Typed draft of speech given to the Southern Negro Youth Congress commending them on their efforts and encouraging them to focus on the South as the “battle-ground” for change.

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<td>Subject(s):</td>
<td>Southern Negro Youth Congress</td>
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To the Southern Negro Youth Congress, October 20, 1946

The future of American Negroes is in the South. Here three hundred and twenty-seven years ago, they began to enter what is now the United States of America; here they have made their greatest contribution to American culture; and here they have suffered the damnation of slavery, the frustration of reconstruction and the lynching of emancipation. I trust then that an organization like yours is going to regard the South as the battle-ground of a great crusade. Here is the magnificent climate; here is the fruitful earth under the beauty of the Southern sun; and here if anywhere on earth, is the need of the thinker, the worker and the dreamer. This is the firing line not simply for the emancipation of the American Negro but for the emancipation of the African Negro and the Negroes of the West Indies; for the emancipation of the colored races; and for the emancipation of the white slaves of modern capitalistic monopoly.

Remember here, too, that you do not stand alone. It may seem like a failing fight when the newspapers ignore you; when every effort is made by white people in the South to count you out of citizenship and to act as though you did not exist as human beings while all the time they are profiting by your labor; gleaning wealth from your sacrifices and trying to build a nation and a civilization upon your degradation. You must remember that despite all this, you have allies and allies even in the white South. First and greatest of these possible allies are the white working classes about you. The poor whites whom you have been taught to despise and who in turn have learned to fear and hate you. This must not deter you from efforts to make them understand, because in the past in their ignorance and suffering they have been led foolishly to look upon you as the cause of most of their distress. You must remember that this attitude is hereditary from slavery and that it has been deliberately cultivated ever since emancipation.

Slowly but surely the working people of the South, white and
black, must come to remember that their emancipation depends upon their mutual cooperation; upon their acquaintanceship with each other; upon their friendship; upon their social intermingling. Unless this happens each is going to be made the football to break the heads and hearts of the other.

White youth in the South is peculiarly frustrated. There is not a single great ideal which they can express or aspire to, that does not bring them into flat contradiction with the Negro problem. The more they try to escape it, the more they land into hypocrisy, lying and double-dealing; the more they become, what they least wish to become, the oppressors and despisers of human beings. Some of them, in larger and larger numbers, are bound to turn toward the truth and to recognize you as brothers and sisters, as fellow travellers toward the dawn.

There has always been in the South that intellectual elite who saw the Negro problem clearly. They have always lacked and some still lack the courage to stand up for what they know is right. Nevertheless they can be depended on in the long run to follow their own clear thinking and their own decent choice. Finally even the politicians must eventually recognize the trend in the world, in this country, and in the South. James Byrnes, that favorite son of this commonwealth, and Secretary of State of the United States, is today occupying an indefensible and impossible position; and if he survives in the memory of men, he must begin to help establish in his own South Carolina something of that democracy which he has been recently so loudly preaching to Russia. He is the end of a long series of men whose eternal damnation is the fact that they looked TRUTH in the face and did not see it; John C. Calhoun, Wade Hampton, Ben Tillman are men whose names must ever be besmirched by the fact that they fought against freedom and democracy in a land which was founded upon Democracy and Freedom.
Eventually this class of men must yield to the writing in the stars. That great hypocrite, Jan Smuts, who today is talking of humanity and standing beside Byrnes for a United Nations, is at the same time, oppressing the black people of Africa to an extent which makes their two countries, South Africa and the Southern South, the most reactionary peoples on earth. Peoples whose exploitation of the poor and helpless, reaches the last degree of shame. They must in the long run yield to the forward march of civilization or die.

If now you young people instead of running away from the battle here in Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi, instead of seeking freedom and opportunity in Chicago and New York which do spell opportunity - nevertheless grit your teeth and make up your minds to fight it out right here if it takes every day of your lives and the lives of your children's children. If you do this, you must in meetings like this ask yourselves what does the fight mean? How can it be carried on? What are the best tools, arms, and methods? And where does it lead?

I should be the last to insist that the uplift of mankind never calls for force and death. There are times, as both you and I know, when

"Tho' love repine and reason chafe, 
There came a voice without reply, 
'Tis man's perdition to be safe 
When for the truth he ought to die.'

At the same time and even more clearly in a day like this, after the millions of mass murders that have been done in the world since 1914, we ought to be the last to believe that force is ever the final word. We cannot escape the clear fact that what is going to win in this world is reason if this ever becomes a reasonable world. The careful reasoning of the human mind backed by the facts of science is the one salvation of man. The world, if it resumes its march toward civilization, cannot ignore reason. This has been the tragedy of the South in the past; it is still its awful and unforgivable sin that it has set its face against reason.
and against the fact. It tried to build slavery upon freedom; it tried to build tyranny upon democracy; it tried to build mob violence on law and law on lynching and in all that despicable endeavor, the state of South Carolina has led the South for a century. It began not the Civil War - not the War between the States but the War to Preserve Slavery; it began mob violence and lynching and today it stands in the front rank of those defying the Supreme Court on disfranchisement.

