

The Negro as a Political Force in America and in the South
since 1900-- by Otis Pease

(an informal narrative written for the Hattiesburg
Freedom School and Voter Registration staffs
by way of a brief refresher course in those aspects
of our recent history which may prove useful for
perspective in the Summer Project.)

The present pattern of discrimination and prejudice against the Negro was set mostly in the period from 1900 to 1930. These years were a time of political reform and social advancement for most Americans, even for immigrants and northern Negroes, but in retrospect they seem to have been the most humiliating years since slavery in the equal treatment of southern Negroes. Where they were once encouraged to vote and hold minor office (as in the delta in the 1880's) he was now kept from voting by law, by private coercion, and by habit. Where once the Negro leader of national prominence (Bruce, Lynch, Washington) represented the southern black man, he was now northern and urban in his interests (Du Bois, Trotter, White). Where white and Negro southerners once rode and ate in the same passenger cars and played in the same public parks (1865-1900, even after reconstruction ended), he was now excluded by local ordinance from virtually every possible contact with white people. Once the southern man of property courted him for his vote against the political power of the southern farmer of little property (about 1875 to 1890). Shortly thereafter the radical Populist attracted Negro support in an effective appeal to a solidarity of the have-nots against the large landowner and industrialist. On both occasions the Negro tried to gain the advantages of political power, but in fact he never became more than a junior partner, and these alliances proved psychologically too difficult for southern white men to sustain in the face of the increasingly bitter appeals to racial solidarity on the part of whichever white group the Negroes were being encouraged to oppose. Between 1896 and 1903 every southern state possessing a substantial Negro population amended their constitutions to permit official white primaries and to prohibit-- by ingenious laws-- both Negroes and uncooperative poor whites from voting. Note the graphic case of Louisiana:

	White	Negro
1897 registration (old const.)	165,000	130,000
1900 " (new const.)	125,000	5,000
1904 " (poll tax added)	92,000	1,300

From this point forth, southern states were run by small, easily-controlled voting blocs which represented largely the upper half of the social structure.

It is generally believed that aggression feeds on frustration. The South in 1900 was a likelyland for aggression against a minority race, for economic problems had built to a climax of frustrations. Two thirds of its white men lived in conspicuous poverty, and it was virtually impossible to persuade an impoverished white farmer to accord any break-- economic or social-- to Negroes

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who were only a few degrees worse off than they. Not only was per capita wealth in the South half that of the national average, but with nearly 30% of the national population the region had less than 12% of the nation's taxable incomes, and most of the income to the South centered in four states. For the southern economy was built on raw materials-- cotton, lumber, ore, oil-- which usually provide their economic return to those people who make them into finished products (the Massachusetts mill owner, the Chicago building contractor, the Pittsburgh steel producer). Meanwhile the southern Negro received the lowest wage in the nation. Negroes were excluded from the higher-paying cotton mills, and less than one Negro out of ten owned any land, cattle, or tools.

All this is to say that where in the North the economy was prosperous enough to permit upper portions of the working class to move into positions of independence and to permit the immigrant the hope of gaining something if he organized political power for himself, the southern small white farmer was caught in an endless cycle of poverty and had little to gain even if he had tried, and his efforts were fitful and easily diverted into agitation against the Negro. Meanwhile the Negro was not permitted even to try. Both his disfranchisement and his segregation came to possess for white men a kind of moral imperative.

Liberals North and South commonly defended Negro disfranchisement on the grounds that political corruption would disappear and that by forcing the Negro to concentrate on improving himself instead of increasing his power race relations would quickly improve. It is true that overt frauds on election days declined slightly from the high levels ~~which~~ reached during and after Reconstruction: the most effective way of stopping the stealing of ballots, of course, is to stop people from voting. But the political process remained as corrupt as before and far less responsive to the growing needs of the social order. It is equally clear that in proportion to the Negro's loss of political power his general security and independence deteriorated and unchecked violence to his person and property grew. A system of caste had in time come to replace the system of slavery.

