“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 presidential 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.

The war itself incubated militant activism. Migration northward brought at least a modicum of political influence and helped foster cultural assertiveness.² 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. In the spring of that year, African Americans all over Florida flocked to the registration offices; black women, in theory newly enfranchised, led the way. In the end, of course, a lethal combination of official obstruction and massive violence in Florida thwarted this promising initiative, but, Ortiz reminds us, this bid for democratic citizenship linked both to prewar struggles and ongoing assertions of civil rights.³

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. 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.” 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. 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. . . .” In important respects, treatment of African Americans by the Wilson administration merely ratified its long pre-war record of discrimination and disdain. Under Postmaster General Albert Burleson, window service at post offices for the first time was segregated. Other government departments, notably Treasury and Navy, downgraded black workers and segregated office facilities. Surrounded by southern advisors and with a south-dominated congressional leadership, Wilson ignored and disdained even those African Americans who had supported his presidential candidacy in 1912. In 1915, the racist film *Birth of a Nation* was the first motion picture to be screened at the White House. Neither Wilson nor any prominent member of his administration publically denounced the white-on-black violence that characterized the World War I decade, nor did he ever suggest that disfranchisement, segregation, and repression were anything other than the natural order of things. 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 has been well-documented.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.” 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. 

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.”

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.”

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 (DNE). 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 DNE 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.”

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 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 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 turn back demand for repressive labor measures and for
curtailment of physical mobility. It was Haynes’s great hope that the work of the DNE could continue into the postwar period and that it 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.

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.  

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.  

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. 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.

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 ghettos, 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. 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.\textsuperscript{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. . . .”\textsuperscript{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.  

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. 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” 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


For a fascinating and insightful addition to the literature on African American military service during World War I, see Richard Slotkin, *Lost Battalions: The Great*


14. Louisiana Congressman John T.


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


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Migration, Reel 5; Report of International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers


37. Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Senegalais in French West*

