

Our Semi-Citizens
in
Frank Leslie
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THE GREAT OBJECTION.

NOT THAT HE IS INCOMPETENT BUT
THAT HE "IS A NEGRO."

The Whole Evangel—Why They Vote Solidly—The Good He Accomplished—All He Asks—The Nation's Promise.

Albion W. Tourgee in Frank Leslie's.

The relation of the colored voter of the South to the Government of the United States is not entirely a question of the present, nor does the ultimate result affect alone the citizens of those states in which the race issue has become the absorbing question. It is, in fact, a part of that larger question which runs through all our history—through all the world's history, indeed—concerning the right of one man or class of men to control the actions and destiny of another man or class of men. When such right exists, and how far it may extend, are questions which depend on a multiplicity of considerations, prominent among which are the purpose of the class seeking to exercise such control and the character of the class sought to be subordinated.

In comparing the American Negro with the white man in the United States certain facts must always be kept in mind. The average white American represents the material accumulations of at least a hundred years of American life and opportunity. The surplus of at least three generations, and the experience and unrestricted opportunity of many more, go to make up his inheritance from the past. The Negro inherited only ignorance, poverty, and the woeful memory of unrequited wrong from two hundred years of servitude. The one class of native Americans with whom he can at all fairly be compared in intelligence and progress is the landless, "poor white" population of the South. Even with them comparison is manifestly unjust. Poor as these may have been, they were rich in comparison with the newly-freed slave, and ignorant as they were, the opportunities that opened before them were a thousand fold better than the Negro has enjoyed. Even in comparison with these, no competent observer will deny that the progress of the Negro during the twenty-four years

enjoyed has been immensely greater than that of their white competitors. Probably five times as large a proportion of the Negroes as of the "poor whites" have bought themselves homes during that interval and the universal testimony of the superintendents of education in the Southern states is to the effect that they have increased far more rapidly in intelligence. When we recall the fact that the average rate of wages of the farm laborer throughout the South is hardly ten dollars a month, that the average number of days the public schools are open in those states is less than one hundred per annum, and that in a great portion of this region even these limited opportunities are inaccessible to a large number of the race, it seems little less than a miracle that one-sixth of them are able to read and write; that in one county of South Carolina there are more blacks than whites who can read their ballots, and in the state of Kentucky fewer black than white illiterates. If ability to achieve progress under unfavorable conditions is any test of racial capacity, the American Negro need not fear comparison with any race that ever inhabited the globe.

As a laborer, it is unquestionable that he very greatly excels; both in industry and efficiency, the average white man of the South. Statistics upon this subject are necessarily hard to obtain, but any one who will compare the population of the South with its agricultural production by the counties, will be surprised to see how nearly the amount of the great staples produced corresponds with the ratio of its colored population. All the great cotton counties, and almost all the great tobacco counties of the South, have decided colored majorities. A recent canvass of the leading wood and iron establishments of the South, made by a prominent journal of that section, shows that the Negro is preferred as a common laborer by a majority of them, and is largely employed as a skilled laborer in certain branches.

It is claimed that he is incapable of self-government by reason of his ignorance. This reason would apply with equal force to one-fourth of the white voters of those states, and cannot be accepted as adduced in good faith until it is made to apply to them as well as to the Negro. An ignorant white man is just as unfit to govern as an ignorant Negro, and has not the same claim to representation in the Government because he does not so much need protection in his rights. But even this argument is not necessary to show the insincerity of this claim, since the educated Negro is regarded by those by whom it is made as far more obnoxious, in a political sense, than the ignorant one, while the interdict imposed by those who object to the Negro as a political factor extends not only to the Negro himself, but to the white man who is chosen by their votes.

The Northern man's idea of a healthy South is usually...

the two great political parties. This is just what the Democracy of the South does not want and does its utmost to prevent. A prominent Southern journal recently declared that "next to the control of the states by a purely Negro majority, the worst thing that could happen would be a division of the Southern whites into two great political parties, who should compete with each other for a prepondering portion of the Negro vote." The simple fact is, and every "white-line" Democrat of the South knows it to be so, that if the Negroes were permitted to hold meetings, engage in political discussions, have a "white-man's chance" in the caucuses and conventions of all parties, they would not only divide upon all public questions, but would be able to compel recognition and respect from all parties. The objection to him as a political factor is not because the Negro is ignorant or incapable, but because he is a Negro!

