georgia, nor of Chattanooga, Tennessee. It is founded upon and nourished solely by the dread of “social equality,” with intermarriage between the races as its ultimate consequence. I say this, believing that few Southern men would feel any special prejudice against social equality of the Negro, if this did not necessitate the same equality with white women. . . .

. . . The North does not realize that the Southern white men in the rural communities have a special haunting uneasiness about leaving their homes unprotected, even though all the statistics in the world may show such fears ungrounded. Northern women are prone to be scornful of their Southern sisters, dependent upon male escorts. We of the South are not. . . .

As I understand the motives of the mob, they sprang from a deep-seated racial solidarity of purpose together with strong environmental prejudices. In such affairs, let it be again remembered, it is not the daughter of any one man who is violated, rather she becomes the daughter of the community. Men forget church affiliations, social strata, and political views when they are swept into an age-old channel of racial feeling, with a flare of primitive vengeance for the crossing of its borders.

“The Mind of the Lynching Mob”

JOHN P. FORT
Tennessee newspaperman

Lynching affords the spectacle of a number of persons with a common urge to the shedding of blood, bound together by such a unity of purpose that they become as if welded into one personality. Such phenomena have been one of humanity’s worst foes. . . .

. . . one has to remember that the southern communities have their own special problem in the presence of an alien race, which is potentially taboo. Such contacts are prone to provoke ancient group fears. Given special incentive—particularly in matters affecting violation, or a gesture toward violation, of the fundamental sex taboo between such races—the “mob murder” occurs. . . .

Considering the problem generally, one finds that lynching, wherever it happens, results from supposed “insult” to the group mind. This insult to the collective consciousness—which has been specially well developed in certain localities—may be a real or a fancied offense. Lynching mobs not only commit horrible crimes, but, by involving a group, destroy racial progress. They offer opportunity for that shedding of responsibility which is the dividing line between man and animal. Their existence is a distressing commentary upon the progress of a community or section, the stripping of a thin veneer from the hidden animal that should have been long tamed.

The real victim in all lynchings is of a certainty the law. It has been much covered by platitudes, but this same law is perhaps man’s finest creation. . . .

The theory that a crime must be perpetrated for the curing of a crime is of the abyss. Lynching is indefensible from the viewpoint of the individual in that it deprives him of the right to be heard in his own defense and more than all else destroys the effectiveness of orderly judgment divorced from the passion of the moment. But it involves much more. Its stigma dyes the community, the section, and even the nation. It is society that shudders. The best instincts of humanity collectively sense the backward swing of the pendulum. Age-old memories of a past filled with blind, unreasoned punishments are revived with all their horror.

Walter F. White
*Rope and Faggot: A Biography
of Judge Lynch, 1929*

Some years ago in a novel [*The Fire in the Flint, 1924*] I ventured to put into the mouth of one of the characters, a Southern white lawyer, what seemed to me a simple and truthful statement to the effect that not in all the lynchings where rape or attempted rape was alleged had such a crime actually occurred. Down upon me tumbled an amazing volume of abuse from small-town newspapers of the South. One of them, a Georgia daily, indignantly asserted that the South is the most law-abiding section of the United States, and, a few paragraphs later, invited me to visit Georgia and see what "Southern gentlemen do to those who slander the fair name of Southern womanhood." . . .

. . . Despite the evidence of the figures showing that only a small percentage of lynched Negroes were even accused of rape, the vast majority of whites in the states where lynching are most frequently staged really believe that most mob murders are the results of sex crimes.

Langston Hughes
"The South"
The Crisis, June 1922

The lazy, laughing South
With blood on its mouth;
The sunny-faced South,
 Beast-strong,
 Idiot-brained;
The child-minded South
Scratching in the dead fire's ashes
For a Negro's bones.
 Cotton and the moon,
 Warmth, earth, warmth,
 The sky, the sun, the stars,
 The magnolia-scented South;
Beautiful, like a woman,
Seductive as a dark-eyed whore,
 Passionate, cruel,
 Honey-lipped, syphilitic—
 That is the South.
And I, who am black, would love her
But she spits in my face;
And I, who am black,
Would give her many rare gifts
But she turns her back upon me;
 So now I seek the North—
 The cold-faced North,
 For she, they say,
 Is a kinder mistress,
And in her house my children
May escape the spell of the South.

