

THE REVEREND J. EDWARD PRYOR

The Patriotism of the Negro

May 4, 1917

African Americans had served in every war fought by the United States since the American Revolution in the late eighteenth century. World War I was no exception. As one black minister reminded his readers in the black West Virginia weekly, the McDowell Times, there was no cause for whites to question black loyalty during the Great War.

There seems to be much discussion these days, throughout the country, concerning the Patriotism of the Negro; and what can reasonably be expected of him, during this crucial period of the country's history. Why there should be any question or doubt as to his loyalty, or patriotism, my readers must answer for themselves, as it is not the purpose of these articles to discuss such things at this time, but rather to enlighten those who have no proper conception of the Negro's patriotism and loyalty to his country.

The silence of many of our prominent leaders, and the silence of our people in general, has been in some instances magnified to mean, that we are listless and unconcerned about the country's welfare, and that we harbor resentment because of past conditions, and see in the present condition of things an opportunity to register our protest by being disloyal to our country's best interests. Now they who would place us in any such light, or harbor any such view of our people, must be intensely cruel and utterly devoid of all knowledge of our people and their history. I am sure there can be no question about our patriotism, unless it be found among those who, by their own assumption of exclusiveness, have studiously and purposely blinded their eyes to every evidence of our progress and all the glorious record of loyalty and faithful devotion to the country's best interests under the most trying circumstances that have confronted any people in the world's history. To question the Negro's patriotism is the worst slan-

der that can be brought against the race, and for this cause alone we cherish the opportunity to use our limited powers in giving the public a clearer view of his patriotism....

W. E. B. DU BOIS

Close Ranks

July 1918

W. E. B. Du Bois's advice to African Americans to "forget our special grievances" for the duration of the war was uncharacteristic of the civil rights leader and proved highly controversial in many black communities. In practice, regardless of what Du Bois advised, many black Americans supported the war effort and simultaneously pressed ahead with their struggle for equal rights.

This is the crisis of the world. For all the long years to come men will point to the year 1918 as the great Day of Decision, the day when the world decided whether it would submit to military despotism and an endless armed peace—if peace it could be called—or whether they would put down the menace of German militarism and inaugurate the United States of the World.

We of the colored race have no ordinary interest in the outcome. That which the German power represents today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and all darker races for equality, freedom and democracy. Let us not hesitate. Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy. We make no ordinary sacrifice, but we make it gladly and willingly with our eyes lifted to the hills.

THE NEW REPUBLIC

Negro Conscription

October 20, 1917

'The participation of African Americans in the nation's armed forces—whether voluntary or by conscription—proved worrisome to many southern whites, who feared that military experience would foster a new spirit of independence and a willingness to challenge the existing racial order. The New Republic, a liberal white journal, posed the issue starkly, calling on the white South to improve relations between the races.'

The South is not altogether easy over the conscription of the Negro. The withdrawal of a considerable fraction of the supply of farm labor is embarrassing just now when the pull of the North upon Negro labor is intensified by the drying up of the flow of immigration from Europe. The assembling at mobilization points of large numbers of lusty young blacks accustomed to no other discipline than that of the plantation quite naturally gives occasion for concern. But what chiefly disturbs the South is the probable effect upon the Negro population of the return of the men who have served their campaigns. Will the Negro be the same kind of man when he is mustered out as he was when he was mustered in? Will he accept the facts of white supremacy with the same spirit as formerly? Or will he have acquired a new sense of independence that will make of him a fomenter of unrest among his people?

There are some indeed who dismiss southern anxiety as quite groundless. The Negro problem, they assert, will present the same aspect after the war as before it, whether Negro soldiers serve in France or not. But this is to ignore all the teaching of experience. The South is quite justified in its belief that war will affect the habit of mind and the behavior of the men who engage in it. The Russian peasant who has fought in Galicia is a quite different being from the timid, abject creature who filled the black lands before the war. He makes a very restive mount for the lords of the earth, as his record in the revolution demonstrates. The German peasant too appears to be changing under the influence of his military experience. The German

aristocracy is not so certain as once it was that "Hans bleibt immer Hans."* Unrest among the masses of the working population of England and France is no remote contingency. At all events there are defenders of the existing order in both countries who express grave concern over what will happen when the soldiers return to civil life. In so far as institutions, political or social, are based upon fear they are likely to be challenged by the returned soldier. After facing death in its most hideous forms on the field of battle, will a man cower before a black look, shrink from a threatened blow?

