

Civil Rights in the Early 1900s

Background

Nearly all African-Americans arriving in or born in the U.S. before 1865 were slaves at one time. By the end of the Civil War all were free. But, the fact that they were free did not mean they were treated the same as members of other ethnic groups. In fact, reconstructing the south to bring about equality had failed miserably. In the early 1900s, African-Americans differed on how to achieve the goal of equality. In 1910, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) was founded. One of its first decisions was whether to focus on achieving economic or political equality first.

Economic Equality First By "Booker Tuskegee"

African-Americans have a right to immediate political, economic and social equality. But, as shown by the failure of Reconstruction, most whites currently oppose complete racial equality.

Some people suggest we demand political equality first. But, politics is zero sum game. If one group increases its political power, it must be at expense of another group. If we try to increase our political power now, we will be opposed by whites who believe they will lose power. And, since our opponents are currently much more powerful than we are, we will lose.

The NAACP must adopt a different strategy. We must focus on achieving economic equality first. By doing so, we can build alliances with whites. Economics is not zero-sum game. We can all get rich at the same time.

We can convince even racist whites that black economic success benefits them. If blacks do not work, they do not provide a labor force for white business owners, they cannot buy products made by white-owned businesses, and they are more likely to commit crime. By focusing on economic equality, we enlist whites in our struggle.

When we become wealthy, we can force political and social equality. Money influences business. If we threaten to refuse to ride streetcars unless

they integrate, the street car companies will either integrate or go out of business. Money influences politics, as well. If we pledge to fund the political party that supports anti-lynching and desegregation laws, the Republicans and Democrats will both compete for our support. Plus, money can be used to fund court cases challenging discriminatory state laws.

When we become more wealthy, social equality will follow. Society respects those who have something to contribute to the world's marketplace. There is no country in which this is more true than America. In the U.S., entrepreneurs, capitalists and inventors are considered heroes.

Durham, North Carolina provides an example of the benefits of striving for economic equality. Three black entrepreneurs started a successful insurance company there. Its success spawned the creation of a black-owned bank, drug store, cotton mill, and newspaper. Even more striking was the response of whites. There are no secret white racist societies, lynchings, intimidation, or race riots in Durham. Indeed, black economic success is celebrated by Durham's white people.

Economic equality is always followed by political and social equality. That is what we must strive for first.

Political Equality First By "Debbie Webb"

It is wrong to discriminate against people because of their race. But today, men are prohibited to vote and children are denied admission to schools on account of their race. Murderers are not arrested or prosecuted on account of the race of their victims. Our first priority must be to change those laws.

Those who place the goal of economic equality first are asking us to compromise with racists and accept political and social inequality. We should not have to postpone our demand for equality. We should not compromise with evil.

Focusing on economic equality is not just wrong. It is also ineffective. Blacks are currently too poor to exert any economic influence. We were freed without land, and have been forced to sharecrop or work for low wages since the end of Reconstruction. The lack of political equality will lead to permanent poverty.

When blacks can't vote, government ignores them or worse, oppresses them. There have been numerous examples of blacks being lynched for not agreeing to a specific price for cotton or labor. How can we achieve economic equality when our opponents are free to use the law to take our property?

Focusing on economic equality will also be self-destructive. Requiring blacks to compromise will sap the strength of the black community. If we accept discrimination and segregation, we will lose our dignity.

In addition, we must have higher goals than simply the pursuit of money. Focusing on economic equality first will lead to an educational emphasis on trade skills, at the expense of art, music and literature. The latter are the virtues by which races and nations are judged by history.

It is true that focusing on political equality may lead to confrontation. But, the racists make up a minority of the white population. By agitating and demonstrating for political equality, we will force the silent majority of whites to help us.

We must organize ourselves into political clubs and put pressure on whites to give us the right to vote in states where it is denied. The Constitution is on our side. If we educate a group of effective lawyers, we will begin to win cases that will strike down discriminatory state laws.

The NAACP must strive, indeed fight, for political equality. Only then will we be able to achieve economic and social equality.