

**New Freedom or New Slavery: Woodrow Wilson
and the Emergence of a New Negro Leadership**

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In the 1890's a general movement developed in the South, sanctioned by court decisions, which by 1910 had almost completely disfranchised the black citizens and had introduced widespread "Jim Crowism." The Negro in countering the new aggressive racist attacks had little chance of aid from the national Republican Party which as early as the 1880's had endorsed the white supremacy movement in the South. In addition the climate of the Spanish-American War provided added impetus to the idea of Caucasian supremacy. After 1900, race riots and anti-Negro literature furthered the racist thinking and increased the difficulties for the black race.

During the critical period from 1890 to 1910 Booker T. Washington, the principal national leader of the colored race, did not consciously encourage or sanction the innovations, but his program for the race generally proved to be compatible with the results if not the spirit behind the anti-Negro legislation. The Tuskegee President's basic goal was to win white support and philanthropy for Negro education. He relegated political activity to the future and accepted social separation. However, he continually fought for equality of "Jim Crow" accommodations and attended the various disfranchising conventions, where he endorsed the principles of limited suffrage but urged application of the limitations without regard to race.

The Tuskegee philosophy, reacting against the disappointments of political activities during Reconstruction and based on a realistic appraisal of the Negroes' economic needs, rested on the belief that self-improvement, primarily through economic progress and a conciliatory attitude, would bring inevitable progress in the political and social spheres. This was pragmatic and realistic, but it required at least the good will if not the cooperation of the whites. It was more compatible with the old southern paternalistic attitude than the late nineteenth century aggressive expressions of racism.¹

Partly because of the belief that the Tuskegee method contributed to or was not adequate to cope with the new problems, and because of the general reform spirit of the time, Washington's ideas and leadership were increasingly challenged after 1902. The first significant Negro figure to offer resistance to, and the man who became the leading dissenter from the Washington school of thought, was a Massachusetts-born Atlanta University professor of sociology, W.E.B. DuBois. In 1903, DuBois projected in his book, *Souls of Black Folk*, a belief that Washington's work, although necessary and valuable, was not sufficient, and the time had come for Negroes to demand full and equal rights of citizenship. The same year another important voice of dissent appeared in the person of William Monroe Trotter, a Harvard-educated lawyer who was founder and co-editor of the Boston *Guardian*, a Negro weekly. Trotter burst upon the national scene when he and his followers turned a Boston meeting which was being addressed by Washington, into a general riot. This action resulted in a thirty-day jail sentence for Trotter and unanimous denunciation from the colored press for his unheard-of "irreverent" treatment of Washington.²

In an attempt to unify the small group of "independents" or "radicals," DuBois issued a call for a secret convention of interested persons to meet near Niagara Falls in July, 1905. Out of this meeting of twenty-nine persons representing thirteen states, emerged the "Niagara Movement." They issued a manifesto that, among other things, demanded full suffrage for the Negroes, an end to "Jim Crowism," and the right of free association. However, the Niagara movement after reaching a high point of two hundred and thirty-six members in April, 1907, collapsed because of the lack of financial resources and the active opposition of Washington. Also, the uncompromising character of both DuBois and Trotter caused internal dissension which resulted in the latter leaving the organization.³

More dissatisfaction with the Tuskegee leadership appeared in 1906 after major race riots in Atlanta and Brownsville. Alexander Walters, Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and president of the Afro-American Council, broke with the Republican Party over the handling of the Brownsville riot and organized the National Colored Democratic League. The Bishop in 1905 had unsuccessfully sought Washington's approval for his plan to convert the loosely organized and virtually inactive Council, the largest Negro organization in the United States, into a liberal

weapon against the radicals. The Bishop's decision in 1907 to support the Democratic ticket placed him in opposition to Washington, who had established close relations with the national Republican Party prior to 1900.'

