Nelson, Truman, 1911-1987
Speech at 90th birthday celebration for W. E. B. Du Bois, March 2, 1958

Transcript of speech, with notes for publication, celebrating the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, and conventional depictions of the Civil War. Transcript of a speech given at the Hotel Roosevelt on the occasion of Du Bois' birthday.

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Speech at 90th Birthday Celebration for W.E.B. DuBois

By Truman Nelson

This is a very happy occasion for me, and I know for most of us in this room. For years now, perhaps all our lives, we have been shouting into the whirlwind of a greedy and irrational society, which tries to drown out, with the idiotic sound and fury of self-hatred and despair, any hope that man can establish a world of peace, beauty and perfectibility. Here, at least, it is possible to stand and speak the beautiful and formidable thoughts of free men, just at the level of one another's ear.

We are met to honor a great man of our own time, a man who has been heaping up treasures on this earth for us all. In a sense we are here as prodigal sons and daughters for we have wasted the substance he has gathered for us, and is still gathering by his incessant toil yet going on at fourscore years and ten. By our indifference or cowardice we are allowing our children to be taught a false and vilely corrupt version of history which wilfully distorts what our distinguished guest, in his towering, unique and prominently truthful work, BLACK RECONSTRUCTION, calls

"The most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history...the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty of the mother continent into the new-found Eldorado of the West. They descended into hell and in the third century they arose from the dead, in the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions which this world has ever seen. It was a tragedy which beggared the Greek; it was an upheaval of humanity like the Reformation of the French Revolution. Yet we are blind and led by the blind. We discern in it no part of our labor movement, no part of our industrial triumph, no part
of our religious experience. Before the dumb eyes of ten
generations of ten million children, it is made mockery of and
spit upon, a degradation of the eternal mother, a sneer at human
effort, with aspiration and art deliberately distorted."

We know this distortion of reality fed the obscene myth of
white supremacy and keeps it unnaturally alive in the face of
supreme Negro achievement on every side... but there is a worse
poison in the effect it is calculated to have on man thinking,
on a writer, on a citizen.

A man thinking first finds much bafflement and no little
shame in the awareness that President after President takes an
oath to uphold the Constitution and then turns his back on
millions of Americans who, because of their color, are denied the
protection and advantages of the law he has sworn to enforce.
He begins to wonder if the whole complex of ideas and promises
he is born to live by, is not a pious fraud; certainly an intellectual
one. If he looks on this gross contradiction in the ground
rules of his daily existence with unstirred contemplation, he is
committing a sin against his own senses, against the light that
is in him. If he accepts these disparities with complacency he
is committing the greatest of sins, that of hypocrisy, which blinds
a man to his own failings and gives him a false idea of his posi-
tion and purpose in the world. If he then consults the historians,
in all the meticulous purity of their academic robes, he is told
that in theory we have the equality promised by our revolutionary
fathers, but in actuality it cannot be worked out, at least in the
South, because the white people down there were terribly hurt
after the "War Between the States," quote and unquote, when the Negro
did have equality under the law but abused it in an unpardonable
way. They sold their votes and wandered lazily about, stealing
and frolicking in a saturnalia of corruption and bestiality. Furthermore, the men who made this possible, Charles Sumner in the Senate and Thaddeus Stevens in the House, were not themselves interested in the Negro but were merely fanatic and vindictive radicals, drunk with power and determined to grind a noble, defeated adversary into the dust.

This is not Mein Kampf I am talking about; this is mine history, the texts our children are reading every day. And so the fabric of the American past is torn apart, the threads are snatched that lead back to the best hope man ever had. A whole race is slandered by separation from the continuity of truth. The man thinking is made a psycho cripple, amputated from the very sinews in the American consciousness which could join him to the manliest examples of the courage and breadth of intellect we need so desperately today; from the minds of Sumner, Frederick Douglas, Phillips, Garrison and Parker, good, warm-hearted patriots, lovers of universal freedom and unswerving foes of bigotry and oppression. All the values these men thought out and implanted in the living tissue of the Republic have been lopped off, and in their place we are offered as patriots to be venerated, traitors like Lee and Davis, drunken bigots like Johnson, drunken hirings of the rich like Daniel Webster, racists all of them who have spread filth on the seamless garment of the American Dream.

