VIEWS OF A NEGRO DURING "THE RED SUMMER" OF 1919

On the torrid afternoon of Sunday, July 27, 1919, white and Negro swimmers collided in savage combat on a South Side Chicago beach and thus ignited a long and fearfully anticipated race war. Sparked by this conflict, during which a Negro youth drowned, the interracial friction which for over two years had been smoldering in Chicago exploded in furious rioting.

The rioting raged for five days. Day and night white toughs assaulted isolated Negroes, and Negro mobsters beat white peddlers and merchants in the "black belt." As rumors of atrocities circulated through the city, members of both races craved vengeance. White gunmen in automobiles sped through the Negro district shooting indiscriminately as they passed, and Negro snipers fired back. Roaming mobs shot, beat, and stabbed to death their victims. The undermanned police force was an ineffectual deterrent to the waves of violence which soon overflowed the environs of the "black belt" and flooded the North and West Sides and the Loop, Chicago’s downtown business district. Only six regiments of state militiamen and a cooling rain finally quenched the passions of the rioters, and even then sporadic outbursts punctuated the atmosphere for another week.

During the riot police officers fatally wounded seven Negroes, and vicious mobs and lone gunmen brutally murdered 16 Negroes and 15 whites. Well over 500 Chicagoans sustained injuries. This bloodshed inflicted an ineradicable scar on the city’s reputation and it outraged the sensibilities of numerous Americans.

Chicago, however, was not the only scene of racial violence that summer. In the five-and-one-half months from April 14 to October 1, 1919, race riots bloodied the streets of 22 cities and towns throughout the country. In addition, 74 Negroes were lynched. James Weldon Johnson called this rash of racial violence in 1919 "the Red Summer.

2 Ibid., 48.
The causes of "the Red Summer" were several. In a nation motivated in great measure at this time by prejudice and intolerance—as evidenced by the xenophobia of the Red Scare—Negroes were highly susceptible objects of aggression. They possessed appropriate stimulus characteristics: that is, they were visibly distinct, their behavior was ostensibly strange or alien, and the white populace had long been antipathetic to them. Interracial competition was keen in the labor market and, in northern metropolises like Chicago where Negroes had migrated by the thousands during World War I, in the political arena as well. Due to a hiatus in residential construction during the war, adequate housing was at a premium; countless bombs ripped apart Negro homes in predominantly white neighborhoods in attempts to drive Negroes back to their black ghettos. In 1919, furthermore, acute interracial conflict was mounting due to the widespread white determination to reaffirm the Negroes’ prewar status on the bottom rung of the racial ladder and the Negroes’ aspirations for a larger share in democracy. During "the Red Summer" these various motivations coalesced and racial violence erupted on a massive scale throughout the country.

Less than one month after the Chicago riot, Stanley B. Norvell, a Negro war veteran residing in Chicago wrote a letter to Victor F. Lawson, editor and publisher of the Chicago Daily News. This letter is moving evidence that in 1919 a Negro with new needs and goals had emerged in the United States. As an upshot of the race’s abundant contributions to the Allied victory—as soldiers, industrial workers, and purchasers of Liberty Bonds—Negroes were imbued both with pride in their race and a fierce determination to possess the rights pledged to all Americans by the Constitution. They felt they had earned the enjoyment of these guarantees. The "New Negro" was resolved also to defend militantly his life, liberty, and property against the aggressions of the white man. Norvell’s letter mirrors what

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4 Lawson had recently been appointed to the Chicago Commission on Race Relations by Governor Frank O. Lowden of Illinois. The Commission, composed of six prominent Negro and six prominent white Chicagoans, studied for two years the origins and causes of the Chicago race riot, publishing their findings as The Negro in Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922).
numerous Negroes were thinking in 1919, and it provides valuable insights into that turbulent summer of racial violence.\(^5\)

My dear Mr. Lawson:

As the cause of the Negro in America is one that is nearer and dearer to my heart than any other, it has become an obsession with me, and for that reason I am taking the liberty of inflicting upon you this unsolicited treatise on the subject. It is my fond hope that these unlettered lines—which are intended to throw a little light upon the controversy from the dark side—may be of some little service to you and your worthy commission, as data....

I take it that the object of this commission is to obtain by investigation and by conference the cause or causes of the friction between the two races that started the molecules of race hatred into such violent motion as to cause the heterogeneous mixture to boil over in the recent race riots.