The race issue in politics to-day is simply a re-assertion of the right of a race claiming to be superior to another to control the inferior, which underlay the institution of slavery. Slavery was the broad assertion of the right of each individual of the superior race to control as many individuals of the supposedly inferior race as he might desire to capture or be able to purchase. The position of the "white-line" Democracy of the South is an assertion, not of the individual but of the collective right of the white race to dominate the colored man against his will. "Slavery," as a prominent Mississippi journal recently declared, "was intended solely to promote the comfort and advantage of the white race." In like manner the race issue in politics has for its aim the pecuniary advantage and personal gratification of the white race in those states, regardless of the interests or desires of the colored man. The ultimate purpose of the movement is to keep the Negro dependent and helpless in order that the white man may have his services as a laborer upon terms as nearly on a level with the conditions of slavery as possible. This purpose of continued repression and debasement of the colored race is naively avowed by a leading Southern journal of recent date, in these words:

"The education and advancement of the Negro tends to create rather than to solve the race problem. If the Negroes could be kept *only as laborers* in the cotton, rice, and sugar fields, and in the furnaces and mines of the South, *aspiring to nothing higher*, and not antagonizing the whites in matters political, there would be no race conflict—no race problem."

This is the whole evangel of a "white man's government" in a nut-shell.

Only one thing will raise the ire of the Southern "white-liner" so quickly as the thought of the Negro exercising the power of the citizen, and that is the fear of his emigration. Nothing will stir public in-

dignation so surely in any Southern community as the advent of an emigration agent. In North Carolina, a few months ago, the Legislature was petitioned to make the solicitation of laborers to go to another state a penal offense on the ground that it "demoralized the colored voter;" in other words, compelled the offer of higher wages and the making of contracts more favorable to the laborer. In Mississippi, within six months, the hanging of a colored preacher has been reported in the public press, it being expressly stated that "some of the most respectable gentlemen of two counties took a part" in the transaction, the only reason alleged for the act being that he had "occasioned the planters of that region a great deal of trouble by persuading the Negroes to go to Arkansas by the promise of better wages."

It is frequently claimed that the fact that the Negro votes solidly as a race compels the whites to adopt the same course to prevent Negro domination. It is well to remember that it was the opposition of the Southern Democracy which first compelled the Negro to vote solidly for his own protection. The "whiteliner" Democracy opposed the enfranchisement of the Negro insisted that he should not be allowed to serve on a jury or testify against a white man, even in assertion of his own rights; they enacted for him in some states, even after his emancipation, a special penal code, whose severity would have disgraced the seventeenth century, restricting his personal liberty, making it an offence to leave his employer's plantation without a pass—in short, re-establishing many of the worst features of slavery under the pretense of regulating labor and providing for the public peace. It was to resist such open and avowed opposition to his enjoyment of the privileges of the citizen that the Negro necessarily became a political unit. That he has continued so is a natural result of inveterate and undisguised hostility to his guaranteed rights of citizenship. His quarter of a century of freedom has been to the Negro a constant battle for equal rights. Were he freely accorded political equality—given the same recognition that white man of equal intelligence enjoy—there would be no more slavishness on his part than on the part of the Irish or Germans in communities where they are in the majority at the North. Of course, as long as the Negroes are threatened with disfranchisement, whether by open violence or individual or collective fraud, they must stand together, and at least protest against their own debasement.

The Negro understands perfectly well—better than any white man of the North, indeed—that the bare legal right to vote, however it may be evaded or denied, is in and of itself a bulwark against actual serfdom. Take away the guarantee of national citizenship, abused and defied as it is, and the civil rights of the Negro would be

from him, and he is quickly as they were conferred. Although, in one state at least, he is prohibited from organizing to secure better terms as a laborer, and that, too, in the face of county organizations of employers who fix a maximum of wages, and pledge themselves not to employ any man who has left another's service. That a less intelligent race should vote solidly when their acknowledged constitutional rights are the subject of present attack by a race boasting of its superiority, armed with the power which the land-owning class always has over the landless laborer, is not only natural but in the highest degree creditable to their stamina and intelligence.