Nevertheless reason can and will prevail; but of course it can only prevail with publicity - pitiless, blatant publicity. You have got to make the people of the United States and of the world know what is going on in the South. You have got to use every field of publicity to force the truth into their ears, and before their eyes. You have got to make it impossible for any human being to live in the South and not realize the barbarities that prevail here. You may be condemned for flamboyant methods; for calling a congress like this; for waving your grievances under the noses and in the faces of men. That makes no difference it is your duty to do it. It is your duty to do more of this sort of thing than you have done in the past. As a result of this you are going to be called upon for sacrifice. It is no easy thing for a young black man or a young black woman to live in the South today and to plan to continue to live here; to marry and raise children; to establish a home. They are in the midst of legal caste and customary insults; they are in continuous danger of mob violence; they are mistreated by the officers of the law and they have no hearing before the courts and the churches and public opinion commensurate with the attention which they ought to receive. But that sacrifice is only the Beginning of Battle, you must re-build this South.

There are enormous opportunities here for a new nation, a new Economy, a new culture in a South really new and not a mere renewal of
an old South of slavery, monopoly and race hate. There is a chance for
a new cooperative agriculture on renewed land owned by the State with
capital furnished by the State, mechanized and coordinated with city
life. There is chance for strong, virile Trade Unions without race
discrimination, with high wage, open shop and decent conditions of
work to beat back and hold in check the swarm of landlords, monopolists
and profiteers who are today sucking the blood out of this land. There
is chance for cooperative industry, built on the cheap power of T.V.A.
and its future extensions. There is opportunity to organize and mech-
anize domestic service with decent hours, and high wage and dignified
training. There is a vast field for consumers cooperation, building
business on public service and not on private profit as the main-spring
of industry. There is chance for a broad, sunny, healthy home life,
shorn of the fear of mobs and liquor, and rescued from lying, stealing
politications, who build their deviltry on race prejudice. Here in this
South is the gateway to the colored millions of the West Indies, Central
and South America. Here is the straight path to Africa, the Indies,
China and the South Seas. Here is the Path to the Greater, Freer truer
World. It would be shame and cowardice to surrender this glorious land
and its opportunities for civilization and humanity to the thugs and
lynchers, the mobs and profiteers, the monopolists and gamblers who today
choke its soul and steal its resources. The oil and sulphur: the coal
and iron; the cotton and corn; the lumber and cattle belong to you the
workers, black and white, and not to the thieves who hold them and use
them to enslave you. They can be rescued and restored to the people if
you have the guts to strive for the real right to vote, the right to
real education, the right to happiness and health and the total abolition
of the father of these scourges of mankind, POVERTY.
"Behold the beautiful land which the Lord thy God hath given thee."

Behold the land, the rich and resourceful land, from which for a hundred years its best elements have been running away, its youth and hope black and white, scurrying North because they are afraid of each other, and dare not face a future of equal, independent, upstanding human beings, in a real and not a sham democracy.

To rescue this land, in this way, calls for the Great Sacrifice:
This is the thing that you are called upon to do because it is the right thing to do. Because you are embarked upon a great and holy crusade, the emancipation of mankind black and white; the upbuilding of democracy; the breaking down, particularly here in the South, of forces of evil represented by race prejudice in South Carolina; by Lynching in Georgia; by disfranchisement in Mississippi; by Ignorance in Louisiana and by all these and monopoly of wealth in the whole South.

There could be no more splendid vocation beckoning to the youth of the twentieth century, after the flat failures of white civilization, after the flamboyant establishment of an industrial system which creates poverty and the children of poverty which are ignorance and disease and crime; after the crazy boasting of a white culture that finally ended in wars which ruined civilization in the whole world; in the midst of allied peoples who have yelled about democracy and never practised it either in the British Empire or in the American Commonwealth or in South Carolina.

Here is the chance for young women and young men of devotion to lift again the banner of humanity and to walk toward a civilization which will be free and intelligent; which will be healthy and unafraid; and build in the world a culture led by black folk and joined by peoples of all colors and all races — without poverty, ignorance and disease!
Once a great German poet cried: "Selig der Er in Sieges Glänze
findet"

"Happy man whom Death shall find in Victory's splendor"

But I know a happier one: he who fights in despair and in defeat
still fights. Singing with Arna Bontemps the quiet, determined philosophy
of undefeatable men:

"I thought I saw an angel flying low,
I thought I saw the flicker of a wing
Above the mulberry trees; but not again,
Bethesda sleeps. This ancient pool that healed
A Host of bearded Jews does not awake.
This pool that once the angels troubled does not move.
No angel stirs it now, no Saviour comes
With healing in His hands to raise the sick
and bid the lame man leap upon the ground.

The golden days are gone. Why do we wait
So long upon the marble steps, blood
Falling from our open wounds? and why
Do our black faces search the empty sky?
Is there something we have forgotten? Some precious thing
We have lost, wandering in strange lands?

There was a day, I remember now,
I beat my breast and cried, "Wash me God,"
Wash me with a wave of wind upon
The barley; O quiet one, draw near, draw near!
Walk upon the hills with lovely feet
And in the waterfall stand and speak!

W. E. B. Du Bois