As a writer I look across a wide gulf of misunderstanding at my colleagues. Like them I turn to my country's history, because, as Walt Whitman says, "Here is not merely a nation, but a teeming nation of nations. Here the performance disdaineth the trivial ... unapproached in the audacity of its crowds and groupings and the push of its perspective spreads with crampless and flowing breadth and showers its prolific and splendid extravagance."
But alas, the writers I see are busy mostly with picking the scabs of small egos and watching them bleed or seeing how many double-backed beasts they can get to dance at the head of a chapter. From my isolation I sometimes try to join them across the divide in a common love of our masters, Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, Melville, but I soon find we are not discussing the same man. They do not understand... because they accept the delusion that the great North-South struggle was based on economics and not on principle; that both sides, somehow, were morally equal. They do not understand that such transcendent beauty of utterance rose exactly out of lives preoccupied with and committed irreversibly to correcting the human condition, with particular reference to the slave; or why the famous Essay on Civil Disobedience, with all the shock of its revolutionary daring, should logically, at that time and place, be published in a book entitled Aesthetic Papers. They pluck the master’s hearts apart with pedantic autopsies but they are never able to discover why these men all cried “Saint” when a man convicted of treason went to the gallows, cried it on public platforms, where it could hurt, while the rest of the country shouted “Brown is a Madman!” Least of all can they ever understand the Whitman who warned us our liberties would go, as they did, when servility by the town or state or the Federal Government, or any oppression on a large scale or small scale can be tried on without its own punishment following duly after in exact proportion against the smallest chance of escape. Now I think Dr. DuBois would understand that very well.

By far our greatest loss has been our citizenship itself. Do you realize what this word citizen meant to the men fighting the Revolution? It meant that henceforth they were to live under Natural Law. Natural Law is born into a man along with his heart and bones and it has nothing to do with what color he is. While in this state of nature he can enter into some form of government
which will protect it, but it must be voluntarily and without relinquishing his superiority to government as a citizen or his right to revolution. Furthermore, he cannot give away, by any compact, his rights of civil liberty, freedom of worship and ideology, freedom of speech and assembly and the right to have any accusation of criminality calmly adjudged by a jury of his equals. These rights belong to his posterity and although he can give away his own life if he chooses, never, never can he dispose of the rights of man.

This to me is the absolute of absolutes... bedrock. I'm not going to argue about it, defend it, explain it, justify it or pettifog about it in any way. It is just there, like Mount Everest. It can't rightly be destroyed because it says in the contract that brought this country into existence that these rights are inalienable. True, there are nay-sayers who should do better but what are they as opposed to the thundering yes written by the bare and bloody feet of revolutionary soldiers in the snow... to the yes in the scarlet flow from the torn breasts of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Negro Regiment on the parapets of Fort Wagner? John Brown said yes to it at the end of a rope at Charleston, Virginia, and Dr. DuBois and the Niagara Movement said amen to him in a holy pilgrimage, barefoot on the sacred stones of Harper's Ferry. Today it is being said best by the nine or eight Negro children walking the corridors of Little Rock High School with death-threats, obscenity and inhumanity stalking them every moment of their school day.

But to the mass of men and women, these footfalls, these sacrifices, which should echo down the corridors of time, have little meaning. To these acts of love they cannot be true because between them, their heroes and themselves, there lies a fearful mass of ignorance, fraud and deceit, a wicked and contrived
cleavage in the rock of our mutual faith, splitting apart the world so various, so new with joy and love and light and certitude of triumph.

W.E.B. Du Bois, with the body of his work and with his own body has bridged this tragic gulf for us. He, and he alone makes it possible for us, lost in this wilderness, in this painful kingdom of empty time and threatening space, to find our way back to the junction where there waits, still valid and unspent, the legacy of our common father's house.

To claim it, we must first come forward and identify ourselves as citizens—in the old sense, the revolutionary sense. We must not deny but we must cherish and proclaim the truths that only outbreaks and revolutions can tell...the terrible judgements and revelations that prove beyond any doubt that the black and white in this country are indivisible, that our fate and our futures are indivisibly forever.

We must affirm that our perfectibility, as a person, as a citizen, lies wholly in a life of principle, under the guidance of ideas, in response to the great and accursed question of personal independence, the citizen's relation to the state, the right of resistance, the wrong of poverty, racism and bigotry, and the quickening vision of the brotherhood of man all over the world.

Let us go forward then and reconstruct the citizen. And if possible, let him be in the image of this country's First Citizen, William E. Burghardt Du Bois.

—Truman Nelson—
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