A NEGRO LOOKS AT POLITICS

BY JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

I WAS once asked if the Negro in the South had accomplished anything in politics. I answered that he had at least furnished the South with its chief political issue. The fact is that he himself is that chief political issue. Southern statesmen may make a pretense of talking national and world politics, but it is only a pretense, for the thoughts and actions of every politician in the Southern States are inexorably limited, circumscribed, interdicted, shackled, handcuffed and muzzled by the omnipresent Negro question.

But the Negro as a political issue has now passed over the boundaries of the South and, in a degree, become national. He is a passive factor in both of the major parties. The Republican party doesn't want him, but finds it too much trouble to get rid of him. The Democratic party won't have him, and uses all the ingenuity and force it can summon to keep him out. The Negro is literally the *bête noire* of both parties. In the political game played on the national gridiron he is the ball.

He may see in various lights the political situation in which he thus finds himself, depending on his frame of mind. If angry, he may damn the whole bunk-shooting, lying, nefarious political business to Hell. If cynical, he may gloat over the embarrassment and fear that he is the cause of. He may get an unhappy satisfaction out of the fact that he is the wrench that clogs the political machinery of a whole section of the nation; that he has made political hypocrites of men who would otherwise be ordinarily honest; that he has done more than any other factor at work to make a ridiculous sham and failure out of this grand and glorious experiment in democracy. If humorous, he may see the whole business as a farce, and so smile or get a sour laugh out of the knowledge that America can't actually have any more democracy than it gives to him. But 99% of the Negroes in the United States do not look at the matter in any of these lights. Anger, cynicism and humor fade out before the serious problem of life and the struggle to attain a goal that is necessary to fit survival.

How did the Negro, starting after the Civil War with the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and the ballot, get where he is politically? Suppose we first find out where he is. There are approximately twelve million Negroes in the United States, which means that there are nearly six million of voting age. Notwithstanding this, the Negro demands and secures less through the ballot, not only in concrete results but even in mere respect for himself as a voter, than any of all the groups that go to make up the American citizenry, though many of these groups are weaker numerically and economically. Despite his mass of numbers and his increase in education and wealth, he remains, in a positive sense, as near being a political zero as it is possible for a group of people in a country with anything that resembles a democratic form of government to be. I say in a positive sense because, in a negative sense, he has for a hundred years been a dominating political factor. How account for this condition of political impotency on the part of twelve million people, one-tenth of the whole nation? The political condition of these people is the

more vitally and pathetically interesting for the reason that they, above any other group, need whatever benefits the ballot is able to gain.

The Negro did start with the war amendments and the ballot, and did for a period hold considerable political power. In that period Negroes participated in the government of various States, and sent two Senators and a score of Representatives to Congress. But within twenty years after Emancipation, by means of corruption, ballot-box stuffing and stealing, K. K. K. intimidation and a general shotgun and black-jack policy, the Negro vote had been rendered nugatory in every Southern State. At the beginning of the present century, by quasi-legal expedients, the Negro in the South had been thrown back politically to about where he was in 1866.

Inquiry into how he was disfranchised in the face of the explicit guarantees of the Constitution opens up a limitless field for the student of the processes of democracy. It reveals a political cunning, a crafty circumvention and brazen defiance of fundamental laws that cannot be matched, I dare say, by any other country in the world, not barring our sister republics south of the Rio Grande. And it shows what has for five generations been consuming the political sagacity of the South, the section which from the beginning of the country down to the Civil War furnished so large a proportion of the outstanding figures in national politics. Thus, starting with the administration of Hayes, the course of the Negro's political fortunes has been steadily downward; downward, until today the average Negro in the States of the old South is as voteless as a life-termer in the Federal Penitentiary at Atlanta.

II

Now, the Negro in the South did not take his disfranchisement lying down. He put up a pretty good fight, but was overwhelmed by the forces against him. When the Southern whites regained control of the States of the former Confederacy they lost no time in serving notice on him that he would not be allowed to vote. However, he had great faith in his lately bestowed constitutional guarantees and went to the polls clothed in his rights of American citizenship. When he was met there by denial and force he took his case into the courts, relying on that section of the Fourteenth Amendment which says:

> All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

and that section of the Fifteenth Amendment which says:

> The right of the citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

More than once he took his case to the Supreme Court of the United States, but the court pointed out that he had failed to show that the State had abridged or denied his right to vote or that the persons who prevented him from voting had done so because of his *race, color or previous condition of servitude*. So the Negro, unable to prove that the committee which met at the polls with shotguns was actuated by any such base and unconstitutional motives, found his case thrown out. In the ultimate analysis, he lost in his fight to vote because of the attitude of the Supreme Court. Through hair-splitting sophistry and astute evasion the court so emasculated the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments that, so far as the Negro was concerned, no sense or meaning at all was left in them. If the court had entered into a conspiracy with the amnestied leaders of the Rebellion to nullify these two amendments it could not have gone about the work with greater dispatch and effectiveness. It was not until 1915 that there was any change in this

attitude. It was not until then that the court showed a definite change from its traditional pro-slavery bias.