Few white men know the cause, for the simple reason that few white men know the Negro as an entity. On the other hand, I daresay that almost any Negro that you might meet on the street could tell you the cause, if he would, for it is doubtful—aye, very doubtful—if he would tell you, because Negroes have become highly suspicious of white men, even such white men as they deem their friends ordinarily. The Negro has always been and is now largely a menial dependent upon the white man’s generosity and charity for his livelihood, and for this reason he has become an expert cajoler of the white man and a veritable artist at appearing to be that which he is not. To resort to the vernacular, “conn” the white man has become his profession, his stock in trade. Take for example the Negro in Chicago—and Chicago is fairly representative—sixty per cent of the male Negro population is engaged in menial and servile occupations such as hotel waiters, dining car waiters, sleeping car porters, barbershop porters, billiard room attendants, etc., where “tips” form the

\(^5\) Stanley B. Norvell, Chicago, to Victor F. Lawson, Chicago, August 22, 1919, Julius Rosenwald Papers, Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago Library; reprinted by permission of the University of Chicago Library. In order not to interrupt the continuity of the document, the editor has not used [sic].
greater part of their remuneration. Thirty per cent are laborers and artisans, skilled and unskilled, governmental and municipal employees; while the remaining ten per cent are business and professional men.

Unfortunately it is always by the larger class—the menial, servitor and funkey class—that the race is judged. Even at that, we would not object to being judged by this class of our race, if those who did the judging had a thorough knowledge of the individuals who make up this class. Unfortunately they have not this knowledge nor can they get it except through the instrumentality of just such a commission as that to which you gentlemen have been assigned. The white man of America knows just about as much about the mental and moral calibre, the home life and social activities of this class of colored citizens as he does about the same things concerning the inhabitants of the thus far unexplored planet of Mars. If any white man were to be asked what he thought of George the porter on the Golden State Limited; or of James the waiter on the Twentieth Century diner; or of Shorty who gives him his billiard cue at Mussey’s; or of Snowball who polishes his boots at the Palmer House; or of that old gray-haired relic of by-gone days . . . who withholds his hat and menaces him with a long-handled whisk broom until he capitulates with a nickel; I say were you to ask any white man concerning these dusky servitors he would tell you that he was either honest or dishonest, that he was either industrious or lazy, that he was smart or stupid as the case might be. He will discuss him in a general superficial sort of way and if you press him further you will be surprised to know that in spite of his years of acquaintance with the subject he knows absolutely nothing about intellect, ability, ambitions[,] the home life and environment of one with whom he has come into daily contact for years. He is just a “nigger” and he takes him for granted, as a matter of course . . .

In hotels, barber shops and billiard rooms where the patrons come in regularly, Sambo has a chance to get well acquainted with them . . . . He knows just what each one’s business is and where it is located. He knows just where each one lives and in what circumstances . . . . He knows just how much each one is going to give him. There are some that never
give him anything but still he likes them immensely because they treat him with kindness and consideration. There are some who tip him most liberally whom he despises because they are always making some aspersion about his race or because they always want him to clown and demean himself in order to get their money. . . . He knows that if he says, “Yas sah, Boss,” and grins that you will vote him a “good nigger” and give him something; but were he to say, “Very good, sir,” you would not only give him anything but would probably take a dislike to him and consider him supercilious. . . .

I can walk down the “Boul Mich” and be surveyed by the most critical of Sherlock Holmes’s and I will wager that none of them can accurately deduce what I am or what I represent. They cannot tell whether I am well off or hard up; whether I am educated or illiterate; whether I am a northerner or a southerner; whether I am a native born Negro or a foreigner; whether I live among beautiful surroundings or in the squalor of the “black belt.” I defy the shrewdest of your pseudo detectives to know whether I am a reputable citizen or whether I am a newly arrived crook. They cannot tell by looking at me what my income is. . . . The point is that I am only an ordinary, average Negro and that the white man is constantly making the mistake of discounting us and rating us too cheaply. He should wake up to the fact that brain is not peculiar to any race or nationality but is merely a matter of development.

This in a measure explains how the American white man knows less about the American Negro than the latter does about the former. . . .

