"Grudgingly, Unwillingly, Almost Insultingly": Racial Progress in the Era of the Great War

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Historians have rightly viewed the decade of the Great War as a time of repression, disappointment, and racially motivated violence directed at African Americans, but it was also a time of surprisingly positive developments.[1] The logic of wartime mobilization, along with the Fourteenth Amendment's still-operative provisions for the rights of national citizenship and the presence in the government of liberal voices, resulted in key changes in the practical status and circumstances of African Americans even during the period of the most racist national administration of the 20th century. Developments in diverse arenas, from the Supreme Court to wartime agencies, combined with the mass migration into northern industrial centers, helped to make this turbulent decade an important period in the struggle of African Americans for full citizenship. Whereas in the wake of war European colonial powers intensified subordination of their African subjects, in the United States the reaffirmation of national citizenship and the right of free movement helped pave the way for eventual civil rights breakthroughs.

Focusing attention on the possibilities and achievements of the Great War era contributes to a growing historical literature on continuities in African Americans' struggles to achieve equal rights. Indeed, the Great War era invites us to stretch the concept of the "long civil rights movement" both chronologically and institutionally. Civil rights historians have been not so much reinterpreting the chronology of the Movement as reminding us of the struggles, both in the streets and in legal arenas, that predated and provided the impetus for the heroic public saga of civil rights, stretching from *Brown* to Memphis. Thus far, this reconsideration has focused on the period from the New Deal forward, stressing depression-era activism, the impact of anti-colonial struggles of the 1930s and 1940s, and the activism associated with the Double V and fair employment movements

of World War II.[2] But there is no reason why the notion of a "long civil rights movement" should not be extended to embrace the 1910s. As Chad Williams, Steven Reich, Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., and Brian Kelly remind us, the war itself incubated militant activism. Migration northward brought at least a modicum of political influence and helped foster cultural assertiveness.[3]

Wartime economic change and military mobilization both revivified ongoing traditions of black resistance and triggered black activism. Thus, for example, Paul Ortiz's *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (2005) chronicles four decades of black resistance to racial violence, segregation, and discrimination. His account of black activism among labor activists, fraternal order members, church women, and other African Americans culminates in a moving account of the 1920 election when "The Florida movement stood poised at the brink of a great victory against one-party rule in the South." Inspired in part by the wartime rhetoric of democracy

and by the service of thousands of black Floridians in the American Expeditionary Force, African Americans throughout the state mobilized to register to vote and thus to overcome the legal and extra-legal obstacles that denied them the suffrage. "Men must register and pay their poll tax. . . .Now is the time when the ballot is mightier than the bayonet. . .," declared Jacksonville editor W. I. Lewis in February, 1920. Through the spring of that year, African Americans all over Florida, led–*pace* Lewis's outdated gender reference by newly franchised black women–flocked to the registration offices. In the end, of course, a lethal combination of official obstruction and massive violence thwarted Florida's promising experiment in bi-racial democracy, but, Ortiz reminds us, this bid for democratic citizenship linked both to prewar struggles and ongoing assertions of civil rights.[4]

The role of the federal government with respect to race in the Great War era also bears scrutiny. Throughout U.S. history, civil rights advance has inevitably involved governmental action, whether through constitutional amendment, legislation, executive orders, or administrative action. The racial injustices

of the Woodrow Wilson administration are well-known, as is the gross mistreatment of African Americans in the United States Army.[5] But the logic of world war, even before U.S. belligerency, required federal authorities, whatever their reluctance to challenge the existing racial order, to acknowledge the importance of blacks as workers and citizens. Thus, in its reaction to the Great Migration itself, to the demands of wartime manpower allocation, and to the military and industrial requirements of mobilization, the Wilson administration found itself adopting measures and implementing policies that offered a brief glimpse of how federal power might be used, however "grudgingly, unwillingly, almost insultingly."[6] Few if any of the actions of the U.S. Department of Labor, including the establishment in 1917 of the Division of Negro Economics, were motivated by altruism or egalitarian sentiments. Rulings of the United States Railroad Administration and the National War Labor Board that sometimes upheld black workers' claims stemmed from concerns about insuring full mobilization and production, not from principled commitment to equal treatment. In 1917,

when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a local ordinance that would have legally barred blacks (and whites) from residing in designated areas, it did so out of concern for property rights and not in furtherance of racial justice. But when are political and administrative leaders *not* responsive to economic and national security considerations? When do the courts *not* privilege property rights? To be sure, these benign federal gestures were more than matched by the growth of the government's surveillance and repressive apparatus, which singled out African Americans as particularly needful of suspicion and scrutiny.[7] But the apprehensions of southern whites about the war's likelihood of spurring racial change and their seemingly atavistic fears that expanding federal authority would inevitably threaten the national consensus about black subordination were not entirely misplaced. "War," Randolph Bourne famously declared, "is the life of the state." It also offered, at least briefly, a different vision of how race might be negotiated in 20th century America.