Eventually the excesses to which corruption and force went appalled the more decent-minded element of Southern whites, and they began to devise means to do the unlawful thing by methods which would at least simulate legality and decency; so they proceeded to abrogate the Federal Constitution by revising the constitutions of the States. Mississippi began this reform in 1890 by so amending its constitution that the right of suffrage depended upon payment of a poll tax, and the ability to read any section of the constitution, or to understand it when read, or to give a reasonable interpretation of it.

This section looked entirely fair on its face. Indeed, it looked like a forward step toward intelligence and responsibility in the electorate, even if not toward a realization of democracy. But the joker lay in the interpretation clause. The average Negro could easily get hold of a few dollars and pay his poll tax, and it was in his power to learn to read a section of the Constitution with some evidence that he understood what he was reading; but when it came to a "reasonable interpretation" he was likely to find himself up against an unsurmountable obstacle. The election officials had absolute discretionary powers and could ply the applicant with questions that would divide the Supreme Court.

There is the story of the Negro in Mississippi who applied to the registration board, and who understandingly read a section of the Constitution and answered with average intelligence a number of questions. When one of the officials, thumbing a law book, asked, "What does *habeas corpus ad subjiciendum* mean?" the applicant took up his hat and replied, "It means that a nigger can't vote in Mississippi." No secret was made of the fact that the sole purpose of this section and of similar sections in the revised constitutions of other Southern States was to keep Negroes from voting.

But the bars of this barrier were not quite close enough; for without going back to undisguised fraud and violence, it was impossible to keep a percentage of intelligent Negroes from slipping through, and perhaps, depending on the temper and integrity of the particular officials, impossible not to keep out some of the more crassly ignorant whites. So Southern political ingenuity set itself to the task of making the disfranchisement of all Negroes, ignorant and intelligent, a process of precision, while saving the most subcivilized white the embarrassment of even having to make a show of his lack of qualifications.

III

It was out of Louisiana in 1898 that there came the cry, "Eureka!" It was there that was evolved the famous grandfather clause. Speaking generally, these grandfather clauses in the amended constitutions of the Southern States enumerated as necessary to the right of suffrage a list of property, literacy, and character qualifications of high standard, and then provided that none of these qualifications need be met by any persons who had the right to vote or had an ancestor who had the right to vote at the time of the close of the Civil War. There were, of course, numbers of colored people who could have qualified under the ancestor proviso, but the right to cast a negligible vote was hardly worth the risk of its establishment. So it looked as though, with the grandfather clauses, had come the end of Negro suffrage nightmare, which for three decades had harassed Southern politicians. But the Negro had not ceased fighting. Oklahoma's brand-new constitution was equipped with a first-class grandfather clause. On that clause a test case was finally brought before the Supreme Court, and that court in 1915 declared grandfather clauses unconstitutional.

The reasonable interpretation clauses were still working, but not with the desired effectiveness. Something needed to be done, and the statesmanship of the South

once again rose to the exigency. (It is astounding to think how much Southern statesmanship has been used up in these processes!) The decision of the strategists among the politicians was to abandon any further frontal attacks on the Fifteenth Amendment, and to defeat it "legally" by a flanking movement. So all the laws on the statute-books which, in any manner at variance with the letter of the Fifteenth Amendment, abridged or denied the right of the Negro to vote were annulled or allowed to become quiescent.

The new move was to substitute primary elections for general elections; that is, to make the primary election decisive and the general election merely perfunctory; and then to provide by law that the Democratic primary was a function for white men exclusively. A Negro, if he succeeded in getting by the registration officers, could vote in the general election, but such a vote was like seconding a motion that had already been passed. For in some States candidates for nomination were eliminated in two or even three primaries. The candidates finally chosen were already as good as elected.

White voters in the Southern States have, comparatively, stopped voting in the general elections. For illustration: in the Texas gubernatorial campaign of 1926, at the first Democratic primary election, held on July 24, with six candidates in the field, the total vote cast was 735,186. In the run-off held on August 30, with the candidates narrowed down to Dan Moody and Governor Ma Ferguson, the total vote cast was 793,766. But at the general election in the same campaign only 89,263 votes were cast. Under "white primary" laws the Negro vote cannot have any effect whatever upon the choice of those elected.