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No man exceeded Booker T. Washington in ~~encouraging~~ the Negro to better himself economically and to postpone his search for political power. Born a slave in Virginia, he was set free at the age of nine by the defeat of the confederacy, worked his way through school and was invited to run a new institute for Negroes at Tuskegee, Alabama. His quiet leadership and courage made Tuskegee into one of the leading vocational colleges in the nation. In 1895 Washington was invited to speak at the opening of the Atlanta Exposition. Sensing the importance of the unprecedented opportunity for a Negro to address such a large audience of influential white men, he urged upon Negroes and whites alike the wisdom of achieving mutual trust through mutually profitable economic relations: the Negro should not seek to leave the South or to agitate for political change but should "cast your bucket down where you are," and gain the equal protection of the laws

through his economic power; the white man should help educate the Negro to work more effectively for him. Americans instantly hailed Washington as the wisest leader of his race, and for the next twenty years, until his death, he was one of the most influential men in the nation. Five presidents consulted him about policies toward Negroes; Theodore Roosevelt invited him to dine at the White House; and Queen Victoria entertained him at tea. It was the day of Horatio Alger, but Alger had never written a story to equal the autobiography Up From Slavery. In his day Washington gained the firm support of large numbers of northern capitalists for Negro vocational education, but it is evident that his "Atlanta Compromise" (work first, vote second) suited the grim plans which southern whites had for Negro subordination, economic as well as political, and both were heavily reinforced by crucial changes in the attitude of northern leaders toward the Negro and his race.

Before the 1890's the Negro had hoped that occasional Federal intervention would sustain his newly-won rights of citizenship, suffrage, and equal treatment before the law and consequently permit him to break free from the caste system which even during Reconstruction had been chaining him down. But in a series of discouraging decisions (from 1883 through 1898) the Supreme Court overthrew or diluted the laws which had sustained him, while Congress and the Executive gradually came to terms with the politically powerful white southerners and their northern business partners, and by 1900 the Negro could no longer count on the Federal government to assist him in overcoming his hopelessly unequal political position. Northern Negroes could vote, but less than 10% of the nation's nine million Negroes lived in the North, and their political influence was slight. Meanwhile Northern liberals and conservatives alike fell prey to new views of race and social evolution which gained favor by virtue of their apparent scientific validity. These views tended to attribute behavioral differences between the Negro and the white man to innate difference in capacity, rather than to environment and culture, and they asserted-- on decidedly incomplete evidence-- that social and political pressures (such as civil rights laws or welfare programs) are virtually powerless to change the long-range behavior or attitudes of men towards other men. (It is ironic that Jim Crow laws provided an example of the effectiveness of social laws to influence long-range behavior and attitudes at precisely this same time.)

Thus in a day when doctrines of social reform-- including a concern for the impoverished city immigrant, an interest in social legislation and in the constitutional rights of union laborers swept the North and parts of the white South and carried to national power men like George Norris, Robert LaFollette, Al Smith, Fiorello LaGuardia, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson, the Negro exercised less real political power than at any time since his years of slavery. Many of his leaders had warned him of the fatal handicap of disfranchisement. In 1865 Frederick Douglass had demanded "immediate, unconditional, and universal voting. . .

for without this the Negro's liberty is a mockery. . . He is a slave of society, and holds his liberty as a privilege, not as a right. He is at the mercy of a mob, and has no means of protecting himself." Douglass in fact saw through to the heart of the political process when he later insisted that so long as the Negro has a vote, "somebody in the South will want that vote and will offer the terms upon which that vote can be obtained."

(Two generations later Mississippi's Senator Bilbo, the nation's leading white-supremacy demagogue, remarked to a union organizer working among Negroes in Mississippi, "Son, when you can show me that you control any sizable number of voters, I'll be the damnedest champion you ever had.") Even Booker T. Washington warned that while the Negro ought to put jobs and education ahead of politics he should never cease voting: "A man cannot learn self-government by ceasing to vote any more than a boy can learn to swim by keeping out of the water." And now in the ~~xx~~ first thirty years of the 20th century the consequences-- in lynch law, Jim Crow, and economic discrimination-- of political powerlessness were hideously plain. Washington had suggested that the Negro put dignity ahead of power and thereby salvage his dignity. But in putting dignity ahead of the power which forces men to respect dignity, the Negro lost both.

