

Letter from W.E.B. Du Bois to President Woodrow Wilson, November 1918

Mr. President,

I have the honor to recall Your Excellency's benevolent attention to a question of gravity and importance to the national life of the American people and whose nature is intimately related to the import of the international conference.

It would be unworthy of the noblest traditions of our country and the grand ideals which Your Excellency has so often expressed, for men to consider for an instant, that this question could embarrass the activity of the American Delegates.

American civilization must not be considered voluntarily negligent nor even as deeply conscious of ignoring the solution of this question which is unique among the civilized nations. The situation at present is rife with every possibility, except violence. The strength of a cause is in its own righteousness; the latter must ultimately prevail.

The world is wondering to-day how America is going to avoid at least an indictment of inconsistency and perhaps a suspicion of insincerity. No epoch in the History of our nation has been so propitious as the present to clear the atmosphere of doubt as to the national intention in this matter.

The international peace Congress that is to decide whether or not peoples shall have the right to dispose of themselves will find in its midst delegated from a nationa (sic) which champions the principle of the "consent of the governed" and "Government by representation". That nation is our own and includes in itself more than twelve million souls whose consent to be governed is never asked. They have no numbers in the legislatures where they are in the majority and not a single representative in the national Congress.

For us to sustain the ancient these of ineligibility and incapacity to govern himself or to enjoy the full rights of citizenship would be a libel on our civilization; if sixty years of its influence has produced so poor a result, Americanism would be a lamentable failure. Happily such is not the case.

He was illiterate; but not less than five (probably six) of the Allied Nations whose rights to independent Government are recognized by the United States have a higher percentage of illiteracy than he.

In numbers he represents nearly twice the population of Roumania or Holland, two and a half times that Chile or Sweden, nearly three times that of Switzerland, three times that of Portugal and five times those of Norway or Denmark.

From agricultural pursuits alone he has enriched the nation to the extent of more than twelve billions of dollars in twenty years, without considering the corn crop (the most important of the country) which included, would mean that the black population of the United States has in the period about

mentioned, given by its labor to the nation twice the amount of all the loans made to the Allied Powers. From an economic point of view he cannot be considered as unimportant.

His traditions in the wars of our country has been that of a worthy patriot and a good soldier; the very birth of the nation was consecrated by the blood of Crispus Attucks; he left his fifty thousand dead on the battlefields of the Secession; he saved a difficult situation at San Juan Hill; he distinguished himself in this last and greatest struggle in the history of mankind, proving himself to be the equal of the best soldiers on the field; he participated brilliantly in the final combat; thus from the Boston massacre to the last battle of Sedan he has maintained traditions worthy of the American people.

Has this race not earned as much consideration as most of the smaller nations whose liberties and rights are to be safeguarded by international conventions?

In principle this is as much an international question as that of the Pole or the Yougo-Slaves who were comprised until recently within the Central Empires. In fact, the question "a people" applies with exceptional distinctness in this case. This appeal can have no report with class distinction or class legislation. The ideals of the peace Congress have to do with the rights of distinctive peoples; a more distinctive people than the American Negro would be difficult to imagine when taken in his present surroundings and as compared with the other races interested which have not the distinguishing mark of color.

More than to the Black race within her borders, America owes to the world the solution of her race problem, from this very year. The question can be resolved and should be resolved, by the same impartial and righteous judgment that is to be applied to other peoples. The consequence of such an effort would not be revolution but untrammelled revolution.

If asked by what authority I make this appeal, my answer would be: By the tacit consent of twelve million people not one of whom would repudiate the principles set forth and by the right that Almighty God has given to each one of his creatures to lift up his voice against suffering and injustices.