Some innocent might ask why the Negro doesn't vote in the primaries of some other party—the Republican, for instance. The answer is that in the States of the Old South there is actually but one party and one primary. The Republican party is not a political party; it is simply a Federal-office-holding oligarchy. The bosses are interested only in carrying hand-picked delegations to the Republican National Conventions and using them as pawns in securing control of the Federal patronage in the South. There is, despite the upset in the last national election, what amounts to a gentlemen's agreement between the Southern Democracy and the Republican bosses in the South; to wit, that the States be left, without opposition, entirely in the hands of the Democratic politicians and the Federal offices in the hands of the Republican bosses. The Negro is left out on both sides. This is not a bad bargain for the Democrats, since their chance at Federal offices comes on an average of only once in every quarter of a century. Nor is there any desire on the part of the Republican bosses to build up an effective opposition with the aid of the Negro, for his allegiance in the South embarrasses the whole Republican party; it disturbs its dream of breaking up the Solid South, hence the persistent lily white movement.

But this latest move did not stop the Negro from fighting. In 1925, the Negroes of the country united in making a definite test of the Southern white primary laws. They made a test of the primary laws of Texas. The fight was carried on from the court of first instance through the Supreme Court by their most powerful defense organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. A section of the Texas law regulating primaries reads as follows:

> All qualified voters under the laws and constitution of the State of Texas, who is a *bona fide* member of the Democratic party shall be eligible to participate in any Democratic primary election, provided such voter complies with all laws and rules governing party primary elections; however, in no event shall a Negro be eligible to participate in a Democratic party primary election held in the State of Texas and should a Negro vote in a Democratic primary election, such ballot shall be void, and election officials are herein directed to throw out such ballot and not count the same.

It was on this section that the contest was made. On March 7, 1927, the Supreme

Court handed down a unanimous decision declaring white primary laws unconstitutional. In its decision the court said, in part:

> The important question is whether the statute can be sustained, but although we state it as a question the answer does not seem to us open to a doubt. We find it unnecessary to consider the Fifteenth Amendment, because it seems to us hard to imagine a more direct and obvious infringement of the Fourteenth.
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> That amendment, while it applies to all, was passed, as we know, with a special intent to protect the blacks from discrimination against them.
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> It gave citizenship and the privilege of citizenship to persons of color, but it denied to any state the power to withhold from them the equal protection of the laws. . . . What is this but declaring that the law in the States shall be the same for the blacks as for the whites; that all persons whether colored or white shall stand equal before the laws of the States, and in regard to the colored race, for whose protection the amendment was primarily designed, that no discrimination shall be made against them by law because of their color?
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> The statute of Texas, in the teeth of the prohibitions referred to, assumes to forbid Negroes to take part in a primary election the importance of which we have indicated, discriminating against them by the distinction of color alone. States may do a good deal of classifying that it is difficult to believe rational, but there are limits, and it is too clear for extended argument that color cannot be made the basis of a statutory classification affecting the right set up in this case.

Texas and other States have already taken steps to circumvent this decision by deleting from the statutes any specific denial to Negroes of the right to take part in primary elections, and by passing laws enabling State Executive Committees of political parties to formulate their own regulations as to who shall have the right to participate. But it is very doubtful if these evasions of an express decision of the Supreme Court will stand when they are tested in that court. The Advancement Association has already begun a test case in Texas; and in June of this year the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia held such an enabling act to be contrary to the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. So it appears that on legal and constitutional grounds the Negro has driven the Southern politicians to their last extremity.

IV

But what is beyond? There is little probability that those who have not hesitated to ignore and defy the Constitution will stand awe-stricken before Supreme Court decisions. The Negro is squarely up against the grim determination of the Southern politicians never to allow him to take part in politics—his education, economic progress and moral fitness, notwithstanding—and the specter of force, violence and murder lurks not very far behind.

This determination is expressed not only by such plebeian demagogues as Senators Heflin of Alabama and Blease of South Carolina, but by such aristocratic statesmen as Senators Glass of Virginia and George of Georgia. Not long ago, in a widely circulated weekly magazine, Senator George, formerly a member of the Supreme Court of Georgia, was quoted as saying in the course of an interview:

> Why apologize or evade? We have been very careful to obey the letter of the Federal Constitution—but we have been very diligent and astute in violating the spirit of such amendments and such statutes as would lead the Negro to believe himself the equal of a white man. And we shall continue to conduct ourselves in that way.

