

Toward Freedom

NEGRO History Week is an appropriate time for all of us to think deeply upon the really big lesson of Negro history; namely, just as the Negro's progress toward freedom is fundamentally dependent upon the decisive economic and political trends of the nation, so the welfare of our country as a whole is very largely dependent upon the further extension of Negro democratic rights.

This lesson was early impressed on the leaders of our country way back in the 18th century when the newborn nation was fighting for its right to exist. At first reluctant to use Negro troops, the Continental Army was finally forced to do so in order to stave off defeat. And on Boston Common, at Bunker Hill, with Washington at Valley Forge, and elsewhere, the heroism of Negro fighting men did much to make possible the realization of those unalienable "Right of Man" for which the colonists fought.

It is no mere coincidence that during this period of the American Revolution, as the nation advanced toward independence so likewise did the Negro people move forward in many ways toward freedom. The development was so marked that the renowned Negro historian, Carter G. Woodson, calls it the "hey-day of victory for the ante-bellum Negro."



by **Doxey A. Wilkerson**

In contrast, during the first half of the 19th century when the reactionary slave economy was spreading rapidly, and even coming to dominate in large measure the federal government, the Negro people were pushed downward into the most brutal, institutional form of human degradation that the world has ever seen.

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BUT the Negro's progress curve turned sharply upward during the period of the Civil War and Reconstruction, when the nation was in danger of being split wide open. The basic interests of the growing bourgeoisie of the North, the young but militant labor movement, the free farmers of the North and the fighting Abolitionists—all coincided during this period with the freedom goal of the Negro people. Indeed, those interests could not then be successfully defended save through the freeing of the Negro slaves. The Emancipation Proclamation was no "social reform" measure; it was what Lincoln called a "necessary war measure" to save the Union. So likewise must we interpret the many democratic advances of the Negro people during Reconstruction as necessary means of consolidating in peace the victories which some two hundred thousand Negro troops had helped the nation to win on the battlefield.

In the present period of our history, the

The Big Lesson Of Negro History

survival goals of our nation have again come to coincide with the freedom goals of the Negro people; again their mutual interdependence has been made strikingly apparent. Fundamentally it was the nation's imperative needs for continued existence which have made possible the rapid wartime advances toward full Negro democratic rights. It is no less true that the extension of Negro democratic rights, which brought the Negro masses into firm unity with the broad democratic coalition of national unity, has tremendously hastened victory on the production and military fronts and markedly strengthened the progressive political forces of America.

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AND now, what of the period after this war has been won? What then will happen to democracy and security for the Negro people and the nation as a whole? They will both move forward together, or they will be engulfed together in the on-rush of postwar reaction.

In the America that will emerge from this war, there is no way to security and freedom for anyone, white or Negro, save through the triumph of progressive political policies for enduring peace and of progressive economic policies for full postwar employment.

The future of Negro freedom and security will be determined decisively by the future of America; and the future of America will depend very largely upon the future of Negro democratic rights. This is the big lesson of Negro history.