The dissatisfaction with the Republican Party as a result of Roosevelt's handling of the Brownsville affair and the exclusion of Negroes from the southern convention delegations, provided a rallying point for the radicals in 1908. Trotter, after his break with the Niagara organization, organized the National Equal Rights League in April, 1908. The stated purpose of the League was to help prevent the nomination and election of William Howard Taft. DuBois by 1908 was trying, without success, to persuade the Democrats to repudiate the southern racial policies in return for the northern Negro vote, which he believed, if mobilized, could deliver New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Indiana and Illinois to the Democratic banner. During the campaign, he first advocated a boycott by the colored voters and then announced his support of William J. Bryan, although with little enthusiasm. The individualistic efforts of DuBois, Trotter and Walters on behalf of the Democrats had little success in attracting Negro support, because of the predominant Washington influence, but it posed a potentially serious challenge to the traditional Republican Negro vote.'

Late in 1908, as a result of a lynching in Springfield, Illinois, and the spreading racist actions outside the South, a group of northern reformers led by Oswald G. Villard, publisher of the *Nation* magazine and the *New York Evening Post* and the grandson of William Lloyd Garrison, launched a movement that in the following year culminated in the inter-racial National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The Association was at first dominated by white citizens, including Jane Addams, John Dewey, William Dean Howells, Lincoln Steffens, Moorfield Storey, Mary White Ovington and Joel Spingarn. Only five Negroes attended the founding conference in February, 1909, and DuBois was the only Negro officer selected when the new movement was formally organized in May, 1910. He was named Director of Publications and was given complete editorial freedom in his supervision of the *Crisis*, the monthly organ of the N.A.A.C.P.

Alexander Walters, the Reverend J. Milton Waldron, the treasurer of the defunct Niagara association, and John E. Milholland, president of the Constitutional League, a national interracial lobbying organization for Negro rights, were the other significant colored charter members. Trotter declined to join because of his early conflicts with DuBois. Furthermore, he believed the tone on the movement was too conservative.'

Thus in 1910, as the Negro disfranchisement and "Jim Crow" legislation was near completion in the South, the passive political and social philosophy of Washington was being challenged by a group of northern Negro and interracial organizations, supported by a segment of the northern white press and several Negro publications, including the *Crisis*, the *Cleveland Gazette*, the *Baltimore Afro-American* and the *Boston Guardian*, devoted to agitation, legal action and independent political pressure on behalf of immediate equal citizenship rights for the Negro.

The small group of Negro radicals and their white allies felt by 1912 that they had sufficient following and influence to extract concessions from one of the major parties. Having already rejected the Republicans, the radicals turned to the Progressive Party. However, the Progressive leadership refused to recognize the southern Negro convention delegations, and the platform committee rejected a civil rights plank drafted by DuBois and presented by Joel Spingarn.' As a result, the independent Negroes and their white supporters were obliged to obtain the best they could from Woodrow Wilson, despite their fears of the Democratic Party

and the concern over Wilson's southern birth. Rumors that he had drawn the color line at Princeton and as Governor of New Jersey increased the anxiety of many of the leaders.

Seeking some assurances, a committee from the Independent Equal Rights League headed by the Reverend Milton Waldron and William Monroe Trotter approached Wilson as early as July 16, 1912.⁹ They apparently received only the vague response that if elected he would "seek to be President of the whole nation and would know no differences of race or creed or section, but to act in good conscience and in a Christian spirit . . ."

However, Waldron made public alleged remarks by Wilson that he invited Negro support and would veto any anti-Negro legislation, passed by Congress. Upon learning of the action by Waldron, Wilson wrote to Oswald Villard denying that he had promised to veto any legislation or had said he was in need of Negro votes. In an attempt to clarify his views and to satisfy the demands upon him, Wilson urged Villard to prepare a statement that he could issue as his official position on the Negro question. But when Villard presented him with a draft prepared by DuBois it was rejected. Wilson was not willing to endorse the position that the Democratic Party sought or welcomed Negro support or that he personally was opposed to racial disfranchisement.¹¹ Throughout the remaining summer months of 1912, Villard and others continued to seek some statement on the Negro problem that would include definite proposals, but failed to receive a satisfactory response.

