

REPORT ON AFRICAN ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE AMERICAN NEGRO AND  
THE AMERICAN NEGRO ATTITUDE TOWARDS AFRICA

(Adopted by the Special Meeting called by AMSAC, May 27, 1961)

Background

In the past several months public discussion about the relationships between American Negroes and Africans has arisen as part of the discussions concerning how to develop mutually profitable relationships between the United States Government and the several African governments. The questions that have arisen in the mass media have challenged the "specialness" of the personal relationships between African diplomatic personnel and the Negro community and, most recently, the personal relationships of American Negroes in residence in Africa to the citizens and leadership of the respective countries. Implied, if not directly stated, has been the question of whether or not American Negroes will or should be of particular usefulness or value in representative capacities for the United States in dealing with Africans either in Africa or this country. Until this writing the discussion has ignored the cultural and political relationships between American and African Negroes over the last fifty years.

The special meeting considered the attitudes and allegations with regard to present-day attitudes, without discussion, in so far as possible, of historical roles and situations. Consideration of the American scene historically and actually in regard to the Negro was limited to its pertinency to the basic issue. Suggestions for action were made without discussion of the availability of organizational channels. These suggestions were aimed at what would be necessary to accomplish the immediate and long range goal of proper friendly relations between the United States and the several African nations and to accomplish the American goal of a free society here at home. It is implicit, of course, that these goals are interrelated.

African Attitudes Towards American Negroes

Recent magazine articles have stated that Africans "look down on" American Negroes; that personal relations between the two peoples are even more strained than those between American whites and Africans. That there are and will be some strained dealings was not challenged. The extent of these feelings and the significance of the case studies presented in the magazine articles were challenged.

The influences of European attitudes toward this country and American white attitudes toward Negroes were cited as sources of some of the negative reactions by Africans toward American Negroes. Misunderstanding is to be expected when there is no knowledge or only inaccurate and misleading information about American systems and institutions and complete ignorance of American Negro history and contributions. These factors have been mitigated in the education and training of those African leaders who studied in this country in Negro and other institutions. The younger African leaders have not had such opportunities and are often not well informed on the American Negro or his status in the American society. Where negative attitudes do exist, they are not firm or fixed, but are recent and transient.

Certain factors of present-day African thinking were cited as pertinent to the issue: 1) The desire of Africans for full sovereignty, which on the level of personal relations means freedom of action and association. 2) The Africans' fear of what is termed "neo-colonialism." In this regard, Africans fear that the United States' action in Africa may be strongly influenced by the interests of the United States' NATO Allies.

Africans do, however, culturally and racially identify with the American Negro cause. Actions and statements of the several leaders are explicit in this regard, especially at the time of an "incident." Africans will and do champion this cause despite the possibilities of offending.

Basic to African attitudes toward the American Negroes is the consideration of the "power-situation." African nations are applying for aid and assistance from this country and are looking for private investment and enterprises. It is important to these nations as they compete for aid, trade and investment to have the best assistance available. This means they must seek the established law firms and public relations firms. The Americans with whom the Africans must deal in government and private industry are white. Private investors are white. The public relations firms already favorably established with the industry-investment public are white. Africans do not, however, overlook the continuing increase of numbers of Negroes in high-ranking government positions and the increasing economic power of the American Negro. Certain African nations have recently made public their desire to use Negro business wherever possible in this country. However, they will not sacrifice, and correctly so, their own self interests. Africans are not unaware of the political power of the American Negro especially in the election of the President of the United States. The use of this political power is closely observed.

An additional factor of the power situation in economics and services must also be considered. American Negroes are the elite of the black world in skills and training, yet they are unable to use many of these skills in this country. Africans are already practicing in their countries vocations barred to American Negroes. Should this trend continue, Africans will come to suspect America's good intentions with regard to solving the race problem and will come to look down upon the American Negro. Two bridges to Africa will then be lost.

#### American Negro Attitudes Towards Africans

Recent articles in the press have alleged American Negro coolness toward Africans in this country and activities and habits offensive to Africans when American Negroes are resident in Africa. Certain articles have also stated that American Negroes look at Africa as the "promised land" while other articles state that American Negroes are unconcerned and unimpressed with Africa. The extent and significance of these purported attitudes were challenged.

The great majority of American Negroes share with their fellow citizens a wealth of ignorance about Africa and Africans. In addition, they share certain invalid stereotypes about Africans. It is probably within the younger generation that these generalities are most valid, however.

The rise of independent sovereign states in Africa has had a greater effect among the American Negroes than other Americans. It has led to greater pride in origins and to dissatisfaction with the situation in this country. Although the current American Negro drive for equality and civil rights does not result from African developments alone, it certainly has received some impetus from such developments. The issue of education is not entirely one of integration but also one of curriculum. American Negroes are more vocal than other Americans about the lack of treatment of their history and the history of Africa in established curricula.

As their own economic opportunities develop, American Negroes are looking to Africa for openings for investment and for use of their skills, but a desire to help the new African nations is paramount. Many Negroes feel resentment of persons and organizations only recently interested in Africa but which receive a great deal of favorable public notice, while little or no attention is given to those who have been working in the field for longer periods.

Increasing interest in Africa among the American Negroes has been evident particularly in cultural and political activities. The extent of these activities and the numbers of persons involved are not reported in the media unless there is an "incident." The rising impatience and discontent of the Negro still comes as a surprise to most. On the level of personal contacts and relationships, American Negroes still have limited opportunities to meet with Africans. Hospitality organized by the United Nations or United States Governmental agencies for Africans and other foreign guests still often ignores Negroes. Some improvement has been recently felt in connection with Africans but not for other nationals.

The question of how American Negroes will use their present political power in regard to Africa was examined. In the area of foreign affairs, it is inevitable that Negro political pressure will be expressed mainly in regard to American policy in Africa. This is as it should be. Information on how this process can best be guided can be obtained in part from a study of the past and present roles of national groups in the United States vis-a-vis their "old countries."

The cultural gap between American Negroes and Africans is a result of more than the "middle passage." It is at least equal to the cultural gap between Negroes and whites in this country. What Baldwin calls the "white man's fantasy" about American Negroes applies also to the white man's concepts of black Africans and may lead to tragic blunders and choices in the international field.

#### Suggestions for Program

I. Committees of experts within disciplines and vocations should be established to provide criticism of the treatment of things African and Negro in the media and in government policy development and review. A special group to study methodology in African studies is also necessary.

II. Activities directed toward Africa should include the development of working relationships between American Negroes and the civil servants of the several African nations in this country. Regular feature services about the American Negro should be provided for the media in Africa, especially in the areas of Negro history and culture. Unlike the past, the American Negro community now has too little contact with African students, many of whom for the first time are in white colleges and universities. There is need of a conscious organizational remedy for this situation.

III. There is need for activities directed toward American Negroes in the areas of American Negro history and African history. These should include educational programs and teaching aids for institutions and organizations, and regular feature services for the Negro press.

IV. What effective political power the American Negro has should be limited when operating in the international area to Africa. In this regard, an effective lobby should be developed which should depend on research and relations with Africans in this country as sources of information along with the customary sources (i.e. organizations, universities, bureaucracy etc.).