In symbolic / contrast to Booker Washington stands the figure of William E. B. Du Bois. Born in Massachusetts shortly after the Civil War in a family long free and prominent in a farming community, he encountered little racial prejudice until he arrived at Fisk University in Nashville for his college training. In the year of the "Atlanta compromise" Du Bois earned a Ph.D. at Harvard and accepted a position of professor of sociology at Atlanta University. For the rest of his life, first in Atlanta and then in New York, he devoted his scholarship and his verbal skills to the position of the Negro race in a white society. As early as 1903 he vigorously rejected Washington's "compromise," and in a collection of powerful essays, The Souls of Black Folk he stressed the primary importance of political influence, assertive leadership, and general pride which Negroes should feel in their race. His spirit can be seen in the remark he made urging that Negroes who face certain death from lynch mobs should resist them with violence. "If we must die let us die like men and not like so many bales of hay."

Du Bois was intellectual, but he was not a sheltered man. When living in Atlanta he risked his life daily by walking to town to show his disapproval of segregated buses. Now he was to urge Negroes everywhere to repudiate the "cowardice and apology" of their leaders. In 1905 he convened a meeting at Niagara Falls of about thirty prominent Negroes from 15 states, and as a challenge to Washington's influence the conference demanded Negro action to obtain full suffrage and civil rights, abolition of Jim Crow laws, legislation to enforce the 14th and 15th amendments, and to establish through national aid free and compulsory education through high school for every American child. The Niagara meeting did not at first attract wide support, but in 1909 a number of white liberals, outraged at the spread of lynching to northern

cities (notably Springfield Illinois, Wineson's home) founded the NAACP, which soon adopted the views of the Niagara conference and named Du Bois as its general secretary. Slowly over the next twenty years but with increasing effectiveness the NAACP was able to focus the energies and hopes of northern liberals, white and black, who believed that the quest for political power must precede, not follow, the quest for economic and social gains. In 1933 in a dramatic public move the NAACP, led by its Negro secretary Walter White, strongly opposed the appointment to the Supreme Court of Judge Charles Evans Hughes from North Carolina, who held hostile views of labor unions and favored Negro disfranchisement. Though Hughes and President Hoover's strong backing and hence would normally have had little trouble gaining Senate confirmation, so skillful and relentless was the NAACP effort in organizing Negro and labor sentiment against Hughes that the Senate was finally persuaded into turning down President Hoover's appointment 41 to 39. This was, I believe, the first example in American history where the political pressure of Negroes--and organized by Negroes--effectively changed a major Federal policy. The NAACP had come of age, and the influence of Du Bois had finally overshadowed the influence of Booker Washington in shaping the strategy of the Negro movement.

The Du Bois strategy of pressure through the vote would undoubtedly have failed had there not developed in the same period a massive shift in the Negro voting population itself--a shift toward the largest northern and western cities, and a shift which is still taking place fifty years later. The southern Negro was caught in a circle of frustration: he could not hope to gain political power except through Federal intervention, which responds only to pressure generated by the exercise of political power. But now it was possible to build new pressures on the basis of Negro votes in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and in other cities where hundreds of thousands of them had moved in response to high wartime wages (1920-25; 1940-45; 1950-55) or to escape depression in cotton prices and agriculture generally (1920-25; 1930-35; 1947-50), or simply to flee the pervasive social and physical oppression of an era of almost unlimited white power. In these cities politicians in search of votes were not deterred from organizing the Negro vote by the endless social pressures which beset every southern politician in search of votes. (Note that Wilson did not offer to organize the Negro vote; he merely offered to bargain for the vote if it should ever come into existence.) In contrast with the southern Negro, the northern Negro in New York and Chicago quickly found "friends" in the Tammany Hall clubs or in the Elihu Thompson Republican machine, and the benefits of this alliance of voters with politicians came as they had for every other minority group in earlier days. Tammany arranged to have 20 Negro policemen appointed to the New York force, and Negro leaders soon entered politics in the largest cities. (In 1929 Oscar De Priest from Chicago became the first Negro to gain a seat in Congress on the basis of a genuine political vote earned without benefit of Federal troops.) More important, Negro votes soon turned city and state officials into supporters of basic Negro demands for street improvements, housing projects, welfare support, community centers, and even (though

slowly) expanded budgets for schools and teachers' salaries.

