

Woodrow Wilson and the Negro Question

Background: By 1910, black leaders, frustrated with increasing entrenchment of Jim Crow regulations, disfranchisement, race riots, and the continuing tragedy of lynching, had given up on the Republican Party. The Party of Lincoln had betrayed them by acceding to the white supremacy agenda in the South. Bishop Alexander Walters, of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and president of the Afro-American Council, reached out to Democratic presidential candidate Woodrow Wilson in 1912, hoping to increase the political voice of blacks in America. Walters invited Wilson to speak at a meeting of the National Colored Democratic League in New York City, though Wilson declined the invitation. Instead, barely three weeks before the election, Wilson sent a letter for public distribution, explaining his official position on what was called “the Negro question”—to what extent was the United States serious about protecting life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for blacks?

Letter from Woodrow Wilson to Bishop Alexander Walters October 16, 1912 (Excerpts)

My dear Bishop Walters:

...to those who do not know me perhaps it is necessary for me to assure my Colored fellow citizens of my earnest wish to see justice done them in every matter, and not mere grudging justice, but justice executed with liberality and cordial good feeling. Every guarantee of our law, every principle of our constitution, commands this, and our sympathies should also make it easy.

The Colored people of the United States have made extraordinary progress towards self-support and usefulness, and ought to be encouraged in every possible and proper way. My sympathy with them is of long standing, and I want to assure them through you that should I become President of the United States, they may

count upon me for absolute fair dealing and for everything by which I could assist in advancing the interests of their race in the United States.

Cordially and sincerely yours,

Woodrow Wilson

Walters, Bishop Alexander. Letter from Bishop Walters to Woodrow Wilson, November 16, 1912. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

Trotter's Protest to President Wilson, November 12, 1914

Background

With Wilson's victory in the 1912 election, some black leaders had high hopes of a “second emancipation,” expecting Wilson to act in accord with the promised justice and “fair dealing.” They soon discovered that their hopes were misplaced. Rather than moving toward justice

and liberty for blacks, the Wilson administration for the first time implemented segregation in the Post Office and Treasury Departments, as well as in other agencies. The races were to be separated in work stations, dining facilities, restrooms, lockers, and break rooms. William Monroe Trotter, founder and editor of the Boston Guardian, led a delegation of black leaders to meet with the president in 1914. The interview was scheduled for fifteen minutes, but lasted nearly an hour as Wilson and Trotter exchanged heated words. Trotter accused the president of breaking his promises, and Wilson accused Trotter of being combative and disrespectful. Below is an excerpt of Trotter's address in that meeting. Wilson said he would have no further meetings with the NAACP as long as Trotter was their leader.

Trotter's Protest to President Wilson, November 12, 1914.

Only two years ago you were heralded as perhaps the second Lincoln, and now the Afro-American leaders who supported you are hounded as false leaders and traitors to their race. What a change segregation has wrought!...Segregation destroys fellowship and citizenship...

As equal citizens and by virtue of your public promises we are entitled at your hands to freedom from discrimination, restriction, imputation and insult in government employ. Have you a "new freedom" for white Americans and a new slavery for your Afro-American fellow citizens?

God forbid! We have been delegated to ask you to issue an executive order against any and all segregation of government employees because of race and color and to ask whether you will do so. We await your reply, that we may give it to the waiting citizens of the United States of African extraction.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was "the Negro question," and what was Wilson's promise regarding it?
2. What specific action does Trotter ask President Wilson to take?
3. What virtues and principles of constitutional government are addressed or implied in the documents?
4. With what passages do you most agree? Disagree? Be prepared to explain your reactions to the documents.