It has also been said that the Negro has proved his incapacity for self-government. Hayti and San Domingo are the stock arguments of the negrophobic repressionists. They are unquestionably terrible examples of repression carried past the limit of safety and resulting in overwhelming evil. But the history of Negro rule in Hayti, with all its horrors, has been no worse than Spanish rule in Cuba; and the massacre of San Domingo was only a feebly imitation of the Reign of Terror in France. Massacre and misrule are never justifiable, but the Negro is not especially blamable when he practice the lessons his superiors have taught.

It is asserted, too, that in the brief period during which the Negro was allowed to exercise power as a voter in the Southern States, he showed himself unfit for the functions of government. This probationary period was a brief one. It began in 1868 and ended in 1876. When it began the Negro had been free but three years. He had the advantage of neither education nor experience. Yet the record of eight years is not so bad as one might expect from the examples set before him and the wrongs he had suffered. In the first place he manifested no spirit of revenge. The constitution of 1868 were, as a rule, models in the careful provisions they contained for equality of right, local self-government and economy of administration. The Congress of the United States had set the example of excluding certain classes from the ballot-box because of participation in the rebellion. A majority of the new State government refused to follow this lead, and opened the door to excluded classes. In comparison with this, the system of legislative fraud upon the ballot since inaugurated seems peculiarly atrocious. The very men to whom the Negro freely opened the way to the ballot-box no sooner reached it than they took possession of it by force, declared the ballot to be their exclusive privilege, and fenced the donors out with Winchesters and "bull-whacks." This wholesale violation and subversion of law they now insist shows them to be the superior race.

But we are told that the financial record of this eight years of probation is proof

positive of racial incapacity. It shows unquestioned extravagance and corruption in those governments, but even in New York, where reformers and financiers are peculiarly abundant, whose swarming publicists are always ready to tell just what everybody else ought to do to secure good government, such things are not entirely unknown. The very capitol in which her legislators meet represents an unquestionable steal of many million dollars, and the end is not yet; her lobbyists take rank with her statesmen; her state government is the most cumbrous and costly in the Union, and it is doubtful if in the same eight years of her history more was not filched from her people than in any state of the South during the Negro's probationary term as a citizen.

But if the failure to administer the financial affairs of the state government wisely is to be imputed to the Negro as a racial defect, let us not forget to give him credit for the good things that were accomplished during this period. The public school system, until his advent as a citizen had not even a shadow of existence in but two or three of the states of the South. The "nigger governments" of 1868 for the first time made it an integral part of the fundamental law of those states. They established equality and uniformity of taxation, and overthrew a barbarous and bloody penal system which was a disgrace to American civilization. They introduced the township system of local self-government or its equivalent in most of these states; they abolished all property qualifications for voters, thereby actually emancipating thousands of men who afterwards repaid this kindness with the shot-gun or a lash!

If races and peoples are to be judged in regard to their capacity for self-government by specific results, what shall be said of that "superior race" of the South, which after eighty-five years of experience in self-government plunged the country into civil war to perpetuate slavery? They had enjoyed freedom, opportunity, knowledge, experience, besides being "inherently superior." Yet their wisdom and "superiority" in less than five years cost the nation a million lives and ten billions of dollars in value. Considered from a financial point of view alone, four years of Confederate rule, "founded on slavery as a corner stone" cost the states in rebellion more than would fifty years of that rule which is relied on to prove that the Negro is racially unfitted for self-government!

But the Negro has never asked for domination or control. All that he has asked—all that has ever been asked on his behalf—is "a white man's chance"—a voice in the government—the right of full citizenship which the nation promised him, and which is the only reparation the American people have ever offered for two hundred and fifty years of acknowledged, unparal- leled wrong.