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## THE SOUTHERN RACE PROBLEM IN RETROSPECT

By Jessie P. Guzman

### I

Officers, Members and Friends of the Tuskegee Civic Association, this is the first opportunity I have had to appear formally before you since 1954, when I was your candidate for election to the Macon County Board of Education. Many important changes have occurred in our nation, state, county and city since that political campaign, greatly affecting our entire life.

Perhaps you can remember some of the activities of the <sup>at</sup> campaign almost five years ago--our open letters to the electorate, speeches made at various churches and at the County Court House, broadcasts over radio and handbills and other literature setting forth our platform. All, you may recall, appealed to our citizens to practice true democracy in public education by electing one Negro to public office. We were operating on the assumption that white citizens had some pride in the achievements of our Negro citizens and could be stimulated to be fair and just if proper appeals were made. Let us review briefly some of those appeals.

Instances were cited in which Negroes had been elected by both races to public office in other Southern communities. White citizens were reminded of the changes taking place not only in this country but in the world at large. We pointed out that Macon County had a wonderful opportunity to get into the mainstream of the progressive South and to set an example for those places not as far advanced in their democratic thinking as we were.

"A real community," I stated, "attempts to develop a working arrangement that will resolve conflict and make consistent progress possible," and that I was certain all elements of our people wanted



*Insert* Restrictions placed on  
Negro registration  
to make sure that  
continued white control

our County to continue making consistent progress.

*or of any phase of local government due to the fact that limitations*  
I indicated that more than 25,000 of the County's 30,561  
citizens had no voice in the administration of their school system,  
and called on the white electors to let the County take the lead *placed*  
in demonstrating that as Americans we knew how to live democratically  
and how to utilize the services of all of our citizens for the  
benefit of all.

"Is Macon County brave enough to accept this challenge?" I  
asked. And, I said this: "I predict that my election to the  
Macon County Board of Education will be the beginning of an era  
of goodwill in our community, such as it has never before ex-  
perienced. If I am elected . . . white citizens will awaken to  
find they have nothing to fear, for they will have lost none of  
their power, or their prestige, or their jobs; but they would  
have gained the confidence and respect of every intelligent colored  
citizen in the County. Negro citizens will awaken to find that  
their white neighbors after all are not tyrants, who look upon  
them simply as subjects for economic exploitation."

I continued: "My candidacy for office is the first opportunity  
Macon County has had to show that it really has faith in its Negro  
citizens; for the present state of affairs whereby one small group  
of our people makes all decisions by which the majority must abide  
cannot continue for very long. Let us of our own free will work  
out our problems," I pled. "We can best serve democracy when the  
races in Macon County are permitted to work together and live to-  
gether and plan together in mutual respect and harmony."

Only one white person in the whole County indicated that my  
appeal was even heard. And he seemingly was under the same illusion



as we were. A few whites, however, did vote for your candidate no doubt because of their own political aspirations, having themselves solicited the Negro vote.

Because of this political gesture, which was simply an incident in the whole chain of events by which the Tuskegee Civic Association, its officers, members and supporters had for many years attempted to bring true Americanism to our locality, we were gerrymandered right out of the City of Tuskegee by our State Legislature and threatened with piece-meal division of our County because we dared to express the desire to have a voice in our own government.

We were truly naive five years ago, but intervening events have been a real education. We now know that what occurred in 1954 and subsequently has simply been an extension of the South's persistent stand during the past one hundred years.

## II

Dr. John Hope Franklin, noted historian of Brooklyn College, has made the following observations: Within the past century, the South has had to make at least four important choices, each related in some way to the Negro, and in each instance the choice was <sup>me</sup> based on the inability of Southerners to accept the Negro as a human being worthy of dignity and <sup>respect</sup> as are the members of other races.

The first choice was related to the institution of slavery. When people abroad and at home were condemning the institution, the South had the choice of going along with the principles of equality or repudiating these principles. The South chose to launch an all-out defense of the "cornerstone" of its civilization and rejected human equality for an economic and social system based



on inequality. This choice was an unwise one. It led to a period of intolerance, of irrational thinking, and finally to secession and the Civil War.

After the Civil War, the South was faced with its second choice. It could either accept the full implications of the Industrial Revolution then in full swing or it could qualify it to the point of nullifying the benefits it would bring. The South again refused to accept the Negro into full citizenship. It excluded him from the new industrial order, and created a situation which in the long run dissipated its peoples' energy, wasted its physical resources, and made itself a colony of the North and of the rest of the world. Southerners preferred to exchange Northern industrial domination of its economy in return for what it wanted most--domination of the Negro.