If England and France and America are in no serious danger of political or social disturbances when the soldiers return, this is because the fundamental institutions of those countries are not founded upon the exploitation of fear. Obedience to the law, except in sporadic instances, rests upon a general recognition of social utility, not upon fear of the police. We leave their possessions to the privileged, not because they hold the keys to the jail, but because the system that produces them serves the social purpose better than any other system we have been able to devise. We may expect that the system will be subjected to severer popular scrutiny after the war. We may expect it will have to undergo many modifications. The government and the employers may be required to show cause why they should permit crises of unemployment to arise. Hours of labor, scales of wages, sanitary and safety arrangements, provisions for disability and superannuation, may be overhauled. All this may give rise to some embarrassment to the lords of the earth, and to much murmuring. But in the long run they will find the new order as satisfactory as the old. They claim title by virtue of service; they cannot object seriously to a more precise definition of their obligation to serve.

Do the relations between blacks and whites in the South rest upon mutual service, or does the social system of the South rest upon fear? Southerners themselves are far from unanimous on this point. There is a type of southerner who swears that the proper function of the white man is to keep the fear of God or Devil in the breast of the black. There is another type of southerner who conceives the function of the white man as that of guide and protector of the black man. The latter, to judge rather by general effects than by expressed opinions, is the prevailing type. Relations between the races are generally far more cordial than could possibly be the case if the southern social system were based wholly, or even chiefly, upon fear.

The New Republic, 12, no. 155 (20 Oct. 1917): 317-18.

*"Hans will always be Hans."

The southern white profits by the labor of the black and he gives service in return. The Negroes of the South, we may well believe, are better off than they would be in a black republic. It does not follow that they are so well off as they ought to be. It does not follow that the whites are performing to the full the obligation they owe. Grant that the South has done much for the Negro; it has not done enough. The northern white will have to give more service in return for his privileges, just as the Prussian aristocrat, the French and British and American factory owners will have to give more. This is a necessary consequence of a war that stirs democracy to its greatest depths.

There is much that the South ought to have done for the Negro that it has not done. It ought to have put down the temperamental Negro bailer, the man who goes out of his way "to put the nigger in his place," acting on a psychology more crude and stupid and brutal than the worst Prussia can exhibit. The South ought to have assumed greater responsibility for the Negro's civil and economic welfare. The best men of the South know that there are cormorants of sharp business preying upon the Negroes. They know that the Negro is handicapped when he buys land and when he sells it; that he is handicapped in every legal transaction; that if he is ambitious, his road to advancement is inhumanly steep and slippery unless he chances to have the personal protection of a white man of the best type. But the men of the best type have not organized for the defense of the legitimate interests of the Negro. They intervene in specific cases of injustice, but they leave untouched institutions that make for injustice.

Conscription of the Negro brings the South face to face with the necessity of overhauling its scheme of racial relationships. It is a necessity that many would avoid. They would be willing to send more of their own sons to battle if their local institutions might remain unchallenged by new problems. But local institutions cannot go forever unchallenged. Is the South willing to admit that white supremacy cannot rest on any sounder foundation than fear? If it can rest on service, the problems arising out of Negro conscription cannot be insoluble.

LEON A. SMITH

Protest to Boston Herald

April 20, 1918

During the era of the Great Migration, black Americans wrote numerous letters to the editors of white and black newspapers and periodicals. The Boston Guardian, a black weekly edited by civil rights activist William Monroe Trotter, printed a letter directed to the Boston Herald, a white daily, by a black reader protesting the Herald's use of racist language.

BOSTON, MASS.
APRIL 13, 1918.

Dear Sirs:

As has been my custom for a number of years and is still my custom at the present time, I take your paper daily. In looking through the columns on this morning (Saturday morning, April 13, 1918) on Page 14, it gave me great discomfort and displeasure to see the Colored draftees at Camp Deven, Ayer, Mass., that arrived from Florida termed as "Southern Darkies."