Gradually the power of this vote affected the national government. Negroes did not vote in large numbers for the New Deal until 1934 and 1936, but when they did their support remained steadfast and became in time crucial to the political success of Harry Truman (in 1948) and John Kennedy (1960). Again, Negroes were voting for specific economic and social gains, and their votes paid off. The New Deal provided massive Federal price supports for cotton farmers, and in substantial numbers Negroes earned cotton. The New Deal provided Federal relief for the unemployed, and Negroes were jobless. The New Deal directly encouraged CIO union organizing, and the CIO made a valiant and partially successful effort to set up bi-racial (not always integrated) unions to allow laboring Negroes to gain higher wages and greater security in their jobs. (Even the more conservative AFL was forced by the success of its rival to do the same.) By 1948 Negro labor pressure, built up directly by Philip Randolph of the Pullman Porters' Union, virtually forced FDR to support a national MEO, and it could be strongly argued that by the time Truman had become President, the Negro had become one of the major forces in shaping national policies. Faced with a revived Republican Party-- which every poll predicted would win the 1948 election-- and with a 3-way split among Democrats (Henry Wallace on the left and the Thurmond Dixiecrats on the right), Harry Truman was forced to scramble for every minority interest vote he could possibly appeal to. Organized labor and the mass of midwest and border-south farmers remained loyal to the Truman New Deal Democrats, but by themselves they did not win for Truman. It took the Negro vote in the large cities, and Truman won them by his strong support of a Civil Rights Commission, his plans for Federal housing, and his order to the armed forces to integrate their facilities and operations, as well as his proven record in support of the New Deal. From this point on (note that it was only sixteen years ago) the national government permanently committed itself to the business of civil rights.

It would be foolish to suggest that this commitment was thorough or whole-hearted or more than partially effective. The New Deal operated not directly on the working classes but indirectly through local authorities. White landowners in southern cotton counties had ways of withholding Federal crop payments from Negroes who proved socially uncooperative. Control over unemployment relief and WPA projects was decentralized from the start, and local control usually reinforced local prejudices. Mere exercise of the vote in northern cities had little immediate impact on the fact that Negroes remained "last hired first fired." As the New Deal voting strength declined (after 1937) the southern bloc in Congress began to exercise crucial vote power over national welfare-state policies, and in short order after the war a coalition of northern Republicans and southern Democrats killed off the national MEO and bottled up much of Truman's "Fair Deal" program for working people. Integration of the armed forces proved that southern white men could be run (grudgingly) to accept equality as part of the natural order of things, but integration could scarcely be said to have reached perfection. Everywhere in the Federal government there remained

men in power who were unwilling to overthrow the compromise of the years following Reconstruction-- the years in which the southern white man was left in control of the southern Negro, when the Supreme Court insisted that facilities could be separate and still be equal (1896) and that the 14th Amendment did not prohibit private individuals, but only state governments, from practicing discrimination in the public facilities they owned or operated.

All this is true. And yet. . . . By the 1950's the foundations as well as the structure of inequality and prejudice were cracking.

For three decades social scientists had been studying the relationship of race to environment and personality in American society. Scholarly literature about the Negro reached a crescendo by the end of the 1930's, and most of it was summed up and greatly extended by the monumental 100 -page study (five years in the making) by Gunnar Myrdal, and his associates like Arnold Rose and Ralph Bunche. Called The American Dilemma (published 1944) it decisively challenged the heavy structure of myths about racial differences between Negroes and whites, identified the sources of behavioral differences as environmental and social, and consequently provided immense ammunition for every leader-- Negro and white-- who was resolved to break through the crusts of prejudice and legend and establish once and for all equality of opportunity through law, environment, and social custom. By 1950 the Myrdal study (and its condensation by Rose) had begun to spread through the educational and opinion-forming community of writers, teachers, editors, lawyers, social workers, and clergymen, particularly in the North but also through a few parts of the South. More important, these newer findings about race and social environment reinforced a newer national commitment to the ~~absolute~~ absolute moral and practical necessity of equal respect for all people which as a nation we forcibly and effectively learned in war against Hitler's Germany and in our subsequent need to wield influence and gain security in a world three fourths non-white. The national climate of opinion on race, in short, had in fifty years begun ~~in~~ substantially to reverse itself.