The third choice faced by the South came at the turn of the twentieth century. Greater economic and political democracy was being promoted in much of the nation due to the ferment of Progressivism. But the South accepted only a portion of reform, and this portion was reserved for whites only. When other parts of the country were taking steps to do something about racial discrimination, the South was enacting segregation statutes. Southern politicians were campaigning for office on white supremacy platforms, supported by southern scholars who were "discovering" new evidences of the Negro's inferiority. When the nation was trying to forget its long record of mistreatment of its largest minority group, the South wrote its white supremacist views into its State constitutions and laws, and increased lynchings to keep the Negro "in his place."



When the United States Supreme Court handed down its decision outlawing segregation in public education in 1954 and implemented this in 1955 with an order calling for a "prompt and reasonable" start "with all deliberate speed" toward complying with the decision, the South was faced with its fourth choice. Here again, the South could accept the Highest Court's decision or it could reject it. We all know the extent to which certain States of the South have gone to nullify and reject national law. They have adopted numerous manifestoes, and have attempted to interpose the sovereignty of the States between the Federal Government and the people. State legislatures have passed so many laws that they are beginning to fall from their own weight. They have heaped abuse of all kinds upon the Supreme Court and have called for the impeachment of that tribunal's justices. They continue to seek national legislation to limit the power and functions of this court, and a State militia was used to prevent the execution of a Federal Court order.

There has been "massive resistance" in Virginia and mob violence in Little Rock. The admittance of a Negro girl to its State University resulted in riots in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and churches, homes and schools throughout the South have been bombed. Propaganda campaigns have been as massive as legal and other acts of defiance. Although the white South is guilty of violence, the Negro is doing no bombing, is defying no courts, is attempting to enact no laws in defiance of his own government.

The choices the South has made have not only been out of harmony with the dominant trend in American life and thought, but they have been against the South's own best interest. They brought the South to the point where it became the nation's most



depressed area economically and it is still lagging behind the rest of the nation not only in this regard, but politically and socially as well. Its decisions have created a situation making it most difficult if not impossible for the region to create satisfactory relations between its own people, between it and the rest of the country, and between it and the rest of the world. To complicate matters, the South believes it is "acting in accordance with the principles of high honor and morality."

In the meantime, it continues on its old historical road of denying to the region the development of its potentials because it is more concerned about seeing to it that Negroes are excluded from participation in a common life.

### III

The Negro has come to know and to understand the white South as it really is. He has not really known it in the past; and it has not really known him, despite long and confident assertion to the contrary. The Negro has come to realize that the bond which truly holds the white South together, as Ulrich B. Phillips long ago asserted, is its white supremacy attitudes.

The South rejects everything that is not in accord with its fundamental theme. Pertinent here are some personal experiences relating to the situation. In order to promote sales several years ago, the Negro Year Book was offered to public high schools throughout the country for a nominal sum per copy. There was widespread response from Negro schools and from white schools above the Mason-Dixon line, but very few, as I recall, from Southern white institutions. Later, when a new edition of the same volume was advertised nationally, some of the advertising materials were returned with insulting comments.



One day my husband and I were raking leaves and cleaning our front yard when a salesman from a nearby town came by, stopped and began to talk. We found he was selling television sets and was looking for the names of prospective purchasers. My husband gave him the name of a lady who he knew wanted a set, then said, "If you really wish to make a sale, I would advise you to be courteous and be sure to call her Mrs." This man flushed and answered, "I'll never call her Mrs. It's against my conscience, it's against my religion, it's un-Christian." I said, "But how do you know it's un-Christian, have you ever tried it?" "No," he said, "and I never will."

While in Kansas a number of years ago, I visited a lady who had attended the college at Highland, Kansas, from which George Washington Carver was excluded back in the 1880's, because of his color. When her attention was called to the fact that the President of that institution was reported as having said, "We do not accept niggers here," she answered, "But he was a perfect gentleman, he could not have said that; and even if he did say it, he couldn't have meant any harm." Perhaps he did not, but the thing that matters, I told her, was that a genius's preparation for his life's work was long delayed because a prejudiced person refused to give him an opportunity to develop latent abilities, and the world is poorer today because, in all, at least fifteen of George Washington Carver's best years were lost to science. And who benefitted more from the researches of this scientist than the South?

Alabama and the whole South had an opportunity to desegregate gracefully all of their transportation systems some two or three years ago, but they refused to do so. Instead, they placed up



new segregation signs for State and inter-State passengers.