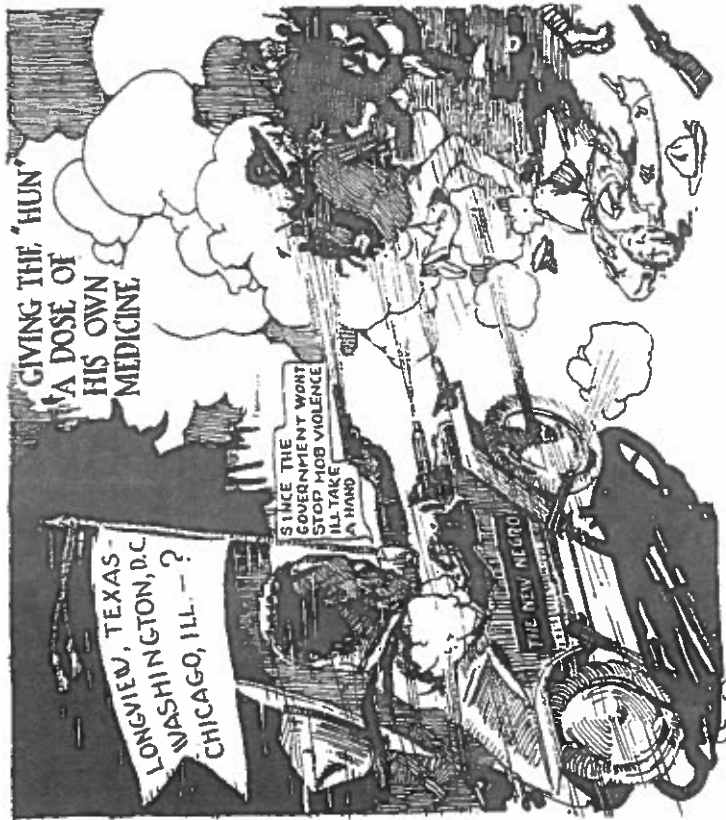
This is a war of democracy. Our boys are in France fighting to uphold America and the good old Stars and Stripes as are the men of the other race. Our boys are in camps training to go to France to do their equal share and bit as are the white boys. If relying on Lincoln's Statement that "All Men Are Created Equal," then why should degrading and insulting statements be cast at us on account of color. We are American citizens as well as the white man and are proud of it. Whether we be from the South or the North or the East or the West we are still American citizens and our boys in uniform are American soldiers.

An early reply from you on this matter will be very appreciative.

Yours truly

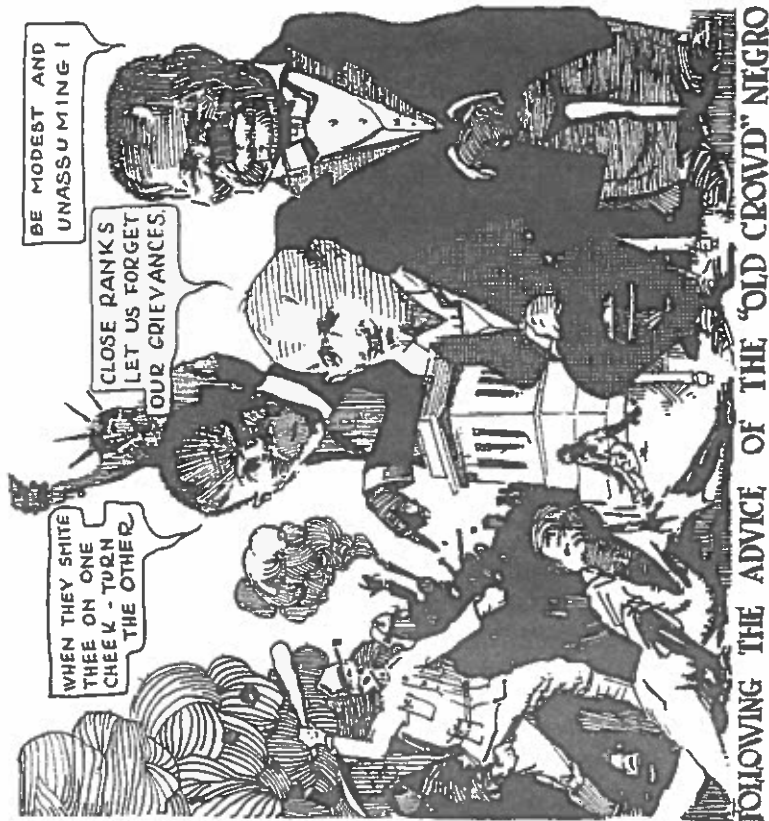
LEON A. SMITH.

Boston Guardian (20 April 1918).



THE "NEW CROWD NEGRO" MAKING AMERICA SAFE FOR HIMSELF

Figure 6. "The New Crowd Negro" heralded the emergence of a "New Negro," termed the *Messenger* magazine, who repudiated what it saw as the accommodationist, gradualist, and cautious approach pursued by many black leaders. The "New Negro" neither turned the other cheek nor suspended the struggle for civil rights during and after the war but instead aggressively challenged white encroachments on black rights and resisted white attacks on black communities. In this cartoon, the white mobs of the 1919 riots are described as the "Hun"—a derogatory term for the Germans during World War I—and the "New Negro" assumes responsibility for the defense of black communities unprotected by white government officials. *The Messenger* (September 1919).



FOLLOWING THE ADVICE OF THE "OLD CROWD" NEGRO

Figure 5. "The Old Crowd Negro" A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, the militant editors of the *Messenger* magazine, an African American monthly, castigated established black leaders, whom they called "the Old Crowd," for their ostensible conservatism and timidity in the face of racial oppression and racial violence. Pictured in the center is civil rights activist and writer W. E. B. Du Bois, whose 1918 "Close Ranks" editorial is mocked. *The Messenger* (September 1919).