The era of the Great War was a time of hope, hardship, and bitter disappointment for African Americans. Indeed, historian

John Higham has singled out World War I as being alone among major US conflicts in the lack of progress associated with it, declaring that it "fails completely to fit the general pattern." World War I, he charges, "made race relations worse rather than better. . . ."[8] Yet from another angle of vision, the World War I decade was a hinge on which eventual civil rights advances turned. The 1910s were in fact an important gestation period in the modern struggle for equality. Despite the spate of outrages immediately following the war itself, in the generation following the Armistice the public status and political influence of African Americans expanded decisively.[9]

A comparison of the U.S. experience vis-a-vis race in the 20th century's two world wars is instructive. We highlight the Second World War as laying the basis for subsequent civil rights advance.[10] The establishment of the Fair Employment Practice Committee and several landmark Supreme Court decisions; Truman's Commission on Civil Rights in 1947; the civil rights platform planks of the Democratic party in 1948; and state anti-discrimination laws all provide support for the theme of the Good War's positive impact. Yet it was not until 1964, 19 years after Hiroshima, that Congress passed a comprehensive Civil Rights Act. Interestingly, the period from the establishment in 1918 of the Division of Negro Economics–the first federal body since the Civil War-era Freedmen's Bureau to express a friendly interest in the economic circumstances of black citizens–to the adoption in 1941 FEPC is 23 years, exactly the span elapsed between promulgation of the FEPC and adoption of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.[11] Like the FEPC, the DNE was abandoned after the war emergency; like the FEPC, however, the DNE played a role in placing the concerns of African American workers on the national agenda.

The dismal racial record of the Wilson administration and of the United States Army hardly needs reiteration here.[12] Even so, however, the logic of wartime mobilization, as well as the proclivities of some key members of the Woodrow Wilson administration, did at least briefly allow a glimpse of what a more racially egalitarian order might look like. Administration officials' response to complaints about the migration of large numbers of African

Americans northward indicated the extent to which manpower needs and industrial mobilization, along with the Fourteenth Amendment's race-blind assertion of national citizenship, could challenge the existing racial order. Moreover, wartime legislation designed to provide support for the female and juvenile dependents of conscripted soldiers provided further evidence of the unintended but difficult to circumvent egalitarian thrust of both federal initiative and the logic of manpower mobilization. Thus in the fall of 1917, Congress provided an across-the-board allotment of $30.00 a month for all married conscripts. With allowances for children, the monthly stipend could reach $65.00. Designed to keep intact male breadwinning status during the war emergency, the measure did not–nor could it–take need or race into account. At a time when southern agricultural workers often earned less than a dollar a day, these federal allotments and allowances, distribution of which entirely bypassed the local power structure, spelled a powerful disincentive for African American women to continue to work in the fields or as domestic servants, adding to the South's perceived manpower (or in this case, womanpower) crisis.[13]

Both the Great Migration and the perceived affects of the allotment program created consternation among important Democratic constituencies. The mass movement of blacks northward, along with fears of the effects of family allotments on local labor markets, alarmed planters and politicians, accustomed to a plentitude of cheap labor. Complained a Louisiana congressman in July, 1917, "The negroes have been leaving in bunches of twenty five to fifty every Saturday night for the last three months."[14] Reflecting complaints by whites that allotment checks were drying up supplies of low wage domestic workers, the mayor of Savannah, complained that "the laborers find they can support themselves without working full time. . . ." Encouraged by the US Army's Provost General, southern cities and states adopted "work or fight" ordinances, ostensibly as a means of compelling unpatriotic "slackers" to contribute to the war effort but in reality, in the southern racial context, a means of forcing blacks to accept substandard wages in their accustomed agricultural or domestic work.[15]

Hardly less concerned were labor

unionists and political leaders in the host states and cities. Thus, in the same month Minnesota governor John Lind wired labor secretary Wilson that "The government must stop the movement of Negros into this section at once[.] I shudder to think of the consequences if this is not done." And, assessing responsibility for the savage racial assaults in East Saint Louis, in June and July of 1917, a committee of Illinois labor leaders declared that "the riots were due to the excessive and abnormal number of negroes . . . [pouring into] East St. Louis."[16]

The effects of the migration and the implications of the allotment system triggered calls for federal regulation of labor mobility. Both southern economic elites and northern labor interests urged the Department of Labor to act. Surely the wartime emergency would enable the Department of Labor to stop the flow of labor northward and provide federal support for local "work or fight" measures.

To be sure, there was no constitutional basis for the restriction of citizens movements. Calls for the administration to "do something" about the black exodus rarely acknowledged the difficulty of restricting U.S. citizens' free

movement across state lines. Presumably, those calling on the government to block black migration northward were implicitly urging such a policy as an emergency war measure of some sort. Here, however, they ran into difficulties, for, with the virtual cessation of European immigration that the outbreak of the war had caused, industrial employers were equally adamant in asserting their desperate need for black labor in northern munitions works.

Southern white employers nonetheless fought hard to retain their entitlement to geographically restricted, low wage black labor privilege. In the 1910s, southern states routinely passed legislation designed to impede or halt outside labor recruitment. State and local ordinances typically imposed prohibitive licensing charges on recruiters. Southern mailmen confiscated copies of newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* that encouraged the exodus and contained practical information for would-be sojourners. Southern state and local officials also sabotaged the federal government's efforts to recruit workers for military construction. In May, 1918, for example, the director of the United States Employment Service (USES), an arm of the

Department of Labor, complained that "Florida has arrested numerous of these labor agents and now has in jail at Gainesville two officers of our Service who have been recruiting common labor for the Army projects at Norfolk." State officials told USES officers that "Florida absolutely forbids recruiting labor from the state."[17]