The City of Montgomery was given the opportunity of making small adjustments in its segregated bus seating, but it chose to make none, thus paving the way for the legal elimination of segregated bus seating entirely. Learning no lesson from its intransigency in the bus controversy, officials of the same city are repeating their error by closing down the public parks to keep from integrating them and vow to close the public schools if threatened with integration, thinking this will solve their problem. In the meantime, the tax payer's money, which includes taxes paid by Negroes, is being expended to boost false pride.

The town of Tuskegee, ~~Alabama~~<sup>9</sup>, was threatened not once but several times with losing the trade of our people, and this trade was actually withheld once before 1957, but the town didn't profit from that experience. It wanted Negroes to help support businesses and bear their share of the burden of operating the municipality, but it did not wish them to have any voice in saying how the town or the county should be run or how monies should be expended. Being gerrymandered outside of the Tuskegee City limits taught Negro citizens a fundamental lesson--they must not support institutions which deny them participation on the same basis as other citizens.

Even though we have a chief executive whose interest is only in the white people of the State; though we have a judge who speaks only for white people; though I believe we have a Director of State Highways who would, if it were possible, build and maintain roads on which only white people would walk and travel, ~~the~~ Negro's enthusiasm for continuing his march toward complete assimilation cannot be checked. Neither State laws and policy which permit Registrars to limit the number of Negroes who may qualify to vote,



nor the antics of a County judge, who tried to withhold public records from the Civil Rights Commission, can stop the progress of democracy.

#### IV

We must never forget that Federal troops had to be sent to Little Rock to protect <sup>n</sup> Negro children from mob violence because they won the right through the courts to attend a decent school; nor that a shouting, <sup>s</sup>genticulating mob in Charlotte, North Carolina, threw sticks and rocks and spat at a young Negro girl after her first day at a previously all-white high school to which she had been assigned. All of the brave children, the pioneers of desegregation, will remind Negroes of their duty in this struggle for democracy.

Nor must Negroes forget that there is a small body of Southerners who realize that the South is keeping itself in economic, political and psychological subservience but are afraid to speak out or to head any movement that would help the area to see itself as it really is. Some way must be found to make this group realize their predicament. Numerous groups and individuals make statements, formulate resolutions and work up programs, but, with the exception of some private educational institutions of higher learning, and a few of lower rank, most real and substantial gains in race relations in the South have come about as the result of legal action instituted by Negroes, with the support, financial and otherwise, of white and colored friends outside the South.

However, there is a little band of white Southerners who really believe in equal citizenship rights for all Americans. These are easily identifiable. They have been aggressive in promoting their beliefs, unafraid of the consequences. Judge J. <sup>Waties</sup> Waites Waring,



formerly of Charleston, South Carolina, was not afraid to rule that the white primary was unconstitutional. Aubrey Williams of Montgomery, Alabama, and James Dombrowski of New Orleans, both officials of the Southern Conference Educational Fund, are not afraid to place themselves squarely on the side of democracy. The leaders of Koinonia Farms, an interracial, religious community near Americus, Georgia, are certainly not afraid of the consequences their stand on racial matters might bring. Lillian Smith of the same State, whose books have mirrored Southern life, knows no fear. Carl and Anne Braden of Louisville, Kentucky, hounded by politicians in high and low places, accused of Communism and abused because they dared to believe and act on their belief that Negroes should be decently housed and respected as human beings, cannot be intimidated. There are others in Florida, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and other states who are not afraid to work for democracy.

But the South has rejected practically every one of its native sons and daughters who are seeking to make democracy a reality and who are demonstrating that democracy can exist in the region. It is this group whose inspiration is encouraging the Negro to continue to work and to make sacrifices to bring about a society where not <sup>2</sup>only he but every individual will be given an opportunity to develop <sup>1</sup>and to make his contribution to a common country. While we are remembering those who are bearing the brunt of the present struggle for freedom for all, we must include those white children, who in numerous instances, regardless of parental and societal control have accepted their new schoolmates; and the white teachers who, in spite of their personal views on segregation, have received no criticism concerning their treatment of their new pupils.



This tide of public opinion at home, the changing conception of the Negro about himself, his past and his future, world disapproval of any type of artificial barrier which would hinder the development of people, are unmistakable signs that the South is again on the losing side, and cannot win its latest struggle for the preservation of a society based on racial discrimination, for this policy is on its way out.

All of the arguments and devices that the South has originated and maintains to keep the Negro in a subordinate position have long since been proved untenable. All branches of our Federal Government have come to the conclusion that the national interest is paramount to that of any one region.

The South has demonstrated that it is unable psychologically and otherwise to solve its problem alone. But it will be solved by interacting forces from within and from without; and in this solution the Negro, his leaders and organizations, including the Tuskegee Civic Association, will have played a significant role.