Before long the Federal Government began to move again off dead center. In 1944 the Supreme Court outlawed the white primary, and from 1948 through 1954 it heard arguments in favor of compulsory desegregation of schools and universities. Finally came Brown v. Board of Topeka, which stated that racially separate facilities in education were inherently unequal. Running through the decision were significant strands of sociological argument, which suggested that the intellectual climate of the Myrdal study had indeed powerfully reinforced legal and political commitment to equality. The Executive branch of the government had meanwhile shown its determination (dormant for ninety years) to intervene forcibly in the jurisdiction of state governments (Little Rock, 1957; Oxford, 1962) to prevent open state defiance of Federal court decrees. And with shifting population Congress was no longer as subservient to the veto power of southern politicians, and in a series of hard-fought battles and compromises (1957, 1960, 1964) it committed the Federal government not merely to the old battleline of 1875, abandoned long ago, but pushed far beyond.

The three civil rights acts viewed as a unit provide roughly for two things: they define specific acts of discrimination as being illegal even though state laws explicitly condone them; and they provide substantial power to the U.S. Department of Justice to bring suits into Federal courts both on behalf of aggrieved individuals and on behalf of the government itself. A Federal Commission on Civil Rights is empowered to investigate alleged denials of the right to vote by reason of color, race, or religion, and the Justice Department may institute suits in Federal courts to require local registrars to register Negroes. If the judge (or panel of three judges, if the Department insists on three) agrees that Negroes have been prevented from registering or voting because of a pattern of discriminatory devices, he may appoint special referees with power to put qualified Negroes on the rolls. States are required to apply uniform standards to all applicants, material errors in applying may not disqualify a person, a sixth-grade education would create a "presumption" of literacy, literacy tests must be in writing, and copies of the test and the applicant's answers must be furnished on request. The Department is also empowered to bring injunction suits to desegregate parks, swimming pools, libraries, and similar public facilities, including public schools. Private establishments in the public business of offering food, lodging, gasoline, or entertainment must serve all persons without regard for race, color, or religion, but proprietor-occupied lodging houses with five rooms or less, and bona fide private clubs, are exempt. No citizen on grounds of race can be excluded from the benefits of any program receiving Federal aid; in case of a violation, funds must be cut off, after a hearing, and after thirty days following notification of Congress. Discrimination by an employer, a union, or an employment agency because of race, color, religion, or sex, is prohibited in the hiring, firing, or promotion of workers; racial quotas, however, may not be used in enforcing the law. Finally, it is made a Federal offense to transport explosives across state lines for illegal use; this is designed to permit the FBI to undertake immediate investigation of any bombing without the prior request or permission of local authorities.

It is clear that the growth of Federal law on civil rights, while swift and comprehensive if seen in the context of Federal silence over 75 years, can only affect the structure within which genuine equality can take root. Fortunately, paralleling the developments in governmental action and political pressures of the past two decades has come a hopeful pattern of change in the economy and social system of the South. What was once a cotton economy tied to a single commodity world price has recently undergone extraordinary diversity, not merely for those who farm but for all others as well. The South has undergone major changes in industrialization and in the use of its resources, and because of these changes a slow revolution has set in for the workman. As in their highly developed and urbanized sections, the demand for skilled competence and advanced education in the laboring force is beginning to affect the South, where over one third of the working force is Negro. As farmers continue to move to the cities and as labor unions improve their chances to win power, the Negro citizen is likely to improve his opportunities to organize his own political

