

Chicago Negro Exposition Marks 75 Years of Struggles And Progress of an Oppressed People Seeking Freedom

By Angelo Herndon

The opening of the Negro Exposition in Chicago on Independence Day, July 4th, had a double significance for black Americans. First, the exposition heard speeches on the opening day of 75 years of Negro progress in America at a time when the entire nation paused to do honor to the great traditions of American liberty and independence. The occasion is appropriate for Negroes to express anew their ever burning desire and love for freedom which has been kept alive in the heart and soul of the Negro people down through the dark and dreary years of their frightful oppression.

In dramatizing 75 years of Negro achievement under the most adverse circumstances, the exposition will call to the attention of the entire nation the persistence of the great crimes of injustice and repression which are in defiance of the Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation.

It is but fitting and proper that Negroes should join with other democratic Americans in paying tribute to the glorious ideals of the great men whose indomitable courage and unselfish sacrifice won for the American nation its freedom from the oppressive yoke of British rule.

Since the first Emancipation Proclamation was issued by Lincoln on Jan. 1, 1863, Negroes have enjoyed

only a relative and theoretical freedom which is a mockery of the Constitution. But notwithstanding this, Republican and Democratic politicians, demagogues and enemies of democracy, will strut forth on this occasion; this is the American custom, with their usual bombast and thunder about democracy, freedom, national unity, and aid to the defunct Allies—but none of them will dare break the solemn conspiracy of silence when black Americans are to be considered in these benefits.

Without doubt, the state legislators and Senators who are scheduled to appear on the program at the exposition will talk about anything under the sun but the lynch terror, jim crowism and oppression which the Negro people are still subjected to 75 years after freedom.

Strange indeed that America can still boast about democracy for all of its citizens, when 75 years after Appomattox and the surrender of the rebel General Lee, 15,000,000 Negro Americans are still clamoring and pressing for political franchise, civil and democratic rights.

Strange, too, that a Negro Exposition in the home state of the Emancipator, Lincoln, should have to be organized in 1940 not for the sheer sake of portraying the cultural achievement and contributions of Negroes to American life, but as a refutation to the white chauvinist charges hurled against them and in defense of their human rights.

The slicing up of the world into new spheres of influence and the subjugation of millions of people to the brutal military force of world imperialism, presents for the entire American people on this Fourth of July a situation no less serious and threatening in its import than the great battle for liberty and independence in 1776.

NEGRO AND DEMOCRACY

As Truman K. Gibson, executive director of the Negro Exposition, correctly points out, "in these days of world strife and chaos when the lights of progress have been put out in a great part of the world, we feel that the achievements of an oppressed people will be an inspiration to all down-trodden victims of oppression throughout the universe."

The Exposition, according to Mr. Gibson, "will demonstrate the Negro's inherent belief and support of democracy. On the other hand, it will not seek to disguise or conceal the failings of American democracy where the Negro is concerned. We have attempted to show a true picture of our participation in American life, and we are confident that we have succeeded."

The Exposition will have on display data on Negro history which has been kept out of history books or ignored by white chauvinist historians. Arna Bontemps, noted Negro novelist, has been in charge of research for the Exposition, and

all murals and dioramas for the fair have been carefully checked for historical accuracy.

"Tropics After Dark," "The Cavalcade of the Negro Theatre," by Langston Hughes, starring many prominent entertainers, will be outstanding features at the Exposition.

STRUGGLE GOES ON

As the pages of history are turned back to pay homage and gain inspiration from the illustrious deeds of such men as Thomas Paine, George Washington, Patrick Henry and Crispus Attucks, Negro Americans should be ever more mindful of the struggle which still must continue for their freedom.

Certainly the celebration of 75 years of Negro progress and 164 years of the Declaration of Independence, should give new impetus to the fight against Jim Crow oppression, Ku Klux Klan terror, lynching, and police—all of which is still the lot of the Negro people in spite of the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the federal Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

The Exposition has an opportunity to do a good job in depicting the status of the Negro which, in the course of years, remains essentially the same as if the Civil War had never been fought and the Constitution never written and adopted.

Under the "protecting" wing of the Constitution, the Negro is still voteless, propertyless and denied practically all rights in the South. The very provisions and amend-

ments to the Constitution through which he has sought his most elementary rights, have been and are still used to browbeat and keep him down.

All through the long 75 years of oppression, whatever progress he has achieved under the Constitution has been through hard and militant struggle.

DOUGLASS' QUESTION

It is well for Negroes to recall on this Fourth of July the Fourth of July oration delivered by Frederick Douglass at Rochester, New York, in 1852, in which he asked the question which is still to be answered.

"Why am I called upon to speak here today. What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? And am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence?"

"... Such is not the state of the case. . . I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of jus-

tice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. . . . Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting. America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future."

A WARNING

The stupidity of such a policy is brought painfully home in the example of Ethiopia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and more recently, the horrible tragedy of France. Betrayed, sold out and deserted by its bankrupt leadership of powerful landlords and bankers who preferred the path of surrender of their country and people rather than give up their selfish class interests, France and all the other countries which have been overrun by Hitler, should be sufficient warning to the American people, lest we be sold down the river by the same selfish imperialist interests.

America can be saved from this sad fate not by adopting the methods of the British and French capitalists and German fascists, but by extending democracy to all of its citizens, including 15,000,000 Negroes.