

*THE DISGRACE OF
DEMOCRACY*

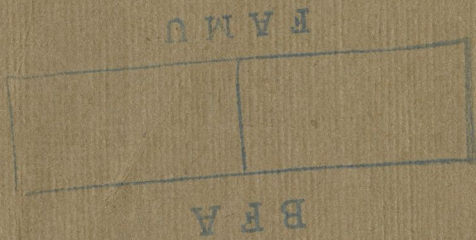


• OPEN LETTER TO
PRESIDENT WOODROW WILSON

BY

KELLY MILLER
HOWARD UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, D. C.

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The DISGRACE of DEMOCRACY

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

suffragists find it necessary to ruthlessly violate the traditional and decorous modes of procedure in order to promote the reform which they have at heart. On one occasion you felt forced to terminate an interview with a committee of suffragists because they persisted in cross-examining the President of the United States.

There are 10,000,000 loyal citizens of African descent in the United States. They are rigorously excluded from a voice in the government by which they are controlled. They have no regularly constituted organ through which to present their case to the powers that be. They have no seat nor voice in the council of the nation. The late Doctor Booker T. Washington was the accepted spokesman and mediator of the race, but he has no successor. Under former administrations there was a small appointive official class of Negroes. Though derisively designated as the "Black Cabinet," they were on the inside of the circle of governmental control to which they had ready access in presenting the claims of the race. But under the exaction of partisan exigencies even these have been excluded from official position under your administration. Several weeks ago a delegation of colored men from the State of Maryland sought an interview with you concerning the horrible crime of East St. Louis. You were good enough to write Senator France that you were too busy with other pressing issues to grant the request of an interview. The failure of all other methods is my only excuse for resorting to an open letter as a means of reaching you and, through you, the nation at large, concerning the just grievances of 10,000,000 loyal American citizens.

The Negro feels that he is not regarded as a constituent part of American democracy. This is our fundamental grievance and lies at the basis of all of the outrages inflicted upon this helpless race. It is the fundamental creed of democracy that no people are good enough to govern any other people without their consent and participation. The English are not good enough to govern the Irish. The Russians are not good enough to govern the Finns. The Germans are not good enough to govern the Belgians. The Belgians are not good

enough to govern the people of the Congo. Men are not considered good enough to govern women. The white people of this country are not good enough to govern the Negro. As long as the black man is excluded from participation in the government of the nation, just so long will he be the victim of cruelty and outrage on the part of his white fellow citizens who assume lordship over him.

These periodic outbreaks of lawlessness are but the outgrowth of the disfavor and despite in which the race is held by public opinion. The evil is so widespread that the remedy lies in the hands of the national government.

Resolutions pending before both houses of Congress look toward investigation of the outrage at East St. Louis. I understand that you are sympathetically disposed toward this investigation by Federal authority. Such investigation is important only to the extent that it implies a tardy recognition of national responsibility for local lawlessness. There is no expectation that any additional comprehensive information will result. You may rest assured that there will be a half dozen similar outbreaks before this investigation is well under way. Indeed, since the East St. Louis atrocity there have already been lynchings in Georgia, Louisiana, Pennsylvania and Montana. Every intelligent American knows as much about the essential cause of this conflict as he will know after long and tedious investigation. The vital issues involved are apt to be obscured by technical wranglings over majority and minority reports. What the nation needs is not investigation of obvious fact, but determination and avowed declaration on the part of the President speaking for the people of the United States to put an end to lawlessness wherever it raises its hideous head.

I know that it has been steadily maintained that the Federal Government has no authority over lynchings and local race conflicts. This is not a political contention. This view was maintained under the administrations of Harrison, Cleveland, McKinley, Roosevelt and Taft. Indeed, President Cleveland, that great American democrat, came nearer recognizing Federal responsibility in such matters than any Presi-

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

that institution might have existed even down to the present time. And so, if lynching could be localized and limited to the Southern States the nation as a whole would have less pretext for interfering. But this cannot be done. Senator Tombs of Georgia boasted that he would call the roll of his slaves under the shadow of the Bunker Hill monument, an ambition which, doubtless, might have been gratified had not the nation arisen in its moral might and blotted out the iniquitous institution altogether. Unless the aroused conscience of the American people, efficiently asserting itself through Federal authority, shall stamp out the spirit of lawlessness, it is easy to prophesy that the Negro will yet be lynched not only in the shadow of the Bunker Hill monument, but on the campus of your beloved Princeton. Already there have been burnings of human beings in the bleeding State of Old John Brown, and in the city where lie the remains of Abraham Lincoln. During the past thirty years nearly 3,000 Negroes have been lynched in various parts of the country. Scores of these have been burned at the stake. Even the bodies of women have been fed to the flames. Thousands of localities in the majority of the States of the Union have experienced these outrages. Our fair land of liberty is blotted over with these foul spots which cannot be washed out by all of the waters of the ocean. It is not easy to calculate the number of persons who have been involved in these lynchings, either as participants or as acquiescent lookers-on, all of whom were potential murderers. So general and widespread has become the practice that lynching may well be characterized as a national institution, to the eternal disgrace of American democracy.