**"Negro Lynched at Roxboro
Was Wrong Man, Says Boss"
The Raleigh [NC] Independent, July 17, 1920**

Ed. Roach, the Negro who was lynched by a Person County mob last Wednesday morning, was innocent of the crime for which he died, according to a signed statement made by Nello Taylor, widely known contractor and employer of the mob victim.

The infuriated mob, in the opinion of the contractor, made a ghastly mistake when they dragged Roach from the Person County jail, hanged him to the churchyard tree and riddled his body with bullets, while the brute who committed the crime was allowed to escape.

"When this Negro was lynched," Mr. Taylor says in his statement, "as innocent a man was murdered as would have been had you or I been the victim of the mob." . . .

I am advised by the chief of police, he asked what they had him for and told them he had not done anything, but he was not told until he got in jail what they had him for. He denied it and told the little girl when she was brought in that she was mistaken: he was not the man, so the sheriff informs me. He asked to be taken by my office to see my superintendent with whom I had arranged to carry him to the doctor, but permission was refused him. He had been working for me off and on for two years and on this particular work since November 1, 1919, and was in every way a straightforward inoffensive Negro. His life has been taken for something he knew absolutely nothing about.

I make this statement in the interest of truth and justice and with a full knowledge of the odium I am bringing down upon my own head in doing so, but with the hope that his fearful crime may shock our people as to make its like again an impossibility.

[In its October 1920 issue, the *Crisis* reprinted the statement of Nello Teer ("Taylor" was likely a reporting error) in a piece entitled "The Scape Goat."]



W. B. Williams, *The Messenger*, July 1919 (A. Philip Randolph, editor)
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture/NYPL



Lynching, Marion, Indiana, August 7, 1930
Indiana Historical Society

M. G. Allison
"The Lynching Industry—1920"
The Crisis, February 1921

During the year 1920 there were 69 persons lynched in the United States; of these lynchings 60 were Negroes, of whom one was a woman, and 9 were white men. Compared with the year 1919 this record shows a decrease of 17 among Negroes and an increase of 5 among white people.

The record for 1920 follows:

- January 14—Floral, Alabama, Jack Waters, shot; attacking woman.
 - February 5—Pine Bluff, Ark., unknown Negro; murder.
 - February 5—Osceola, Ark., W. E. Hansel (white); burned by unidentified robbers.
 - March 4—Pike City, Ga., Cornelius Alexander.
 - March 11—Montgomery County, Ala., William Smith, shot; attacking girl.
 - March 30—Maysville, Ky., Grant Smith; attacking girl.
 - April 1—Laurens, S.C., George Robertson; cutting boys in dispute.
 - April 8—Laurens, S.C., James Steward; injuring men in fight.
 - April 20—Pittsburg, Kan., Albert Evans, assault.
 - May 8—Beaumont, Tex., Charles Arling, flogged to death; threatening man.
 - June 15—Duluth, Minn., Isaac McGhee, Elmer Jackson, Nat Green; attacking girl.
 - June 21—Rincon, Ga., Philip Gaithers, shot; murder.
 - June 30—Wharton, Tex., Washington Giles and brother, shot, and Jodie Gordan and Elijah Anderson, hanged; murder.
 - July 2—Paris, Tex., Irving and Herman Arthur, burned; murder.
- [List continues.]

Mary Church Terrell
Testimony before the Senate
Judiciary Committee on the Dyer
Anti-Lynching Bill, March 1926

But I have come to speak in the interest of the white women of the South. We all know what heredity is. We must believe in heredity. And I maintain that white women who apply the torch to burn colored men—as they have done more than once—when they become the mothers of children, those children undoubtedly will be brutalized, and I think it is going to be more and more difficult to stop lynching, as has been suggested here, because the white mothers of the South are becoming more and more brutalized by these lynchings in which they themselves participate.