It is true that federal agents sometimes collaborated in white southerners' efforts to retain the benefits of cheap, captive labor. For example, in the summer of 1918, one southern saw mill operator complained that contractors building the government's great munitions complex at Muscle Shoals, Alabama, were "offering my niggers . . . $3.80 and $4.00 a day, while I am paying them $2." USES Director John Densmore sympathized with this dilemma, thus reflexively endorsing southern white employers' sense of entitlement to low-wage black labor. While duly pointing out that it would not be legal for his agency openly to dissuade the movement of black labor toward more remunerative opportunities, Densmore pledged that "if the $2 fellow in the sawmill down there is satisfied with his $2–and he is or he would not be working there–we, as

part of the Government, are not going to . . . lay before him newspapers showing what they do at Muscle Shoals to get him to move away from there. We will let him alone. . . .'" Representatives of the Department of Agriculture, most notably southern county agents, always sensitive to local white constituencies in the South, were more aggressive in aiding planters and other employers to discourage blacks from migrating, demanding higher wages, or even changing jobs. Since the United States Supreme Court had in the past sanctioned certain kinds of restrictions on geographical mobility–approving, for example, state laws imposing heavy licensing fees on labor agents, the clear intent of which were to impede black agricultural workers' freedom of movement–there was no guarantee that in the perfervid atmosphere of wartime emergency that the Woodrow Wilson administration could not have found ways of acceding to the demands of these important constituencies.[18]

Overall, however, Secretary of Labor Wilson resisted these pressures. He did acknowledge that "The migration of negroes from the South . . . in larger numbers than can be assimilated in the North has caused a

great deal of anxiety to the Department of Labor, both because of the fear of friction in the North and the shortage of labor in the South." And the Department of Labor's agencies most intimately involved with manpower mobilization, notably the USES and the DNE, did at times advise potential migrants of the perils of relocation, even as they counseled southern employers that improved wages and conditions of employment would help to keep black workers on the farms. Nonetheless, Wilson repeatedly pointed out to advocates of governmental restriction that no agency of the government, even during wartime, had any authority to impede the free movement of people across state lines. Moreover, the secretary and his aides resisted the "work or fight" movement that peaked in the summer of 1918, despite pressure from potent southern political sources and the military itself. In the end, though politically disfranchised and socially reviled, African Americans simply could not, finally and generally, be treated as other than US citizens when it came to the fundamental right of free transit.[19]

Under William B. Wilson, the main response of the government, though the

Department of Labor, was a joint program of detailed study and on-site exhortation and negotiation. Alert even before the entry of the US into the war to the vast dimensions of the black migration, in 1916 Wilson borrowed two black investigators from the Department of Commerce to conduct a preliminary survey of the scope and impact of the migration and then recruited academic and social investigator James H. Dillard to oversee a more ambitious analysis. Spurred in part by concern "expressed over the probable loss . . . of southern crops through the departure. . . of Negro workers in appalling numbers," Dillard's report provided a wealth of information about conditions both North and South but made no specific recommendations for governmental action.[20]

The declaration of war in April, 1917, further spurred blacks' search for industrial opportunity and the numbers leaving southern plantations and cities swelled. At the urging of black leaders, in May of 1918, Secretary Wilson created a new body in the Department of Labor, the Division of Negro Economics. To head it, he tapped Dr. George Edmond Haynes, a distinguished African American social

scientist and a founder of the National Urban League. The DNE, which operated without a separate budget line and functioned in the field in close association with the United States Employment Service, had two primary tasks. One was to monitor and analyze the scope and effects of the migration. The other was to spur wartime production by easing the so-called "labor shortage" in the South while promoting amity and accord between white and black workers in newly biracial northern settings.[21]

Throughout its two-year existence, the DNE and its director walked a tightrope. On the one hand, Haynes's brief was to subordinate all considerations to prosecution of the war effort. Yet southern commercial and agricultural elites were determined to cling to their sources of cheap and, so they thought, docile labor. But it was black leaders who pushed for the creation of the Bureau and militants in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) could be relied upon to criticize any concessions to southern interests. Moreover, southern blacks themselves proved deeply suspicious of any official efforts to discourage migration:

reported one of Dillard's white investigators, "all the advice about staying in the South that we shower on the Negro, he reads backward."[22]

Moreover, Haynes was convinced that the migrations constituted a magnificent opportunity for members of his race to gain a foothold in industry, improve their living standards, gain access to educational opportunities, and generally promote black betterment and achieve full citizenship. Creating a structure of state committees in both the chief departure and host states, working deferentially through the existing white power structure in the former, and dissociating himself and the government generally from the currents of race radicalism that the war fostered, Haynes and his state directors and field agents worked assiduously to ease the economic transitions, North and South, involved in the migration. Able investigators in Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and New Jersey conducted a series of illuminating studies of the living, working, religious, and leisure-time lives of new northern workers. At the same time, their southern counterparts worked to blunt the impact of "work or fight" orders, to recruit local blacks for needed war production, and

to promote the view that the key to retention of southern labor was the improvement of wages and working and living conditions on Dixie's farms and in her lumber camps and construction sites. Although Bureau staff members were not able to devise quantitative instruments for measuring the effects of their work, their efforts, given considerable public visibility by Secretary Wilson, helped to blunt the call for repressive labor measures and for curtailment of physical mobility.[23]

It was Haynes's great hope that the work of the BNE could continue into the postwar period and that the Bureau could become a permanent agency. The migration, he believed, marked a decisive breakthrough in the struggles of African Americans. "'Mr. Opportunity,'" he advised a Detroit audience, ". . . has taken hold of the Negro worker's right hand and has led him into the place of work. . . ." Nor was potential progress confined to the North, for "One of the striking things is that 'Mr. Opportunity' is concerning himself in the South. . . as well as in the North," since southern whites were being forced to improve conditions so as to retain their labor force. After the Armistice, Bureau agents

continued to file detailed reports of living and working conditions in northern states, as the end of the war failed to stem the flow of African Americans northward. Although Congress quickly cut funding for the USES, into whose budget DNE allocations were folded, Haynes soldiered on into mid-1920 attempting to keep alive what he and his allies in the black community considered the most important federal racial initiative since Reconstruction.[24]