The further causes of the apparent increased friction between the two races, in my opinion is due to the gradual, and inevitable evolution—metamorphosis, if you please—of the Negro. The Negro has also progressed in knowledge by his study of the white man, while the white man blinded by either his prejudice or by his indifference has failed to study the Negro judiciously, and as a consequence, he knows no more about him than he did fifty years ago and still continues to judge him and to formulate opinions about him by his erstwhile standards. Today we have with us a new Negro. A brand new Negro, if you please. What opportunities have
you better class white people for getting into and observing the homes of the better class of colored people[?]. Yet the duties of the colored man in his menial capacities gives him an insight of your home life. As a suggestion, if I may be permitted to make one, I suggest that the white members of this commission make it their business to try to obtain an opportunity through some of the colored members of the commission to visit the homes of some of our better class people. You will find that “Uncle Tom” that charming old figure of literature contemporary with the war of the rebellion is quite dead now and that his prototypes are almost as extinct as is the great auk, the dodo bird, old Dobbin and the chaise, and the man who refused to shave until William Jennings Bryan was elected. You will have committed an unpardonable faux pas if you should happen to call any eminently respectable old colored lady “mammy” or “auntie,” and yet there still remain many misguided and well-intentioned folks of the white race who still persist in so doing. This was all brought about by education. . . . When a young colored boy of Chicago goes through the eight grades of grammar school and wins the cherished Victor F. Lawson diploma; then through a four year high school course and wins a university scholarship; and then goes to college and wins a degree . . . and is highly popular and well received among his fellow classmates, it is a very difficult thing for him to get it into his head that he is inferior to anybody that has no more knowledge, ability nor money than himself. Regardless of what the eminent sociologists may say, and the fiery and usually groundless claims of the southern negrophile [negrophobe] to the contrary notwithstanding, there is no amount of logic, nor philosophy, nor ethnology, nor anthropology, nor sociology that can convince him to his own satisfaction that he is not the possessor of all the lesser and major attributes that go to make up a good citizen by all of the standards which our republican conventions hold near and dear.

Take the late war for example, and consider the effect that it has had upon the Negro, by and large. I believe that the mental attitude of the Negro that went to war is comparable in a certain degree to the mental attitude of most of the Negroes throughout the country; so far as the awakenings
are concerned. The Negro of this country has gone through the same evolution that the white man has, in his own way; and in a large percentage of the total, that way is not far removed from the way the white man’s mind thought out the matter or is thinking it out, especially the soldier mind. The Negro of our country . . . the Negro of the mass I mean, is comparable in his awakening and in his manner of thought after that awakening, to these white boys who went to war. The white soldiers—being young—had but little thought of anything but their immediate concerns, and the Negro, until lately, had but little thought of anything but his immediate concerns—being segregated. How I loathe that word.

Since the war the Negro has been jolted into thinking by circumstances. . . . [Negroes] have learned that there were treaties and boundaries and Leagues of Nations and mandates, and Balkan states, and a dismembered Poland, a ravished Belgium, a stricken France, a soviet Russia and a republic in Ireland and so on, and they have . . . for the first time in their lives taken a peep of their own volition and purely because they wanted to know, into the workings of governmental things of those other countries, and have tried to reason out the possible real cause of all of this bloodshed and woe and misery along such international, allied and foreign government and other vague lines.

Now then, this has logically—and we are nebulously logical, despite what the southern white says about us—brought us round to a sort of realization of how our government was made and is conducted. I venture to claim that any average Negro of some education, if closely questioned, and the questions were put to him in simple understandable form, will tell you that he finally has come to know that he counts as a part of his government, that he is a unit in it. It took a world war to get that idea into general Negro acceptance, but it is there now. Centuries of the dictum, which heretofore not many of us disputed, that, “This was a white man’s country and that we were destined to always be hewers of wood and carriers of water,” was set aside by circumstances and conditions and reactions and reflexes and direct contacts of this war. Negroes were pulled out of their ordinary pursuits all over the country and called upon to do things that they had
to do because there was nobody at hand to do them, and those circumstances induced an awakening that must inevitably continue for all time.

The five hundred thousand Negroes⁶ who were sent overseas to serve their country were brought into contacts that widened both their perceptions and their prespectives, broadened them, gave them new angles on life, on government, and on what both mean. They are now new men and world men, if you please.