The Crisis, August 1920
reprinted from *New Orleans States* and *Jackson* [MS] *Daily News*
Modernist Journals Project

James Weldon Johnson
Black Manhattan
1930

It has often been stated as axiomatic that if Negroes were transported to the

North in large numbers, the race problem with all of its acuteness and inflexibility would be transferred with them. Well, more than two hundred thousand Negroes live in the heart of Manhattan, nearly a hundred thousand more than live in any Southern city, and do so without race friction. These two hundred thousand Negroes have made themselves an integral part of New York citizenry. They have achieved political independence and without fear vote for either Republicans, Democrats, Socialists, or Communists. . . .

The Negro in New York still has far, very far yet, to go and many, very many things yet to gain. He still meets with discriminations and disadvantages. But New York guarantees her Negro citizens the fundamental rights of citizenship and protects them in the exercise of those rights. Possessing the basic rights, the Negro in New York ought to be able to work through the discriminations and disadvantages. His record beginning with the eleven [blacks in the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam—New York City—in 1626] three hundred years ago proves that he can; and he will.

Reinhold Niebuhr
Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, 1929

Niebuhr, one of the most influential American Protestant theologians, pastored a small Detroit congregation in the 1920s.

[1927] Our city race commission has finally made its report after months of investigation and further months of deliberation on our findings. It has been a rare experience to meet with these white and colored leaders and talk over our race problems. The situation which the colored people of the city face is really a desperate one, and no one who does not spend real time in gathering the facts can have any idea of the misery and pain which exists among these people, recently migrated from the south and unadjusted to our industrial civilization. Hampered both by their own inadequacies and the hostility of a white world they have a desperate fight to keep body and soul together, to say nothing of developing those amenities which raise life above the brute level.

I wish that some of our romanticists and sentimentalists could sit through a series of meetings where the real social problems of a city are discussed. They would be cured of their optimism. A city which is built around a productive process and which gives only casual thought and incidental attention to its human problems is really a kind of hell. Thousands in this town are really living in torment while the rest of us eat, drink and make merry. What a civilization!



“Great Scot! What Have I Done?”
The Chicago Defender (black newspaper), Feb. 17, 1923



“The South Will Soon Be Demanding Restriction of Migration of Its Labor,” *Chicago Tribune* (white newspaper), May 10, 1923

Walter F. White
"Chicago and Its Eight Reasons"
The Crisis, October 1919

In what is called the "Red Summer" of 1919, devastating race riots took place in more than thirty towns and cities across the United States. Walter White, assistant secretary of the NAACP, investigated the causes of one of the most serious outburst of violence, the Chicago riot in which nearly forty people were killed and hundreds injured.

Many causes have been assigned for the three days of race rioting, from July 27 to 30 in Chicago, each touching some particular phase of the general condition that led up to the outbreak. Labor union officials attribute it to the action of the [meat]packers, while the packers are equally sure that the unions themselves are directly responsible. The city administration feels that the riots were brought on to discredit the Thompson forces [Chicago mayor], while leaders of the anti-Thompson forces, prominent among them being State's Attorney Maclay Hoyne, are sure that the administration is directly responsible.

In this manner charges and countercharges are made, but, as is usually the case, the Negro is made to bear the brunt of it all—to be "the scapegoat." A background of strained race relations brought to a head more rapidly through political corruption, economic competition, and clashes due to the overflow of the greatly increased colored population into sections outside of the so-called "Black Belt," embracing the Second and Third Wards, all of these contributed, aided by magnifying of Negro crime by newspapers, to the formation of a situation where only a spark was needed to ignite the flames of racial antagonism. That spark was contributed by a white youth when he knocked a colored lad off a raft at the 29th Street bathing beach and the colored boy was drowned.