Indeed, if progress was to be steady and secure, blacks and whites needed the support of a benign federal government. In Haynes's view, the racial balance in the North was delicate, with much friction between white and black workers. Militant race-conscious elements were capitalizing on the frustration and anger of migrants who too often encountered poor housing and hostility on the part of white fellow workers. Migrants' "discontent growing out of previous conditions and present maladjustment. . ., their desire for American rights, their resentment against unjust discriminations and other un-American practices. . . make them a very ripe field for unrest, friction and disturbances. . . ," he warned. In view of the kinds of racial

tensions that erupted into deadly violence in Washington, Chicago, and elsewhere in the summer of 1919, a federal presence was desperately needed, perhaps more so than during the war itself, for angry transplanted blacks "will listen to counsel and guidance from Federal agents as from no others."[25]

Haynes's appeals, however, were unavailing. By the fall of 1920 this promising experiment in federal manpower and race relations management was a dead letter. Neither the southern-dominated outgoing 66th Congress nor the incoming 67th regarded ongoing involvement of the federal government in the monitoring or amelioration of social conditions a necessary or appropriate function. Stripped of his investigating staff and his office help, Haynes returned to his teaching post at Fisk University. There he continued to write as a private citizen about the migration, seeking to encourage the efforts of civic and religious bodies to provide moral and practical support to the new black urban communities. Groups such as the Urban League attempted to fill the void left by federal departure but for the most part the great migration continued apace into the 1920s with little public oversight or direction.[26]

Other wartime agencies also gave initial evidence of concern for the welfare of African American workers, although none specifically targeted the problems of black wage-earners. The U.S. Railroad Administration, created in December, 1917, to take over operation of the chaotic transport system, promulgated a series of rulings that facilitated the organization of some black workers and even on occasion favored the interests of black employees in opposition to the demands of the powerful and thoroughly racist mainstream white railroad brotherhoods. USRA support for black workers, however, was at best episodic and ended abruptly with the cessation of the fighting as the white rail unions were quickly able to gain governmental backing for the exclusion of blacks from all "operating" positions.[27]

The record of another wartime agency, the National War Labor Board, was better, however. Established in the spring of 1918, the NWLB played a key role in boosting union membership and extending industrial democracy. Led by militant progressive Frank Walsh, it intervened in a number of racially pregnant labor disputes.

In cases involving streetcar operators in New Orleans, laundresses in Arkansas, iron and steel workers in Alabama, and phosphate miners in Florida, NWLB investigators came down on the side of equal pay for equal work and the rights of workers to workplace representation, regardless of race. However, as soon as the war ended, employers everywhere immediately withdrew even their grudging cooperation with the Board and refused to implement its awards even before the Board's official termination in May of 1919.[28] In the actions of both the USRA and the NWLB, African American workers and race spokesmen caught a glimpse of what might be possible from a national government in its dealings with black workers at the heart of the wartime economy. The brevity of American belligerency and the sharp postwar reaction against virtually all evidences of war-begotten federal activism, however, quickly ended these seemingly promising experiments in de facto workplace equality.[29]

The brevity of the war also truncated other, non-governmental initiatives that seemingly had the potential for decisively shifting national perspectives on race. The American labor movement, long a bastion of racial exclusivism, at last showed signs of responsiveness to the concerns of black workers, for example. In 1919, the American Federation of Labor established a committee to investigate the possibilities of launching a major organizing campaign among black workers and its officers conferred regularly with civil rights leaders who were eager for progressive allies in a tense racial climate. Indeed, a number of promising initiatives in bi-racial unionism marked the wartime and immediate post-war period. In Chicago, mass unions of packinghouse workers brought blacks and whites together in a city seething with racial tensions. In Little Rock, Birmingham, central Florida, and backwoods Louisiana laundresses, metal workers, phosphate miners, and wood products workers sought to take advantage of wartime labor shortages and a relatively benign federal disputes resolution machinery to build bi-racial unions.[30]

War era developments also triggered black political activism. As early as 1915, W. E. B. Du Bois, then editor of the NAACP magazine *The Crisis*, had brilliantly

adumbrated the ways in which the war raging in Europe opened opportunities for recognition and leadership for African Americans. In "The African Roots of the War," an essay published in the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly*, the fiery editor pointed to the role of imperial rivalry in accounting for the outbreak of the conflict. Prior to the 19th century, he held, European elites could exploit their domestic populations with relative impunity. But the rise of popular democracy, organized labor, and socialism had democratized material expectations. "It is," Du Bois held, "no longer simply the merchant prince, or the aristocratic monopoly, or even the employing class, that is exploiting the world: it is the nation; a new democratic nation composed of united capital and labor." For elites to continue to exert political, economic, and cultural authority, they had to find ways to extend the benefits of material bounty to once-subordinated domestic populations. The result was the imperial scramble, wherein now-democratic European states sought access to the resources and cheap labor of the non-Western world, notably Africa, as a means of meeting the demands of formerly quiescent workers and peasants. In the

resulting imperial rivalry, particularly involving Africa, lay the roots of the war, even as both sides recruited African workers and soldiers to wage it.