Senator Glass was quoted by the same interviewer as saying:

> The people of the original thirteen Southern States curse and spit upon the Fifteenth Amendment—and have no intention of letting the Negro vote. We obey the letter of the amendments and the Federal statutes, but we frankly evade the spirit thereof—and purpose to continue doing so. White supremacy is too precious a thing to surrender for the sake of a theoretical justice that would let a brutish African deem himself the equal of white men and women in Dixie.

Yet, bold as Southern politicians, of both the lower and the higher type, are in expressing sentiments of this sort; they are all, nevertheless, busy rationalizing and justifying their position. Justification is generally based on two considerations: the evils of Reconstruction and the menace of black domination. Neither is sound; the first passed away completely more than

fifty years ago, and the second can never happen.

The evils suffered by the South from "corrupt rule by ignorant Negroes" during the Reconstruction period were far less than they are reported to be. It can be shown that the governments of the States when Negroes were in political power were not more corrupt than they came to be under the restored Confederates; in fact, the records show that in several instances they were even less corrupt. Nor was the Negro wholly responsible for such corruption as did exist. Moreover, the resentment of the whites sprang not so much from virtuous recoil against corruption as from humiliation and chagrin at seeing Negroes in places of power. But in looking for political corruption we need not go back through musty records to Negro politicians during Reconstruction or to Southern white politicians immediately thereafter; we need only read the newspaper files for the past three or four years to find enough of it in some of the most progressive Northern States; we might, indeed, pursue the subject with fruitful results to the national capital.

A study of the Negroes who represented the South in Congress shows that most of them measured up in intelligence and general fitness to the average lawmaker who gets to Washington today. However, be the record as bad as it may have been, the Negro of the present year of our Lord is not the Negro of the Reconstruction period.

As to black domination, that is either a deliberate fabrication designed for use on the hustings or a hallucination. In either case, it is too high a compliment to the powers and abilities of the Negro to say that the one-third black population of the South, if given the right of the ballot, might dominate the two-thirds white. It would be impossible by any method whatsoever—short of black magic.

This medieval position of white Southern leaders is not tenable either in logic, enlightenment or common decency; and they realize it. Their only defense is to get mad or to refuse to discuss it. Their embarrassment is not reduced by the inconsistency between their stand on the Fifteenth Amendment and their stand on the Eighteenth. They defend their right to ignore or annul or defy the Fifteenth, but froth at the mouth when a sovereign Northern State suggests taking some similar action regarding the Eighteenth. The effort to set the moral intent of the Eighteenth Amendment, which is purely a regulatory ordinance, above that of the Fifteenth, which deals with a fundamental citizenship right, only adds absurdity to the discussion.

V

What will be the outcome of this political situation in the South? There can be only one of two results; either the Negro will win full political rights or he will be permanently reduced to the status of a voteless, voiceless peon. Looking over all the forces involved and weighing the probabilities, not as a partisan, but as would a cool and careful gambler, I bet on the Negro to win. In the final outcome I don't believe the whites have a chance.

There appear to me to be certain practical steps the Negro in the South can take to hasten the time for throwing up hats. He has already drawn first blood and scored a knockdown in his fight against the white primary, the main device for keeping him out of political life; continuing in the parlance of the ring, he must press his advantage to a decisive knockout. As soon as he is able, he should go into the Democratic primaries and vote for what he believes to be the best men for local offices. For a long time he should not bother himself about helping to elect Republican Presidents—or Democratic ones either. By eschewing national Republican politics he will undermine all arguments about his being a mere tool and monkey paw of alien Yankee domination.

By this course of action he will be build-

ing from the ground up. In common sense, the chief concern at present of a Negro in the South is to have a voice in electing the judges of the local courts, the county prosecuting attorney, the sheriff, the members of the school board. Unless he holds a Federal job, it is sheer nonsense for a Negro in Mississippi to boast that he voted for Hoover. If he can't get equitable school facilities for his children or is in danger of being railroaded in the courts, or mobbed or lynched, President Hoover can't help him—in Mississippi. Of course, if he were in China the President could send the Navy to his assistance. Such a course on the part of the Negro would eventually lead to making a real two-party system in the South. White men would divide, and both sides would want and seek Negro votes. The Southern politicians are wise in their narrow way, and this is what they foresee; and it is exactly what they are fighting to stave off. The Southern political oligarchy fights to preserve the *status quo*, both to keep out the Negro and also any class of white men who might become recalcitrant and aspire to the pleasure and power of controlling the public offices.