Four weeks spent in studying the situation in Chicago, immediately following the outbreaks, seem to show at least eight general causes for the riots, and the same conditions, to a greater or less degree, can be found in almost every large city with an appreciable Negro population. These causes, taken after a careful study in order of their prominence, are:

1. Race Prejudice.
2. Economic Competition.
3. Political Corruption and Exploitation of Negro Voters.
4. Police Inefficiency.
5. Newspaper Lies about Negro Crime
6. Unpunished Crimes Against Negroes.
7. Housing.
8. Reaction of Whites and Negroes from War.



Soldiers guarding a vandalized house, Chicago, 1919 (detail)
Chicago Daily News/Library of Congress

Gerold T. Robinson, "Racial Minorities"
in H. E. Stearns, ed., *Civilization in the United States: An Inquiry by Thirty Americans*, 1922

Robinson, a history professor at Columbia University in New York City, was one of the thirty scholars and specialists whose views were invited by Stearns for his overview of "civilization in the United States" after World War I.

Since America has deprived the Negro of the opportunity to grow up as an African, and at the same time has denied him the right to grow up as a white man, it is not surprising that a few daring spirits among the Negroes have been driven at last to the conclusion that there is no hope for their race except in an exodus from the white man's culture and the white man's continent. The war did a great deal to prepare the way for this new movement; the Negroes of America heard much talk of democracy not meant for their ears; their list of wrongs was lengthened, but at the same time their economic power increased; and many of them learned for the first time what it meant to fight back. Some of them armed themselves, and began to talk of taking two lives for one when the lynching mob came. Then trouble broke in Chicago and Washington—and the casualties were not all of one sort. Out of this welter of unrest and rebellion new voices arose, some of them calling upon the Negro workers to join forces with their white brothers; some fierce and vengeful, as bitterly denunciatory of socialism and syndicalism as of everything else that had felt the touch of the white man's hand; some intoxicated, ecstatic with a new religion, preaching the glory of the black race and the hope of the black exodus.



Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture/New York Public Library

United Negro Improvement Assn. (UNIA) parade, Harlem, New York City, 1924 (detail)

Marcus Garvey "The True Solution of the Negro Problem" 1922

Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association was an incarnation of the Back to Africa movement promoted by various black leaders since emancipation. While the UNIA saw rapid growth, its momentum was stalled by Garvey's increasingly extreme stands that alienated Du Bois and other black leaders, and with his 1923 conviction for mail fraud in promoting his Black Star shipping line.

As far as Negroes are concerned, in America we have the problem of lynching, peonage and disfranchisement. In the West Indies, South and Central America we have the problem of peonage, serfdom, industrial and political governmental inequality. In Africa we have, not only peonage and serfdom, but outright slavery, racial exploitation and alien political monopoly. We cannot allow a continuation of these crimes against our race. As four hundred million men, women and children, worthy of the existence given us by the Divine Creator, we are determined to solve our own problem, by redeeming our Motherland Africa from the hands of alien exploiters and found there a government, a nation of our own, strong enough to lend protection to the members of our race scattered all over the world, and to compel the respect of the nations and races of the earth. Do they lynch English-men, Frenchmen, Germans or Japanese? No. And Why? Because these people are represented by great governments, mighty nations and empires, strongly organized. Yes, and ever ready to shed the last drop of blood and spend the last penny in the national treasury to protect the honor and integrity of a citizen outraged anywhere.

Until the Negro reaches this point of national independence, all he does as a race will count for naught, because the prejudice that will stand out against him even with his ballot in his hand, with his industrial progress to show, will be of such an overwhelming nature as to perpetuate mob violence and mob rule, from which he will suffer, and which he will not be able to stop with his industrial wealth and with his ballot. . . .

If the Negro were to live in this Western Hemisphere for another five hundred years he would still be outnumbered by other races who are prejudiced against him. He cannot resort to the government for protection for government will be in the hands of the majority of the people who are prejudiced against him, hence for the Negro to depend on the ballot and his industrial progress alone, will be hopeless as it does not help him when he is lynched, burned, jim-crowed and segregated. The future of the Negro therefore, outside of Africa, spells ruin and disaster.