In October, Bishop Alexander Walters invited Wilson to address a mass meeting in New York City of the National Colored Democratic League. Walters had supported the Democratic Ticket since 1907 and was almost a party regular in comparison to the more independently oriented N.A.A.C.P., DuBois, and Trotter. Wilson declined the invitation but on October 16 sent a letter to the Bishop for public release.

I hope that it seems superfluous to those who know me, but to those who do not know me perhaps it is not unnecessary for me to assure my coloured fellow citizens of my earnest wish to see justice done them in every matter, and not mere grudging justice, but justice executed with liberality and cordial good feeling. Every guarantee of our law, every principle of our Constitution commands this and our sympathies should also make it easy . . . My sympathy for them is of long standing, and I want to assure them through you that should I become President of the United States they may count upon me for absolute fair dealing and for everything by which I could assist in advancing the interests of their race in the United States.¹²

This became Wilson's official stand on the Negro question.

Trotter and Walters and their respective organizations, the National Colored Democratic League and the National Independent Political League, gave Wilson their enthusiastic support. With less enthusiasm and more misgivings, DuBois and the leaders of the N.A.A.C.P. endorsed the Democratic candidate late in the campaign.¹³ It is extremely unlikely that the efforts of the radicals on behalf of Wilson had any effect on the outcome of the election. Nevertheless, they confidently welcomed the inauguration and were sure that their efforts had not been in vain.

The hopes held by some of the radicals of a "second emancipation" under Wilson were quickly dispelled as reports from the capital in the late spring of 1913 indicated that widespread segregation was being instigated in the Post Office and Treasury Departments. The administration's decision to introduce segregation was made as early as April 11, 1913. At that time during a cabinet meeting Postmaster General Burleson complained of friction between white and Negro railway mail clerks and suggested separation as the remedy, not just for his department but for all departments. He claimed to have discussed the matter with Bishop Walters and other colored citizens and to have received the approval of most

of them. The President gave his consent to the prepared changes and stated that he had "... made no promises in particulars to the Negroes, except to do them justice"

When the segregation adjustments became apparent, the N.A.A.C.P. and Villard forwarded protests and inquiries to Wilson demanding some explanation. On July 23, in a letter to Villard, Wilson explained that it was

... true that the segregation of the colored employees in the several departments was begun upon the initiative and at the suggestion of several of the heads of departments, but as much in the interest of the Negroes as for any other reason, with the approval of some of the most influential Negroes . . . and with the idea that the friction or rather the discontent and uneasiness, which had prevailed in many of the departments would thereby be removed.

The President then justified the action as being in the best interest of the race.

It is as far as possible from being a movement against the Negroes. I sincerely believe it to be in their interest.

I am sorry that those who interest themselves most in the welfare of the Negroes should misjudge this action on the part of the departments My own feeling is, by putting certain bureaus and sections in the charge of Negroes we are rendering them more safe in their possession of office and less likely to be discriminated against.¹⁴

As protests from the northern press and Church organizations were added to those of the Negroes, Wilson on September 8, in a letter to H. A. Bridgman, editor of the *Congregationalist* and *Christian World*, made his views on the segregation policies public.

... I do not approve of the segregation that is being attempted in several of the departments.

... but I think if you were here on the ground you would see, as I seem to see, that it is distinctly to the advantage of the colored people themselves that they should be organized, so far as possible and convenient, in distinct bureaux where they will center their work. Some of the most thoughtful colored men I have conversed with have . . . approved of this policy. I certainly would not myself have approved of it if I had not thought it to be to their advantage and likely to remove many of the difficulties which have surrounded the appointment and advancement of colored men and women.

