

Statement of Conference of White Southerners on Race Relations*

Atlanta, Georgia

April 8, 1943

IN OCTOBER, 1942, a representative group of Southern Negro leaders met in Durham, N. C., and issued a statement in which they addressed themselves "to the current problems of racial discrimination and neglect, and to ways in which we may cooperate in the advancement of programs aimed at the sound improvement of race relations, within the democratic framework."

Their statement is so frank and courageous, or free from any suggestion of threat and ultimatum, and at the same time shows such good will, that we gladly agree to cooperate.

We do not attempt to make here anything like a complete reply to the questions raised nor to offer solutions for all the vexing problems. We hope, however, to point the pathway for future cooperative efforts and to give assurance of our sincere good will and desire to cooperate in any sound program aimed at the improvement of race relations.

These Negro leaders rightly placed emphasis in their statement on discrimination in the administration of our laws on purely racial grounds. We are sensitive to this charge and admit that it is essentially just. From the Potomac to the Rio Grande there are some ten million Negroes. While all citizens are governed by the same laws, it is recognized that Negroes have little voice in the making and enforcement of the laws under which they must live. They are largely dependent upon the will of the majority group for the safety of life and property, education and health, and their general economic condition. This is a violation of the spirit of democracy. No Southerner can logically dispute the fact that the Negro, as an American citizen, is entitled to his civil rights and economic opportunities.

The race problem in any Southern community is complicated by our economic limitations. The factors which have kept the South a tributary section have also kept it poor and lacking in sufficient industry to develop and to provide enough jobs and enough public funds for every public need. Yet the only justification offered for those laws which have for their purpose the separation of the races is that they are intended to minister to the welfare and integrity of both races. There has been widespread and inexcusable discrimination in the administration of these laws. The white Southerner has an obligation to interest himself in the legitimate aspirations of the Negro. This means correcting the discrimination between the races in the allocation of school funds; in the number and quality of schools, and in the salaries of teachers. In public travel where the law demands a separation of the races, primary justice and a simple sense of fair play demand the facilities for safety, comfort, and health should be equal. The distribution of public utilities and public benefits, such as sewers, water, housing, street and sidewalk paving, playgrounds, public health, and hospital facilities should come to the Negro upon the basis of population and need.

It is recognized that there is often practical discrimination by some peace officers and in some courts in the treatment of Negro prisoners and in the abrogation of their

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civil rights. There is no such discrimination incorporated in the laws of any of the Southern states. False arrests, brutal beatings and other evils must be stopped.

In the economic field, unquestionably procedures should be undertaken to establish fully the right to receive equal pay for equal work. To do otherwise works a wrong to our entire economic life and to our self respect. With so large a proportion of our wage-earning population belonging to the minority race, if we cannot plan for a well-trained, well-employed, and prosperous Negro population, the economic future of the South is hopeless.

Most of the Negroes in the South are on farms and in rural communities. Failure to provide for them all the facilities for improving agricultural practices through schools, county agents, and supervision holds back all of the South. Fair wages, longer tenures of leases, and increased opportunities for farm ownership are also necessary.

All men who believe in justice, who love peace, and who believe in the meaning of this country are under the necessity of working together to draw off from the body of human society the poison of racial antagonism. This is one of the disruptive forces which unless checked will ultimately disturb and threaten the stability of the nation. Either to deny or to ignore the increased tension between the white and the colored races would be a gesture of insincerity.

That there are acute and intricate problems associated with two races living side by side in the South cannot be denied. But these problems can be solved and will ultimately disappear if they are brought out into an atmosphere of justice and good will. If we approach them with contempt in one group and with resentment in the other group, then we work on hopeless terms. The solution of these problems can be found only in men of both races who are known to be men of determined good will. The ultimate solution will be found in evolutionary methods and not in ill-founded revolutionary movements which promise immediate solutions.

We agree with the Durham Conference that it is "unfortunate that the simple efforts to correct obvious social and economic injustices continue, with such considerable popular support, to be interpreted as the predatory ambition of irresponsible Negroes to invade the privacy of family life." We agree also that "it is a wicked notion that the struggle by the Negro for citizenship is a struggle against the best interests of the nation. To urge such a doctrine, as many are doing, is to preach disunity, and to deny the most elementary principles of American life and government."

It is futile to imagine or to assert that the problem will solve itself. The need is for a positive program arrived at in an atmosphere of understanding, cooperation and a mutual respect.

[Signed]

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