A. Philip Randolph Editorial Comments *The Messenger*, Dec. 1924

Randolph was a union founder and black activist who created the *Messenger* in 1917 with Owen Chandler to publish literary work of the Harlem Renaissance and to provide a voice for socialist, pro-labor, and black progressive opinion. Opposed to Garvey's UNIA, Randolph initiated a "Garvey Must Go" campaign through the *Messenger*.

A Tragical Nuisance

It was a disgusting spectacle to see Marcus Garvey out on the streets during the campaign telling Negroes not to vote for Dr. Chas. H. Roberts, the Negro candidate for Congress on the Republican ticket, on the grounds that the time was not ripe to send a Negro to Congress. Think of it! While he had the right to oppose Roberts or anybody else he chose to, think of the silly, inane, foolish, childish, and asinine reason he gave. Truly Garvey is the worst menace the Negro has ever had in America.

The A. F. of L.'s Convention

At the coming A. F. of L. [American Federation of Labor] Convention in El Paso, Texas, the Negro workers should begin again their drive to get the Federation to go on record for a vigorous campaign for the organization of the Negro workers into the trade union movement. . . . The Negro workers can depend on support from the delegation from the International Ladies' Garment Workers, the United Cloth Hat and Cap Makers' Union, the International Fur Workers' Union, the Bakers' and Painters' Unions of New York City and Brooklyn. But even if they don't get any support from anybody, they should go to the bat and carry the fight to the floor for recognition as the industrial equals of their white brothers. It is not sufficient merely for Negroes to condemn the white workers for their economic ills, for they are not altogether guiltless themselves.

Wait and See

Now let us see what Mr. Coolidge will do for our colored Republican brethren. What will he do about segregation in the Departments at Washington? What will the party do about a federal law against lynching? What sort of responsible posts will be appoint negroes to, or will he appoint them to any?

[Editorial comments appeared in a different order in the 1924 Messenger.]



TWENTY YEARS AGO



AND TODAY

Leslie Rogers, "Too Powerful to Keep Out," (captions: "Twenty Years Ago"; "And Today") *The Chicago Defender* (black newspaper), Sept. 13, 1924

Washington, D. C., April 19.—The crowd which packed the gallery Monday for the opening of the 71st congress displayed more than the usual amount of curiosity always attendant upon this most important national event. There was much craning of necks, a hum of questions and answers and an air of expectancy which increased as the time of opening approached. The flurry seemed directed toward the business of getting a good look at the new member-elect, Oscar DePriest, of Illinois, and seeing him take the oath making him the first congressman of his Race since 1901.