Later in September, in a letter to Villard, Wilson offered a more apologetic explanation.

What I would do if I could act alone you already know, but what I am trying to do must be done, if done at all, through the cooperation of those with whom I am associated with in the Government.

... I believe that by the slow pressure of argument and persuasion the situation may be changed But it cannot be done . . . if a bitter agitation is inaugurated¹⁵

Amidst the conflicting reports and rumors, the N.A.A.C.P. had conducted an investigation of conditions in the federal departments, as part of their nation-wide protest campaign. On November 17, the Association released its findings to the news services, five hundred newspapers, fifty religious publications and many magazine editors. Also the report was circulated to the members of Congress. It declared that segregation had been carried out in the Miscellaneous and Examining Division of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, the Dead Letter Office of the Post Office Department, and the auditor's office of the Post Office. In addition, the release claimed that plans were under way to place the two hundred and

seventy colored employees in the Treasury building into an all-Negro Registry Division.¹⁷

The nation-wide protests possibly had some effect on preventing any further extension of segregation after December 1913. However, by that time most of the colored employees had been separated, and the abandonment of plans for the Registry was in part because of the failure to gain Senate confirmation of a Negro Register.

An anti-climax to the segregation controversy took place late in 1914. William M. Trotter, at the head of a delegation of the National Independent Equal Rights League, met with Wilson on November 12, 1914. A Trotter committee once before, on January 6, 1914, had presented the President with an anti-segregation petition with 20,000 signatures.¹⁸ The November interview scheduled for fifteen minutes lasted almost an hour as Trotter and Wilson became engaged in heated discussion that resulted in the President rebuking Trotter for his aggressive attitude and dismissing the delegation. Wilson declared any further discussions between himself and the Negro race would have to be with a different leader. During the interview the President stated that the segregation affair was a human and not a political question. He labeled Trotter's threat, that he would lose the Negro votes, blackmail and a matter of indifference to him. Wilson informed the delegation that the cabinet members had investigated the situation and had reported that,

... the segregation was caused by friction between colored and white clerks and not done to injure or humiliate the colored clerks, but to avoid friction . . . [They] had assured him that the colored clerks would have comfortable conditions, though segregated. He had taken their view that the segregation was the best way to meet this situation . . .

The President then elaborated on the Negro problem in general.

It will take one hundred years to eradicate this prejudice, and we must deal with it as practical men. Segregation is not humiliating but a benefit, and ought to be so regarded by you gentlemen. If your organization goes out and tells the colored people of the country that it is a humiliation, they will so regard it, but if you do not tell them so, and regard it rather as a benefit, they will regard it the same. The only harm that will come will be if you cause them to think it is a humiliation.

Trotter countered with the claim that for fifty years white and colored have worked together in peace and harmony and accused Wilson of violating his 1912 pledges that had given many Negroes the belief that he would be "a second Lincoln."¹⁹

In an attempt to rally support and keep the controversy alive, Trotter conducted a lecture tour in the East and Middle West, but with little success. He was condemned for his lack of tact and diplomacy by several of the colored newspapers.²⁰ The affair did serve further to confirm Wilson's position and alienate Trotter and other Negroes who had supported him in 1912. An example was the Baltimore *Afro-American*, which had been placing all of the blame for the segregation policies on the southern influence, especially on Senator James K. Vardaman of Mississippi. But after the Trotter interview the *Afro-American* finally gave up all hope. "Mr. Wilson has proved himself to be a traitor, to be a receiver of goods under false pretense . . ."²¹

Concurrent to the segregation dispute and serving as added evidence to the radicals that they had misplaced their support in the 1912 election were the President's patronage policies in regard to the Negro. When Wilson took office in 1913, Negroes held over fifty federal appointive positions. Of these, thirty-one were positions of authority and objects of race pride. By the end of 1915 the Negroes retained only eight.²²

As a result of Wilson's segregation and patronage policies, the hopes possessed by the radicals in 1912 had been shattered by the end of 1915. The credit or blame for the President's racial policies probably belongs to the southern members of his party in Congress. Wilson as early as August, 1913, had shown his reluctance to oppose the southern legislators, when he refused to appoint, at the suggestion of Villard, a commission to study race relations.²¹ To have opposed the southern Democrats on the racial issue could possibly have endangered parts of his program Wilson considered more important.