resources, for if the South is at all like the rest of the nation greater urbanization and greater union power are bound to stimulate the use and effectiveness of the vote. Evidence presently available to us suggests that in these respects the South in fact has already proved the point, for it is no longer a solid South either in economic patterns or in willingness to live with civil rights. Wherever enclaves of highly complex industry and a diversified agriculture have moved, the questions which engross the efforts of the civil rights movement have yielded answers and partial solutions. It is probably no accident that Mississippi remains the least industrialized and the most segregated state in the region; its urban population is relatively the smallest, its Federal industries are few, its "official" status is probably high-- and its base for taxes, schools, welfare, and internal capital investment is about the lowest in the entire nation. The prospect for civil rights in this state would seem truly desperate at times if it were not for the example of what well over half of the rest of the South is beginning to show. Over one hundred years ago, Abraham Lincoln saw clearly that if he was to preside over a victory against the South he would have to divide the South against itself. Much of his devious and opportunistic politics in 1861 and 1862 was devoted to splitting Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee off from the "hard-core" secession. His final score was four states and half of Virginia, out of a total of seven slave states which seemed worth maneuvering for. It is safe to say that without these four and a half states, the Union could not have brought the Confederacy to terms. (He is said to have remarked that to win the war he had to have God on his side but that he must have Kentucky.) Lincoln's strategy has been no less valid in the past generation. The civil rights movement today needs to take account of every broad economic and social force within the South which can possibly be seen as working for it. Surely among those forces are to be found a slow transformation in the southern social system and a region which is no longer a united "monolithic state of mind" but a perplexed, dissured, and divided collection of societies and people. It is, perhaps, out of this division that will come the true beginnings of a determined and effective Negro political power.

Let those who read this memorandum take too much comfort from these admittedly rosy thoughts, I will end on a note of caution that in one major respect the "hard-core" South does not resemble the rest of the nation. I refer to the entrenched one-party system, and it is well to ponder how this fact affects the chances of Negro political power. I will not take time to suggest how or why the one-party system developed. I want only to outline five aspects or consequences of the system which are worth our prying bearing in mind. I would state them this way.

- 1) Statewide minority groups can seldom gain a foothold where no fairly stable "opposition party" exists. Any group which wants to use its small vote to win favors from majority voters must make deals with organized parties which can deliver on its promises or can be counted on because of its permanence in the community. One-party politics, in other words, encourages domination by factions

which derive their strength from ad hoc and temporary alignments of politicians rather than stable and relatively permanent groups representing well-defined interests.

2) Factional politics in the South tends to decentralize political power. County leaders and local landowners are not easily held to accountability for acts of violence or intimidation. No state-wide "check-power" against the dominant factions exists to make sure that minority rights are cared for.

3) Factional politics prevents the building up of an effective administrative system to which minority citizens can sometimes appeal for equitable (though impersonal) treatment. The unpaved streets and the failure of the city to provide sewage, schools, public health facilities are all more likely to characterize a town where the Negro has no recourse to a fairly stable group of officials. Such officials can often be helpful even when elected officials are indifferent on account of a minority lack of power.

4) The "ins" are economically and socially "in" have a stake in any political system which discourages the development of issues; where issues are kept low, present control tends to flourish. It is said of the South that no person making more than \$20,000 a year wants a two-party system. Even more to the point is the virtue, for the "ins", of keeping a large portion of the "outs" disfranchised. If the bottom quarter of the citizens-- economically-- is voteless, conservatives gain in any system.

5) One-party politics isolates the bulk of voters from the important emotional and educational forces of national politics. The old fact is that genuine party contests are vital to the political process, and they do not usually arise within states these days unless the state is also a battleground for a national party contest. National organizations often act as galvanizers for local leadership, and most really crucial local issues are now national/ issues.

In summary comment, let no one underestimate the problem of generating a genuine political power among any Negro community struggling against the forces which have dominated the history of our nation since the Civil War. Someone once said that if read carefully history is always on "your" side. This may mean only that every generation has its own hands the power to defy history or to let it work for them. It is certainly possible that Americans who do not study the history of minority politics are doomed to repeat some of the failures and might never recognize success when they see it.