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

and bruised and burned in all parts of the nation and flees to the national government for asylum, to be denied relief on the ground of doubtful jurisdiction. The black man asks for justice and is given a theory of government. He asks for protection and is confronted with a scheme of governmental checks and balances.

Mr. President, you are commander-in-chief of the Army and Navy. You express the voice of the American people in the great world conflict which involves practically the entire human race. You are the accepted spokesman of the world democracy. You have sounded forth the trumpet of democratization of the nations, which shall never call retreat. But, Mr. President, a chain is no stronger than its weakest link. A doctrine that breaks down at home is not fit to be propagated abroad. One is reminded of the pious slaveholder who became so deeply impressed with the plea for foreign missions that he sold one of his slaves to contribute liberally to the cause. Why democratize the nations of the earth if it leads them to delight in the burning of human beings after the manner of Springfield, Waco, Memphis, and East St. Louis while the nation looks helplessly on? You add nothing to the civilization of the world nor to the culture of the human spirit by the technical changes in forms of government. The old adage still remains true:

"For forms of government let fools contest—
What's best administered—is best."

If democracy cannot control lawlessness, then democracy must be pronounced a failure. The nations of the world have a right to demand of us the workings of the institutions at home before they are promulgated abroad. The German press will, doubtless, gloat with ghoulish glee over American atrocities against the Negro. The outrages complained of against the Belgians become merciful performances by gruesome comparison. Our frantic wail against the barbarity of Turk against Armenian, German upon Belgian, Russian upon Jew, are made of no effect. It cannot be said that these outbreaks are but the spontaneous ebullitions of popular feeling,

without governmental sanction or approval. These outrages occur all over the nation. The nation must be responsible for what it permits. Sins of permission are as reprehensible as sins of commission. A few years ago a Turkish ambassador was handed his passports by you for calling attention to the inconsistency between our national practice and performance. The nation was compelled, with a spirit of humiliation, to accept the reproach which he hurled into our teeth: "Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye." Every high-minded American must be touched with a tinge of shame when he contemplates that his rallying cry for the liberation of humanity is made a delusion and a snare by these racial barbarities.

It is needless to attempt to place the blame on the helpless Negro. In the early stages of these outbreaks there was an attempt to fix an evil and lecherous reputation on the Negro race as lying at the basis of lynching and lawlessness. Statistics most clearly refute this contention. The great majority of the outbreaks cannot even allege rapeful assault in extenuation. It is undoubtedly true that there are imbruted and lawless members of the Negro race, as there are of the white race, capable of committing any outrageous and hideous offense. The Negro possesses the imperfections of his status. His virtues as well as his failures are simply human. It is a fatuous philosophy, however, that would resort to cruel and unusual punishment as a deterrent to crime. Lynching has never made one Negro virtuous nor planted the seed of right doing in the mind of a single American citizen. The Negro should be encouraged in all right directions to develop his best manly and human qualities. Where he deviates from the accepted standard he should be punished by due process of law. But as long as the Negro is held in general despite and suppressed below the level of human privilege, just so long will he produce a disproportionate number of imperfect individuals of evil propensity. To regulate the Negro to a status that encourages the baser instincts of humanity, and then denounce him because he does not stand forth as a model

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 good-will 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 dismal 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 short-lived 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

would not slumber forever. Abraham Lincoln is perhaps the only great statesman of democracy who was absolutely consistent in his logical attitude and moral sincerity. The nation believed in his moral integrity. He uttered no word of cryptic meaning. The people heard him gladly because the words that fell from his lips were not the coinage of his intellect, but the mintage of his heart. The embattled hosts under his high command marched to victory with the Battle Hymn of the Republic resounding in their souls:

"As He died to make men holy,
Let us die to make men free——"

To them this phrase had no remote and deferred meaning, but was immediately applicable to their black brother in chains. It was not a barren ideality, but a living impulse. You have given the rallying cry for the present world crisis. But this shibboleth will be robbed of instant meaning and power unless it applies to the helplessness within our own gates. If the sons and grandsons of the heroes who battered down the walls of slavery a half century ago could be made to feel with unreserved certainty a renewal of the moral energy which urged their fathers to that high resolve, they would, with heightened enthusiasm for humanity, demolish the Teutonic bulwarks of oppression across the seas.