The results of the radicals' political activities seemed on the surface to provide added argument for the Washingtonian non-political orientation. Nevertheless, the N.A.A.C.P. maintained a steady growth. From 1912 to 1916, the paying membership increased from three hundred and twenty-nine to eight thousand seven hundred and eighty-five.²² And when Booker T. Washington advised, during the height of the segregation controversy, that the Negroes cease their useless protesting and reject the uncertainties of political pursuits in order to have more time for building an economic foundation for progress, he was bitterly denounced by several of the normally non-radical colored newspapers. The Columbian *Herald* labeled the advice a "doctrine that had . . . resulted in growing up a generation of moral cowards . . ." and the *Cleveland Gazette* termed it a "doctrine of surrender." The *Louisiana News* branded Washington a "White-Man-Made-Leader." While the Tuskegee president, as a result of the radicals' experiences with the Democratic administration, became even more convinced that the economic basis offered the only hope for the advancement of the Negro, DuBois took the position that the events under Wilson only proved that the Negro had left politics alone too long and as a result, possessed no effective voice in his government.²³

FOOTNOTES

¹Basil Mathews, *Booker T. Washington: Educator and Interracial Interpreter* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948); C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 75-107, 142-175.

²Charles W. Puttkammer and Ruth Worthy, "William Monroe Trotter, 1872-1934," *Journal of Negro History* (October, 1958), VI, 298.

³The terms "Radicals" and "independents" will be used to denote those Negroes who were opposed to Booker T. Washington's methods, especially his de-emphasis of political activity, and his accommodation attitude.

⁴Elliott M. Rudwick, "The Niagara Movement," *Journal of Negro History* (July, 1957), XLII, 177-200.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Emma Lou Thornbrough, "The Brownsville Episode and the Negro Vote," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (December, 1957) XLIV, 469-494.

⁷Woodward, *New South*, 321-396; Puttkammer and Worthy, "William Monroe Trotter," 317.

⁸Francis L. Broderick, *W.E.B. DuBois: Negro Leader in a Time of Crisis* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1959), 96.

⁹Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The Road to the White House* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1947), 501-504.

¹⁰Ray Stannard Baker, *Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters* (8 vols., New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1927-1938), III, 387.

- "Link, *Road to the White House*, 504.
- "Baker, *Life and Letters*, III, 387-388.
- "Broderick, *DuBois*, 96.
- "Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The New Freedom* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1956), 246-247.
- "Baker, *Life and Letters*, IV, 221.
- "*Ibid.*, 223.
- "*Crisis*, (December, 1913), VII, 88.
- "*Ibid.*, (February, 1914), VII, 17.
- "*Ibid.*, (January, 1915), IX, 119-120; *New York Times*, November 13, 1914, 5.
- "*Crisis*, (January, 1915), IX, 122; (February, 1915), IX, 166.
- "*Baltimore Afro-American*, December 27, 1913; January 3, 24, 1914; February 14, 1914; editorials.
- "Kathleen Long Wolgemuth, "Woodrow Wilson's Appointment Policy and the Negro," *Journal of Southern History*, (November, 1958), XXIV, 458-467.
- "Link, *New Freedom*, 244-245; Baker, *Life and Letters*, IV, 222.
- "Kathleen Long Wolgemuth, "Woodrow Wilson and Federal Segregation," *Journal of Negro History* (April, 1959), XLIV, 172-173.
- "*Crisis*, (November, 1913), VII, 338; (November, 1914), IX, 17; (December, 1914), IX, 71.
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