

DEAR FRIENDS

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Greetings:

For a man with his eye on the ball, who has zeroed in on constructive deeds towards solving the problems of his people, a salute is due Jackie Robinson.

At a time, when the big leagues would not engage Negro ball-players, Robinson, by sheer brilliance, broke through the prejudice and won a contract from the then Brooklyn Dodgers. Jackie didn't burn down the ball park - he burned up the bases. The acclaim he won opened the door for many hundreds of Negro and other colored athletes. Today, the baseball fan does not judge a performer by the color of his skin, but by his colorful playing.

Always improving himself, always hopeful and ambitious, Jackie has gone on after the end of his baseball career to win a respected place in the economic world. Besides executive posts he has held, he is now an advisor to Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York, and heads the Freedom National Bank in Harlem. By loan opportunities, and sound business advice and encouragement, this institution has made it possible for Negroes to own over 30% of businesses in Harlem, almost double what it was two years ago.

This approach - education, self improvement along sound economic lines - is the surest, most enduring answer to the Negro problem today. To give to the Negro the hope to achieve, to progress in the same manner as all previous minority groups have done.

In this period of urban turmoil and racial outbursts, it is well to turn to history and not to hysteria. History teaches us that our Society is built on the design of the Totem Pole. The favored sit on top, with successive strata resting on the low man on the bottom. It has always been thus. It will remain so until such time as we evolve a kind of horizontal egalite of Mankind rather than our exploitive vertical form.

Cities developed with waves of minority immigrant groups following each other. Each minority served as the low man. The pattern was always the same - only the people were different. Slums, tough jobs, low wages, exploitation and discrimination. Ugly, unchristian prejudice made it as cruel for Irish rabble, Jew kike, Italian wop, hunkie, polack, chink, squarehead, etc. as for today's nigger and spik.

It wasn't a hopeless situation, however. In a generation or two, the low men would move up. It was called the American Dream, the Horatio Alger story, the working of the melting pot. It made America the greatest land of opportunity of all history. Most of the minority immigrant wave improved itself with the exception of some surviving dregs who mingled with the next incoming wave. It worked for Scotch, German, Irish, Jews, Italians, Scandanavians, Poles, Hungarians, Greeks, Chinese, Japanese and others.

The process began to break down after World War II. Two vast immigrant waves swept into the Northern cities. The Puerto-Ricans from the misery of their island, and the Negroes from the South. The latter had begun to come by the thousands and then by the millions. First, there was the demand for their labor by war industries, then the rising expectations of Negro soldiers whose horizons had been broadened by war travel, and finally by the mechanization of agriculture that displaced them from the soil on which they had toiled for many generations. The Negro wave engulfed the slums, swamping them and becoming bogged down in ever-worsening ghettos.

Somewhere, the desire for education and economic improvement was dulled. Previous waves had availed themselves of all schools, any schools, no matter what the shortcomings. Adults and children alike went to school, to night classes, vocational classes,

evening college courses - to learn, to overcome language difficulties, to reach for better jobs and professions.

In economic life, each previous immigrant wave, all almost penniless by any standards, had seized on every chance for earning a living. Any job, no matter how difficult and poor pay, then a little shop, a small store, any venture. It represented the tiny savings laboriously accumulated, or the pooling of the meager resources of a family or group. The Jew had his pushcart or the pack on his back to peddle. The Irishman labored with pick and shovel. The Italian dug the ditches and the sewers. The Chinese laid the miles of great railroad lines.

This struggle brought opportunity for the worker and for those of his fellows whom he could help - and it won him acceptance for his worth and ability. He began to move up on the Totem Pole - the peddler's sons became merchants, the laborer's sons were great contracting firms and the ditch digger's sons were building subways and vast public projects.

Somehow, in the case of the Negro, the pattern was interrupted. Aid for the needy - welfare introduced with the best of humane motivations - began to be a political tool. It exacted a heavy toll in human dignity and incentive. Political opportunists led the Negro to believe that he was entitled to more and more handouts. Then promises proved to be mirages. So-called beneficial legislation was little more than a hypocritical fraud. Tokenism, much publicized, reached but a miniscule part of the population. Resentment began to build up and finally exploded in the riots and arson in the cities of our nation.

History will tell us that the solution will not come from Congressional hearings, from the succession of Committees investigating the troubled ghettos. It will not come from the rash, intemperate mouthings of the current crop of tough guys inciting to violence. It will not come from those who would take counter measures, using violence, weaponry and hate.

The hope for a decent solution to the Negro problem is to turn to History. To learn from the preceding minority immigrant waves. To take for an image, the story of George Washington Carver, Ralph Bunche, Thurgood Marshall, Jackie Robinson - men who rose despite every handicap to positions of eminence and respect. The young Negro should learn that the numbers racketeer, the drug pusher, the pimp and the prostitute - those who defy "whitey and his lawmen" are doing more to destroy the social fibre of his people than the meanest of slumlords and dishonest storekeepers.

The young Negro should be encouraged to gain all the education he can assimilate, to train himself for a job, skill, trade or profession. To have horizons in useful opportunities - which are limitless. To do for himself. To lift himself by his bootstraps. To improve his environment, cleaning up his slums himself and killing the rats. Then to learn to build his own homes, shops, schools, hospitals and the like. The young Negro must never abandon hope for this is self-destructive. When the going is tough, the young Negro like Jackie Robinson, like a successful current slogan, "Must TRY Harder".

And the white man, if he has any sense, should be in there helping him all the way.

-- Joseph Zashin