What the Negro wants and what the Negro will not be satisfied with until he gets is that treatment and that recognition that accords him not one jot or tittle less than that which any other citizen of the United States is satisfied with. He has become tired of equal rights. He wants the same rights. He is tired of equal accommodations. He wants [the] same accommodations. He is tired of equal opportunity. He wants the same opportunity. He must and will have industrial, commercial, civil and political equality. America has already given him these inalienable rights, but she has not always seen to it that he has received them. America must see that the Negro is not deprived of any right that she has given him otherwise the gift is bare, and in view of her recent international exploits she will stand in grave danger of losing her national integrity in the eyes of Europe and she will be forced to admit to her European adversaries that her constitution is but a scrap of paper.

Social equality—that ancient skeleton in the closet of the southern negrophile [negrophobe], whose bones are always brought out and rattled ominously whenever the Negro question is discussed—is in no way a factor in the solution of the problem, but is a condition that will quite naturally exist when the problem is eventually solved—just a little prior to the millenium. Leastwise considering the unsettled condition of the world at large, the white man of this country has a great deal more to be sensibly alarmed about than the coming of social equality. Looking into the future I can see more ominous clouds on the horizon of this country’s destiny than the coming of social equality.

⁶ Actually, approximately 200,000 Negro troops were assigned to overseas duty during World War I. *Negro Year Book*, 1919-21, 188; 1925-26, 250-53; 1931, 32, 331.
When the Negro ponders the situation—and now he is beginning to seriously do that—it is with a feeling of poignant resentment that he sees his alleged inferiority constantly and blatantly advertised at every hand, by the press, the pulpit, the stage and by the glaring and hideous sign-boards of segregation. Try to imagine, if you can, the feelings of a Negro army officer, who clothed in the full panoply of his profession and wearing the decorations for valor of three governments, is forced to the indignity of a jim-crow car and who is refused a seat in a theatre and a bed in a hotel. Think of the feelings of a colored officer, who after having been graduated from West Point and having worked up step by step to the rank of colonel to be retired on account of blood pressure—and other pressure—in order that he might not automatically succeed to the rank of general officer.\(^7\) Try to imagine the smouldering hatred within the breast of an overseas veteran who is set upon and mercilessly beaten by a gang of young hoodlums simply because he is colored. Think of the feelings in the hearts of boys and girls of my race who are clean, intelligent and industrious who apply for positions only to meet with the polite reply that, “We don’t hire niggers.” Think how it must feel to pass at the top of the list and get notice of appointment to some nice civil service position that is paid for out of the taxes of the commonwealth, and upon reporting to assume the duties thereof, to be told that there has been a mistake made in the appointment.

When you think of these things, and consider them seriously it is easy to see the underlying, contributory causes of the friction that led up to the recent racial troubles. It is a well known fact that civilization is but a veneer which lightly covers the surface of mankind; that if slightly scratched, with the right kind of tool, a man will turn into a bloodthirsty savage in the twinkling of an eye. The overt act that is alleged to have started the recent conflagration, would not have in itself been sufficient to have ignited and exploded such vials of wrath had not the structure of society been long

\(^7\) This reference is to Colonel Charles Young, a Negro full colonel in the United States Army, who was retired at the outbreak of World War I, just when his promotion to brigadier general seemed highly probable.
soaked in the inflammable gasolene of smouldering resentment.

As soon as the white man is willing to inform himself about the true status of the Negro as he finds him today, and is willing to take off the goggles of race prejudice and to study the Negro with the naked eye of fairness, and to treat him with justice and equity, he will come to the conclusion that the Negro has “arrived” and then voila, you have the solution to the problem.

We ask not charity but justice. We no longer want perquisites but wages, salary and commissions. Much has been said anent the white man’s burden. We admit to having been a burden, just as an infant that cannot walk is at one time a burden. But in the natural order of things the infant soon ceases to be a burden and eventually grows up to be a crutch for the arm that once carried him. We feel that now we are able to take our first, feeble diffident steps, and we implore the white man to set his burden down and let us try to walk. Put us in your counting rooms, your factories and in your banks. The young people who went to school with us and who learned the three R’s from the same black-board as ourselves will surely not object to working with us after we have graduated. If they do, it will only be because they are not yet accustomed to the new conditions. That is nothing. People soon become accustomed to new things and things that seem at first preposterous soon become commonplace. We have surely proven by years of unrequited toil and by constant and unflagging loyalty and fealty that we are worthy of the justice that we ask. For God’s sake give it to us!

**Stanley B. Norvell**

**William M. Tuttle, Jr.**

_Arlington, Va._

Note: Tuttle is on the research staff of President Emeritus James Bryant Conant of Harvard who is preparing his _Autobiography_ and is America’s greatest living educator.