The war, Du Bois believed, must end in the awakening of colonial peoples and in addressing their legitimate demands for self-government and participation in the advantages that modern regimes of production offered. To be sure, Africans and other people of color, Du Bois conceded, needed tutelage. A product himself of elite western education, he shared the view that people of color needed guidance from the West in entering the modern world. And it was here, in a version of the same American exceptionalism that animated Wilson, that Du Bois saw a distinctive role for African Americans. Victims of racism and imperial outrage, African Americans had nonetheless adapted to and were participating in the modern world. They were in a unique position to supply the leadership, born of their special experience and their record of social advance, to bring Africa into its rightful place in the new world order. Thus, Du Bois, while remaining a sharp critic of Woodrow Wilson's blinkered view of

colonialism and while continuing to advance an astringent critique of western imperialism, urged African Americans to support the U.S. war effort as a means not only of strengthening claims at home to equal rights but also of assuming leadership roles in the post-colonial aftermath of the conflict.[31]

Other African American activists drew more extreme lessons from the wartime turbulence. Thus, in New York and Chicago for example radical black organizations proliferated, often invoking anti-war sentiments and linking them to calls for militant racial struggle in the United States and in European colonial dependencies. Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association recruited thousands of adherents in the eastern and southern cities, while groups such as the African Blood Brotherhood and the black socialists associated with Chandler Owen's and A. Philip Randolph's magazine *The Messenger* attracted the attention of federal surveillance agents.[32] But it was the NAACP that seemed for a time to be using the ferment among African Americans most effectively in broadening its membership base and extending recruiting well beyond

its traditional constituency of urban professionals and businessmen. In Texas, for example, NAACP organizers had a field day through the immediate postwar months. "JOIN NOW AND FIGHT FOR JUSTICE," urged a black weekly in Dallas, seeking to mobilize African Americans to resist racial violence. "'The people are in a "fever heat,'" wrote a local secretary. Thousands of blacks flocked into new branches, many of them springing up in small hamlets. Returning veterans and newly politicized women played key roles in this remarkable flowering of activism. "Send me a copy of the 13th, 14th, 15th amendment," a local secretary pleaded, for "'the time has come that the white man and the black man to stand upon terms of social equality.'" In a number of Texas towns, petitions from engorged NAACP branches were instrumental in causing white mayors to ban the showing of the racist film *The Birth of a Nation*.[33]

During the decade of the Great War also, the United States Supreme Court began a cautious retreat from its robust endorsement of segregation and discrimination. Inspired in part by the promulgation in 1913 of the Natives Land

Act in South Africa, some southern whites sought adoption in the United States of similar measures, designed to prohibit black residence in designated areas. A broad movement to emulate South Africa by creating large, racially exclusive black and white zones eventually fell victim to the reliance of southern economic elites on cheap black labor. But a number of southern cities did adopt ordinances that would designate geographical areas in which black (or white) residency was prohibited. In many ways, the movement toward this sort of geographical restriction was the logical culmination of the powerful segregationist impulse underway since the late 19th century, an impulse that as late as 1908 in the *Berea College* case the Supreme Court had sanctioned. But in April, 1917, the Court, in an important precedent setting case, struck down a Louisville ordinance that provided legal enforcement of residential segregation. Though narrowly framed, the Court's decision in *Buchanan v. Warley* was crucial in that it specified sharp limits to the segregationist tide expressed in the *Plessy* (1896) and *Berea* (1908) cases and rejected, albeit on narrow, property rights grounds, the legally enforceable effort

to impose strict geographical segregation on racial lines. While the *Buchanan* decision was in no way connected with the Woodrow Wilson administration, it did illustrate the ways in which the logic of the 14th Amendment's specification of national citizenship, however abridged in other respects, operated to affirm African Americans' rights in the critical realm of personal mobility.[34]

All in all, considering both governmental actions and organizing impulse within the black community, the African American experience during the era of the Great War was one of promising beginnings, abrupt endings, and opportunities for future advance. The AFL never did budge from its haughty and self-defeating attitude toward African Americans and the promising grass roots efforts of meatpackers, timber workers, phosphate miners, and others soon fell victim to repression, internal conflict, and lack of sustained support. While the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters preserved a precarious existence through the 1920s and eventually linked up with the eloquent Randolph to lay the basis for a successful black union, other initiatives went

underground or collapsed under the pressure of federal and state harassment. The DNE went out of business and although the Republican administrations of the 1920s often verbally invoked racial justice, they provided no tangible support for black aspirations, the passage by the House of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in 1922 proving the high-water mark of GOP concern for its African American constituents.

In another sense, though, what was important about the era of the Great War for African Americans was what *didn't* happen. Looked at from the broad perspective of the 20th century overall, no event is more important that the mass migration that began after war broke out in 1914. Over the decades, this great population shift beginning in the era of the Great War brought millions of people into the nation's industrial and urban matrix. For all of the problems that have developed in the great urban ghettoes, migration northward has been central to the entry of African Americans into the mainstream of American life. Despite its discriminatory features and the failure of public authorities to support the legitimate aspirations of blacks, North and South, migration had a permanent and

positive economic effect. To take just one measure, the proportion of blacks classified as skilled workers by the census rose from 7.9% in 1910 to 12.6% in 1930 (on its way toward 24% in 1950). And certainly, the political power that enfranchised blacks in key northern cities was the fulcrum that forced Congress to give substance to the 14th and 15th Amendments and to make real the constitutional rights adopted in the 19th century.[35]

This observation, commonplace though it may be, leads to another, namely that the refusal to restrict internal migration may have been the most important positive race relations legacy of the public men of the World War I era. The absence of measures on the part of the federal government to treat African Americans as constitutionally "other" merits registering. Clearly, when it came to matters of prejudice and discrimination, the government was often shockingly overt in its ill-treatment of blacks, as Du Bois, the *Defender*, and thousands of ordinary black citizens frequently and eloquently complained. Yet citizenship rights were crucial in a sense precisely because they were so rarely enforced. They remained on

the books, repositories of legitimate dreams and aspirations and texts upon which moral and legal appeals could be based. And of course with the migration northward, voting and other civic rights now *were* exercised.[36]

