



Bound by the Color Line

By W' E' B' DuBOIS

MANY friends of American Negroes would say that we tend to emphasize our problem of race above that of the more basic problems of labor, poverty and ignorance. But to this we would reply that our problems are so fundamentally human that they often underlie the broader but more abstract social problems. Nothing illustrates this better than the history of America where development of work, income and education have had the greatest field for expansion the world has ever known; and yet continually have been hindered from the progress they might have made by problems of race and color which have been, and still form, the central thread of our history.

Despite desperate efforts to rewrite and distort this history, a few of us must recall that in 1776, when three million Americans proclaimed the equality they were at that very hundred thousand and classifying but as real had been built on two of this slavery and the independence which they demanded was mainly freedom to pursue this exploitation of men in raw material and in trade.

When in the War for Independence these slaves threatened to revolt to the English, the American army not only used five thousand of them to win the war but welcomed volunteers from that Haiti which for a half century afterward they refused to recognize as a nation. The emancipation which was implicit in this use of the slave was thereupon begun in the United States, but it was halted in 1820 when the Cotton Kingdom, based on slave labor, together with plans for vaster empires centered in the Caribbean and South America, became backbone and vision of the American economy.

For the next half century the meaning of America was not the winning of the West, nor the development of democracy, as history insists, but a bitter fight as to whether American labor was to be slave or free. It flamed into bloody Civil War: a war caused by Negro slavery and in singular paradox stopped, as Abraham Lincoln himself testified, when two hundred thousand black soldiers reinforced the North and brought emancipation of both white labor and black to a nation that had never wanted it.

Thereupon the nation was faced by the logical contradiction that unless they used slaves as voters they could not control the former slaveholders or hold the United States in permanent union. Black votes and black labor, as well as white, reconstructed the union and attempted to reconstruct democracy, but Northern capital and Southern land monopoly bound Southern labor to the chariot wheels of new free enterprise, which became powerful enough to disfranchise labor. This disfranchised labor was immediately thrown into two antagonistic competing groups by a legal caste of black folk reminiscent of the Middle Ages established by consent of the nation in the center of the twentieth century.

How in such a case could real democracy develop in this land? Remember that tonight in nine states of the Union a meeting like this would be illegal; and that in at least eight other states it would be advisable because of the danger of mob law. Remember that today you cannot in the United States either attack this basic caste or carry out social reform by legal methods because in your way there stands a bloc of 134 electoral votes based on color caste, which makes a third party movement impossible and prevents any clearcut voting on education, economic security or health. It takes 126,000 of your votes to send a representative to Congress but it needs only 44,000 to send such a representative from the South. In Bilbo's Mississippi, 150,000 votes have the same power in the Senate as 6,000,000 votes in New York. These figures are so fantastic that most people do not know them and cannot believe them when they are stated. Yet it remains true that New York's 6,024,597 votes in 1944 elected the same number of Senators that Mississippi elected with 152,712. President Truman, backed by a majority of the voters of the nation, can implement no program of reform as long as the South, with political power based on disfranchisement and caste, can out-count the majority in the presidential election and in Congress.

Thus we Negroes insist that there can be no attack upon social problems by free democratic methods because we have neither freedom nor democracy. We have bound our own hands by the color line entrenched in the rotten boroughs of the South. By the same token the significance of America in the world is not freedom, democracy, education and economic security but rather alliance with colonial imperialism and class dictatorship in order to enforce the denial of freedom to the colored peoples of the world. Whatever may be the sentiment in this room and in this state or even in this section, we cannot tonight for a moment forget that there are millions of Americans of wealth, education and power who believe that the necessity of keeping black men from ever becoming free citizens is more important than the triumph of democracy in the world. Under such circumstances you cannot blame us if we stress, sometimes perhaps unduly, the importance of the Negro problem, not simply for ourselves but for you.