Doctrine is more than deeds, if it be sound doctrine. Deeds are the outgrowth of doctrine. Doctrine lives forever with persistent potentiality. Doctrine rules the world or throws it into confusion. The power of words is far greater than the meaning of the author. It makes no difference what lay in the minds or practice of the statesmen of Greece. They planted the seeds of democracy, and all mankind will become the beneficiary of the sowing. The intendment of the signers of the Declaration of Independence boots but little. That document will stand for all time as the gospel of human liberty. When you speak of the democratization of the world and the liberation of mankind, you are setting up a standard to which the whole world must rise in the ages to come, despite its attitude at the present time. It may be far from the

purpose of our present day statesmen to admit the Negro into this democracy on terms of equality with the rest. But in spite of the purpose of this statesmanship, this must be the ultimate goal of human democracy. A democracy of race or class is no democracy at all. It is with projected imagination that the Negro will endure until these high-sounding phrases have borne their full fruition. Any other class of the American people, under the strain of distress to which the Negro has been subjected, would imitate Job's distracted wife, and curse the white God and die. The Negro will neither curse nor die, but grin and live—albeit beneath that grin is a groaning of spirit too deep for utterance. The Negro says to his country, "Though you slay me, yet will I serve you."

The Negro's patriotism is vicarious and altruistic. It seems to be an anomaly of fate that the Negro, the man of all men who is held in despite, should stand out in conspicuous relief at every crisis of our national history. His blood offering is not for himself or for his race, but for his country. This blood flows like a stream through our national history, from Boston Commons to Carrizal. Crispus Attucks was the first American to give his blood as an earnest of American independence. The Negro was with Washington in the dark days of Valley Forge, when the lamp of national liberty flickered almost to extinguishment. The black troops fought valiantly with Jackson behind the fleecy breastworks at New Orleans. Two hundred thousand black boys in blue responded to the call of the immortal Lincoln for the preservation of the Union. The Negro was the positive cause of the Civil War, and the negative cause of the united nation with which we face the world today.

The reckless daring of Negro troops on San Juan Hill marked the turning point in that struggle which drove the last vestige of Spanish power from the Western world. It was but yesterday that we buried with honor at Arlington Cemetery the Negro soldiers who fell face forward while carrying the flag to the farthest point in the heart of Mexico, in quest of the bandit who dared place impious foot on American soil. In complete harmony with this marvelous patriotic record, it

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 deviltry 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 long, 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

concern for the welfare of the race, though of a general and passive character, caused many Negroes to give you their political support. Under the stress and strain of other pressing issues and the partisan demands of your political supporters you have not yet translated this passive purpose into positive performance. There is, however, something of consolation in the fact that while during your entire career you have never done anything constructive for the Negro, you have never done anything destructive against him. Your constructive opportunity is now at hand. The time has come to make lawlessness a national issue, as a war measure if not from any higher consideration. As a patriotic and military necessity, I suggest that you ask the Congress of the United States to invest you with the power to prevent lynching and to quell lawlessness and violence in all parts of the country during the continuance of the war. Or at least you might quicken the conscience of the nation by a stirring message to Congress calling attention to this growing evil which is gnawing at the vitals of the nation. It is entirely probable that before the war is over you will have to resort to some such measure to control internal disturbances on other accounts. It is inconceivable that this nation should spend billions of dollars and sacrifice the lives of millions of its citizens without domestic uprising and revulsion. In such a time it becomes necessary for the President to exercise all but dictatorial power. The country is willing to grant you anything you ask which, in your judgment, would promote the welfare of the nation in this crisis. You asked Congress to grant indiscriminated use of the Panama Canal as a means of securing international good-will and friendship, and it was granted. In face of the impending conflict, you demanded that Congress should grant the eight-hour demand of the laboring men, and it was done. The suffragists who guard your going in and coming out of the White House were duly convicted under process of law, but were immediately pardoned by you to avoid embarrassment in this war emergency. You asked for billions of dollars and millions of lives to be placed at your disposal for the purpose of carrying on the great conflict, and

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 hysterics 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.

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