The fates of other blacks caught in the maelstrom of the Great War contrasted sharply with those of African Americans. In French West Africa, the French recruited and conscripted over 170,000 Senegalese and other colonials, over 30,000 of whom died in service. Tens of thousands of Africans were imported into France to work in wartime transport and industry. During and after the war, when conscription was actually intensified, these men not only suffered from discrimination and ill-treatment; even more importantly, they were subjected to special rules and disciplines, both as soldiers and civilians. Postwar rule in Africa brought no rewards for loyal service but rather ever more degraded civic status. Remarks the historian of these "colonial conscripts," "For Africans, conscription was but another example of how their situation compared to France of the *ancien regime* rather than to France of the Revolution. No egalitarianism was ever intended or extended. . . ."[37]

South African blacks were even more harshly victimized. Although the African Native National Congress endorsed the Imperial war effort and blacks volunteered to fight, South African authorities refused them any military role. Indeed South African statesman Jan Christian Smuts chided his British and French allies for *their* use of black troops in Africa and in France: In the future, he told a London audience in the spring of 1917, "I hope that . . . the military training of natives . . . will be prevented, as we have prevented it in South Africa. It can well be foreseen that armies may yet be trained there, which under proper leading might prove a danger to civilisation itself." Labor battalions recruited for heavy work in England and on the Western Front suffered appalling rates of death owing to disease and poor conditions. Six-hundred died in the English Channel when the ship on which they were being transported, *Mendi*, was sunk. Worse, however, was to come, for in the wake of war, the reward for blacks' support of the Imperial war effort and for the sacrifices they made was reaffirmation and drastic intensification of pre-war measures that relegated them to increasingly inferior civic

status.[38]

The point here is not that America's black citizens should have been grateful for escaping worse mistreatment or that theoretical political and constitutional rights are a substitute for substantive justice. The sometimes-promising initiatives of the Wilson government, as evidenced in the work of the Division of Negro Economics, offer a sad counterpoint to the disappointments and illusions of the whole enterprise of the Great Crusade. To look back through the official records of America's wartime agencies in their dealings with fellow citizens of color is to be newly appalled and shocked by the depth and scope of racism.

But Du Bois's mid-war judgment that "already because of this war . . . the [people of the] Negro race in the United States, have gained more than at any time since emancipation" was not entirely mistaken.[39] The physical and moral fact of the Great Migration insured that, in contrast to the experience after the Civil War, African American progress would not descend again to what historian Rayford W. Logan called "the nadir"[40] of race relations in the United States that prevailed in the

quarter century before the Great War. The preservation of fundamental constitutional status even during a period of perceived national crisis and intense and virtually universal ideological racism was, in the end, a worthy, if inadvertent, achievement of a government otherwise notable for its disdain and disregard for its citizens of color.

Endnotes

1. There is as yet no comprehensive study of race and politics in the 1910s. For now-standard treatments, see Jane Lang Scheiber and Harry N. Scheiber, "The Wilson Administration and the Wartime Mobilization of Black Americans, 1917-18, *Labor History* 10: 3 (Summer 1969): 433-58, and Nancy J. Weiss, "The Negro and the New Freedom: Fighting Wilsonian Segregation," *Political Science Quarterly* 84: 1 (March 1969): 61-79. Important works that also deal with this theme include Theodore Kornweibel, Jr.,*"Seeing Red": Federal Campaigns against Black Militancy, 1919-1925* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998); Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., *"Investigate Everything": Federal Efforts to Compel Black Loyalty during World War I* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002); Mark Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance: African Americans and the United States Government during World War I* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001); David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (NY:

Henry Holt, 1993); Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (NY: Viking, 2001), 86-109; and Jonathan Rosenberg, "For Democracy, Not Hypocrisy: World War and Race Relations in the United States, 1914-1919," *International History Review*, 21: 3 (September 1999): 592-625. Recent general studies of the U.S. in World War I include Jennifer D. Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), and Robert H. Zieger, *America's Great War: World War I and the American Experience* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000). Still standard, however, is David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (NY: Oxford, 1980).

2. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91: 4 (March 2005): 1233-63; Cheryl Greenberg, *"Or Does It Explode?": Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Risa Lauren Goluboff, "'Let Economic Equality Take Care of Itself': The NAACP, Labor Litigation, and the Making of Civil Rights in the 1940s," *UCLA Law Review* 52: 5 (June 2005): 1393-1486; Patricia Sullivan, "Southern Reformers, the New Deal, and the Movement's Foundation," *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies*, ed. Armstead L. Robinson and Patricia Sullivan (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991), 81-102. See Max Krochmal, "An Unmistakably Working-Class Vision: Birmingham's Foot Soldiers and Their Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Southern History* 76: 4 (November 2010): 923-60, for

a cogent case study that stresses continuity between the Popular Front era and the 1950s and 1960s.

3. Chad Williams, "Vanguards of the New Negro: African American Veterans and Post-World War I Racial Militancy," *Journal of African American History* 92 (2007): 347-70; Steven A. Reich, "Soldiers of Democracy: Black Texans and the Fight for Citizenship, 1917-1921," *Journal of American History* 82: 4 (March 1996): 1478-1504; Kornweibel, *"Investigate Everything"*, 1-9; Brian Kelly, "No Easy Way Through: Race Leadership and Black Workers at the Nadir," Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas 7: 3 (Fall 2010): 79-93; and Mark Whalan, *The Great War and the Culture of the New Negro* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008).

4. Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 142-236; quotes on pp. 205, 171.

5. For a fascinating and insightful addition to the extensive literature on African American military service during World War I, see Richard Slotkin, *Lost Battalions: The Great War and the Crisis of American Nationality* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005), 1-11, 35-71, 112-53, and passim.

6. The words are those of Du Bois, March, 1918, as quoted in Philip Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker* (New York: International Publishers*,* 1974), 140.

7. Kornweibel, *"Investigate Everything"*; Kornweibel,*"Seeing Red"*; Mark Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance African Americans and the United States Government during World War I* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001)

8. John Higham, "Three Reconstructions," *New York Review of Books*, November 6, 1997.

9. See Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

10. E.g., Merl E. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1991); Richard Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution," *Journal of American History* 54:4 (March 1968): 90-106; Andrew Edmund Kersten, *Race, Jobs, and the War: The FEPC in the Midwest, 1941-1946* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000). On state anti-discrimination legislation in the postwar period, see James Wolfinger, "'An Equal Opportunity to Make a Living–and a Life': The FEPC and Postwar Black Politics," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 4:2 (Summer 2007): 65-94; and Anthony S. Chen, *The Fifth Freedom: Jobs, Politics, and Civil Rights in the United States, 1941-1972* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

11. See Daniel Kryder, *Divided Arsenal:*

Race and the American State during World War II (Cambridge; NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 257-58.

12. See endnote 1 for the relevant citations, as well as Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International origins of Anti-Colonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 26-28, 34. Recent examinations of the African American military experience in World War I include Chad L.Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Nina Mjagkij, *Loyalty in Time of Trial: The African American Experience During World War I* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011); and Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I* (Harvard Univeristy Press, 2009).

13. K. Walter Hickel, "War, Region, and Social Welfare: Federal Aid to Servicemen's Dependents in the South, 1917-1921," *Journal of American History* 87: 4 (Mar 2001): 1362-91. See also Cindy Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997, 83-96, 103-113.

14. Louisiana Congressman John T. Watkins to William B. Wilson, July 14, 1917, *Great Migration*, Reel 14.

15. Quoted in Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor*, 103.

16. Lind telegram to Wilson, July 7, 1917, *Great Migration*, Reel 14; Report of Labor Committee of State Council of Defense of Illinois upon the Inquiry into the Recent Race Riots in East St. Louis, n.d.; enclosed in John M. Walker, President of the Illinois State Fed of Labor, to William B. Wilson, July 5, 1917, ibid. For a somewhat more positive view of organized labor's opposition to mob violence, see Malcolm McLaughlin, "Reconsidering the East St. Louis Race Riot of 1917," *International Review of Social History* 47 (2002): 187-212.

17. David E. Bernstein, *Only One Place of Redress: African Americans, Labor Regulations, and the Courts from Reconstruction to the New Deal* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 9-26, and supporting notes; William Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 238; William J. Breen, "Sectional Influences on National Policy: The South, the Labor Department, and the Wartime Labor Mobilization, 1917-1918," *The South Is Another Land: Essays on the Twentieth-Century South*, ed. Bruce Clayton and John A. Salmond (Westport: Greenwood, 1987), 78. See also William J. Breen, *Labor Market Politics and the Great War: The Department of Labor, the States, and the First U.S. Employment Service, 1907-1933* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1997), 126-30.

18. Breen, "Sectional Influences on National Policy," 76; Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge*, 238. On agricultural recruitment and the role of the USDA in the South, see Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor*,

83-96.

19. W. B. Wilson to John Lind, July 16, 1917, *Great Migration*, Reel 14; George E. Haynes, "Function and Work of the Division of Negro Economics in the Office of the Secretary of Labor," corrected as to March 15, 1919, ibid., Reel 12.

20. Dillard quoted in Breen, "Sectional Influences on National Policy**,**" 72**;** U.S., Division of Negro Economics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Negro Migration in 1916-17*, with an introduction by J. H. Dillard (Washington: GPO, 1919; 1969 reprint)**.**

21. Breen, "Sectional Influences on National Policy," 73-74; Henry P. Guzda, "Social Experiment of the Labor Department: The Division of Negro Economics," *The Public Historian* 4: 4 (Fall 1982): 7-37; Haynes, "Function and Work of the Division of Negro Economics." On Haynes' background and influence, see Francille Rusan Wilson, "Racial Consciousness and Black Scholarship: Charles W. Wesley and the Scholarship of *Negro Labor in the United States*," *Journal of Negro History* 81: 1/4 (Winter-Autumn, 1996): 81.

22. *Negro Migration in 1916-17*, 34.

23. George E. Haynes, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction: Statistics, Problems, and Policies Relating to the Grater Inclusion of Negro Wage Earners in American Industry and Agriculture* (Washington: GPO, 1921); draft article by Haynes for the *Detroit Compass*, c. June 25, 1920, *Great*

Migration, Reel 12; "Division of Negro Economics--Matters of Record," c. 1919-20, ibid.

24. "Inspector's Report on Visit to Pittsburgh, August 12-13, 1920; Eugene Kinckle Jones, Executive Secretary, National Urban League, to William B. Wilson, September 18, 1919; draft article by Haynes for the *Detroit Compass*, c. June 25, 1920, all in *Great Migration*, Reel 12.

25. Haynes, *The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction*, 21, 26-31; Haynes to William B. Wilson, July 8, 1919, *Great Migration*, Reel 14.
26. George Edmond Haynes, *Negro New-Comers in Detroit, Michigan: A Challenge to Christian Statesmanship–A Preliminary Survey* (New York: Home Missions Council, 1918; 1969 reprint); Guzda, "Social Experiment of the Labor Department: The Division of Negro Economics"; Breen, "Sectional Influences on National Policy," 73-74.