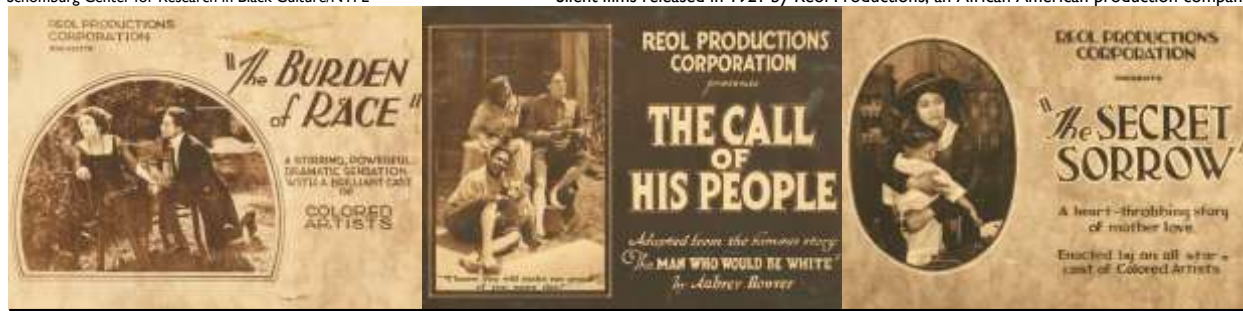
The Chicago Defender, April 20, 1929

The New York Times, April 16, 1929

De Priest, Negro, Takes House Seat.
WASHINGTON, April 15 (AP).—The appearance today of Oscar De Priest, a negro, who was elected by Chicago Republicans to fill the seat of the late Martin B. Madden, was the first time in twenty-eight years a member of his race has been in the House. He took a seat near the rear of the chamber with the Republicans, and was sworn in along with four other members of the House who still face contests over their seats. One gallery was crowded with negroes who earlier in the day had called at the office of Representative De Priest.

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture/NYPL

Silent films released in 1921 by Reol Productions, an African American production company



Walter Lionel George
*Hail Columbia!: Random Impressions
of a Conservative English Radical, 1921*

W. L. George was an English writer, a lover of America, and a social liberal, despite the tongue-in-cheek subtitle of *Hail Columbia!*, a memoir of his 1920 travels throughout the U.S. While in “a little town in Alabama,” he reflected on the changing image and self-image of American blacks.

So long as the negro was either a slave or a man of very low earning power, he did not make a difficulty [for southern whites]. But if we consider that, since the Civil War, the houses in possession of the negroes have passed from twelve thousand to six hundred thousand, the wealth they own from twenty million dollars to eleven hundred million dollars, that in those days only ten percent could read and write whereas now eighty percent can do so, that negroes now operate insurance companies with assets of three and a half millions, and have sixty millions of policies in force, that there are seventy-two negro banks—one realizes that here is a movement made infinitely more serious by material wealth and educational power.

For the movement is not going to stop. The negro is acquiring pride. Whereas in the old days white blood was admired and a quadroon given the front pew in church, now colored opinion turns against the girl who consorts with a white man. The negro may be kept back publicly, but he cannot be kept back financially and commercially, because business knows no colors. . . . Is it not possible that, when the negro comes into the fullness of his power and his wealth, there will be white people ready to kowtow to him because he is rich? just as today they kowtow to other white men, overlook their [ethnic/family] extraction if they happen to be rich. If they do, social life will grow immensely complicated. Collisions and race feeling are quite intense enough when the negro is poor; they will become violent when he is rich.

Alain Locke, “Harlem”
in special Harlem issue of
Survey Graphic, March 1925

If we were to offer a symbol of what Harlem has come to mean in the short span of twenty years it would be another statue of liberty on the landward side of New York. It stands for a folk-movement which in human significance can be compared only with the pushing back of the western frontier in the first half of the last century, or the waves of immigration which have swept in from overseas in the last half. Numerically far smaller than either of these movements, the volume of migration is such none the less that Harlem has become the greatest Negro community the world has known—without counterpart in the South or in Africa. But beyond this, Harlem represents the Negro’s latest thrust towards Democracy. . . .

When the racial leaders of twenty years ago spoke of developing race-pride and stimulating race-consciousness, and of the desirability of race solidarity, they could not in any accurate degree have anticipated the abrupt feeling that has surged up and now pervades the awakened centers. Some of the recognized Negro leaders and a powerful section of white opinion identified with “race work” of the older order have indeed attempted to discount this feeling as a “passing phase,” an attack of “race nerves,” so to speak, an “aftermath of the war,” and the like. It has not abated, however, if we are to gauge by the present tone and temper of the Negro press, or by the shift in popular support from the officially recognized and orthodox spokesmen to those of the independent, popular, and often radical type who are unmistakable symptoms of a new order. It is a social disservice to blunt the fact that the Negro of the Northern centers has reached a stage where tutelage, even of the most interested and well-intentioned sort, must give place to new relationships, where positive self-direction must be reckoned with in ever increasing measure.



Cartoonist: Frank Hanely

The New Yorker, March 28, 1925
Reproduced by permission of the *New Yorker*.