

"A New Reconstruction" Letter, May 1919

An Open Letter to the College Men of the South from the University Commission on Southern Race Questions.

A New Reconstruction

The world-wide reconstruction that is following in the wake of the war will necessarily affect the South in a peculiar way. Nearly 300,000 Negroes have been called into the military service of the country; many thousands more have been drawn from peaceful pursuits into industries born of the war; and several hundred thousand have shifted from the South to the industrial districts of the North. The demobilization of the army and the transition of industry from a war to a peace basis are creating many problems which can be solved only by the efforts of both races. The Negro in adapting himself to the new conditions, should have the wise sympathy and generous co-operation of his white neighbors. It is to the interest of these as well as of the Negro himself, that re-adjustment should proceed with the least possible difficulty and delay.

We believe that this re-adjustment may be effectively aided by a more general appreciation of the Negro's value as a member of the community. Lack of sympathy and understanding between two groups of people frequently causes one group to regard the shortcomings of a few individuals of the other as characteristic of all that group. This is a natural tendency, but it is neither rational nor just, and it has proved, we believe, one of the great obstacles to the development of more satisfactory racial relations in this country.

The Negroes' contribution to the welfare of the nation has never been more clearly indicated than by his services during the Great War. When the call to arms was sounded his country expected him to do his duty, and he did not fail. Large numbers of black men on the fields of France made the supreme sacrifice for the cause of world democracy. In other war services the Negroes did their full share. Many thousands were employed in the building of ships, the manufacture of munitions, the construction of cantonments, and in the production of the coal, iron, cotton and food stuffs without which victory would have been impossible. The Negroes' purchases of Liberty Bonds and War Savings Stamps and their contributions to the Red Cross, the United War Work Fund, and other similar agencies are in themselves a splendid record of which the Negroes and their white friends may be justly proud.

It may also be appropriate in this connection to recall that throughout the period of hostilities the Negro was never suspected of espionage or of sympathy with the enemy, and that he has been wholly indifferent to those movements fostered by radical aliens that aim at the destruction of the American form of government. This good record of the whole race deserves such publicity as will offset the common tendency to judge it by the shortcomings of some of its members. No people is spurred to higher things when habitually referred to in disparaging or contemptuous terms. Ordinary human beings tend to live up to or down to the role assigned them by their neighbors.

On several previous occasions the University Commission for the Study of Race Problems has addressed appeals to the college men of the South for more justice and fair play for the twelve millions of our colored citizens. At this time we would appeal especially for a large measure of thoughtfulness and

consideration, for the control of careless habits of speech which give needless offense and for the practice of just relations. To seek by all practicable means to cultivate a more tolerant spirit, a more generous sympathy, and a wider degree of co-operation between the best elements of both races, to emphasize the best rather than the worst features of interracial relations, to secure greater publicity for those whose views are based on reason rather than prejudice — these, we believe, are essential parts of the Reconstruction programme by which it is hoped to bring into the world a new era of peace and democracy. Because college men are rightly expected to be moulders of opinion, the Commission earnestly appeals to them to contribute of their talents and energy in bringing this programme to its consummation.

(Signed)

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James M. Farr, professor of English, University of Florida.

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