27. Eric Arnesen, "Charting an Independent Course: African-American Railroad Workers in the World War I Era," *Labor Histories: Class, Politics, and the Working-Class Experience*, ed. Eric Arnesen, Julie Green, and Bruce Laurie (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 284-308; Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 42-83.

28. Joseph McCartin, *Labor's Great War: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern American Labor Relations, 1912-1921* (Chapel Hill:

University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 114-18.

29. Burl Noggle, *Into the Twenties: The United States from Armistice to Normalcy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974).

30. For accounts of the wartime race-labor nexus, see Zieger, *America's Great War*, 203-15, and Robert H. Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America since 1865* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 91-100. Detailed discussions of bi-racial initiatives are found, e.g., in Rick Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago's Packinghouses, 1904-54* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 44-72; James R. Grossman, "The White Man's Union: The Great Migration and the Resonance of Race and Class in Chicago, 1916-1922," *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Joe William Trotter, Jr. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1991), 83-105; Elizabeth Haiken, "'The Lord Helps Those Who Help Themselves': Black Laundresses in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1917-1921," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 49: 1 (Spring 1990): 20-50; National War Labor Board, "Findings in Re Employees v. Certain Employers in Florida," February 18, 1919 (Dockets 680-91, 786, and 819); J. W. Bridwell, U. S. Commissioner of Conciliation, to Hugh Kerwin, September 19, 1918, in NWLB Records, *Great Migration*, Reel 5; Report of International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union president Charles Moyer, *Miners' Magazine*, February, 1919; Thomas Quinnan, "Logical Solution of the Colored

Man's Problem," *Miners' Magazine*, April, 1919; Minutes, NAACP Board of Directors, April 8; May 13; July 8, 1918, Du Bois Papers, Reel 8; Stephen H. Norwood, "Bogolusa Burning: The War against Biracial Unionism in the Deep South, 1919," *Journal of Southern History* 63: 3 (August 1997): 591-628.

31. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The African Roots of the War," *Atlantic Monthly* 115 (May 1915): 707-14, reprinted in Herbert Aptheker, compiler and editor, *Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois in Periodicals Edited by Others* (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1982), vol. 2, 1910-1932, 96-104; David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (NY: Henry Holt, 1993), 503-05. For Du Bois's critique of Wilson, see Zieger, *America's Great War*, 54-55. For Du Bois's general intellectual orientation, see Axel R. Shafer, "W. E. B. Du Bois, German Social Thought, and the Racial Divide in American Progressivism, 1892-1909," *JAH* 88: 3 (Dec. 2001): 925-949. Examinations of the problems associated with Du Bois's support of the war effort, in addition to that found in Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, cited above, include Mark Ellis, "'Closing Ranks' and 'Seeking Honors': W. E. B. Du Bois in World War I," *JAH* 79: 1 (June 1992): 96-124, and William Jordan, "'The Damnable Dilemma': African-American Accommodation and Protest during World War I," *JAH* 81: 4 (March 1995): 1562-83. See also William G. Jordan, *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), esp. 28-29, 69, 70, 113-15.

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34. See Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (3d ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000–paperback ed., 2001), 163-64; George Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 126-30; and Roger L. Rice, "Residential Segregation by Law, 1910-1917," *Journal of Southern History* 343:2 (May 1968), 179-99. On the effort to emulate South Africa's program of geographical restriction, see Jeffrey J. Crow, "An Apartheid for the South: Clarence Poe's Crusade for Rural Segregation," *Race, Class, and Politics in Southern History*, ed. Jeffrey J. Crow, Paul D. Escott, and Charles L. Flynn, Jr. (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1989), 216-59, and Jack Temple Kirby, *Darkness at the Dawning: Race and Reform in the Progressive South* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1972), 119-30. On Progressive Era southern

"moderates" generally, see John Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (Cambridge, etc.: CUP, 1982), 174-91. To be sure, actual de facto residential segregation proceeded apace, unaffected by the Court's ruling, as realtors, politicians, and ordinary citizens used restrictive covenants, zoning ordinances, and physical violence to enforce housing segregation. See Stephen Grant Meyer, *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 13-29, and Thomas W. Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 116-44.

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36. Second Lieutenant Edward D. Busby, National Army, to Benjamin F. McAdoo, January 17, 1918, Du Bois Papers, Reel 7. On the importance of constitutional rights during this period, see Fredrickson, "Industrialism, White Labor, and Racial Discrimination," 234-36.

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38. Kenneth W. Grundy, *Soldiers without Politics; Blacks in the South African Armed Forces* (Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press, 1983), 58-60; Albert Grundlingh, *Fighting Their Own War: South African Blacks and the First World War* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987); Fredrickson, "Industrialism, White Labor, and Racial Discrimination,"232-34.

39. Du Bois to Emmett J. Scott, April 24, 1918, Du Bois Papers, Reel 7. On Du Bois's controversial support of the war, see Mark Ellis, "'Closing Ranks' and 'Seeking Honors': W. E. B. Du Bois in World War I," *JAH* 79: 1 (June 1992): 96-124; William Jordan, "'The Damnable Dilemma': African-American Accommodation and Protest during World War I," *JAH* 81: 4 (March 1995): 1562-83; Mark Ellis, "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Formation of Black Opinion in World War I: A Commentary on 'The Damnable Dilemma,'" ibid., 1584-90; and Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race*, 525-80.

40. See Rayford W. Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (NY: Dial Press, 1954).