I have used all my space discussing the situation of the Negroes in the South, and properly, because they constitute three-fourths of the entire number, and because it is by their status that the race as a whole is measured and graded. In the States outside of the South, Negroes vote and have their votes counted; and in a number of States such as New York, where they vote Republican or Democratic or Socialist, they are politically free and independent. But on a national scale the Negroes in the North are almost as impotent as the Negroes in the South. They are impotent because as a whole they dare vote nationally for but one party—the Republican party. And that party knows it, and therefore feels that it needs to do only the very least for them.

Most Negroes in the North, like their Southern brethren, are still in the sentimental stage of politics; they feel that they owe a great debt of gratitude to the Republican party and Abraham Lincoln, and they continue to vote the Republican ticket—regardless of the fact that Abraham Lincoln is not a candidate. This attitude is childish. These Negroes need to learn that politics is a hard-boiled, calculating game in which gratitude is a futile virtue and in which Sunday-school ethics have no place. They need to establish and maintain political independence as rapidly as possible; voting for men and measures rather than parties. There are now many Negroes in the Northern States who chafe under the Republican chains. They want to break out of them, and they will do so as soon as the Democratic or some other party gives them half a chance. As it is now, they feel bound by the situation of their fellows in the South—and they hesitate to place any more power over them in the hands of their enemies. They feel it is the better part of wisdom to stand with lukewarm and apathetic friends.

As much as anybody in the country the Negro wants to be a good American; and he is bending all his energies to that end. But he is also determined—as grimly determined as the Southern politicians are to keep him out and down—to wear the rights as well as bear the burdens of American citizenship. This desire, backed up by tireless and constant effort, has to be taken into account. I have said he will win. He must win not only for himself but for the South, because there cannot possibly be an enlightened, progressive and vital state of politics in the South unless the Negro does win. He must win for the nation, because if he fails, democracy in America fails with him.

EAST SIDE MEMORIES

BY MICHAEL GOLD

The livery stable was a busy scene of life and death. It was a dépôt for wedding and funeral coaches, and headquarters for the Callahan Transfer Express.

The expressmen were leather-faced young Irishmen, the coach drivers were leather-faced young Jews.

Between jobs these citizens of the two most persecuted and erratic small nations of the world loafed on a bench. They fought, philosophized, and drank buckets of beer together in the sunlight.

Their bench was on the sidewalk in front of the stable. There were always ten or twelve drivers sitting here, and at least one neighborhood prostitute and a goat or a dog.

The stable was an antique five-storied brick building standing next to my own tenement. In Summer it was a dynamo generating bad smells. It added, to the ripe odors of the street, the miasma of rotting manure. I should like to see that perfume sprinkled in Congress. I know that for years it clung to me. It filled my life. It poisoned my sleep. It was beloved by millions of flies. They grew fat in the stable, and then visited my home.

Giant orchids grow in the South American jungles. I have seen them; some weigh hundreds of pounds. Their manure-like fragrance makes them a magnet for whole nations of flies. The Indians fear these orchids, for they occasionally collapse on a sleeping man, and kill him. Our stable had its victims, too, but no one realized it except young Dr. Solow, who hated the flies, and warned us against them.

I liked to go to funerals with the Jewish coach drivers. What glorious Summer fun! Nathan was a tall Jewish ox, with a red, hard face like a chunk of rusty iron. His blustering manner had earned him many a black eye and bloody face. It was a warm bright morning. Three coaches rolled down the ramp of the livery stable on their way to a funeral. Then out bounced Nathan, cursing his horses. I begged him to let me go along. He was grouchy, but slowed down. I scrambled up beside him on the tall seat.

Three coaches and a hearse: a poor man's funeral. We rolled through the hurly-burly East Side. The sporty young drivers joked from coach to coach. The horses jerked and skipped. Nathan cursed them.

"You she-devil!" he roared in Yiddish at his white horse. "Steady down, or I'll kick in your belly!"

He tugged at the check-rein and cut the mare's mouth until it bled. But she was nervous; horses have their moods.

We came to the tenement of the corpse. Many pushcarts had to be cursed out of the way. We lined the curb. There was a crowd gathered. Weddings, sewer repairs, accidents, fires and murders, all are food for the crowd. Even funerals.

The coffin was brought down by four pale men with black beards. Then came the wife and children in black, meekly weeping. The family were so poor that they had not the courage to weep flamboyantly.

But some of the neighbors did. It was their pleasure. They made an awful hullabaloo. It pierced one's marrow. The East Side women have a strange keening wail, almost Gaelic. They chant the virtues of the dead sweatshop slave, and the sorrow