

Toward Freedom

By DOXEY WILKERSON

IF MRS. ELEANOR ROOSEVELT were a Negro, she could appreciate the impropriety of much of the advice she gives the Negro people in her article, "Freedom: Promise or Fact," in the current issue of *Negro Digest*. If she were also a scientific student of society, she would understand the inadequacy of her program.



"If I were a Negro," writes Mrs. Roosevelt, "I would have moments of bitterness," but "I would realize that if my ancestors had never left Africa, we would be worse off as 'natives' today. . . ." She would also know that other groups are denied full freedom, too, and that she must "work hard and go on accomplishing the best . . . possible under present conditions." Moreover, she "would still feel" obligated "to participate fully in this war," for "when the United Nations win," things will be different.

Were she a Negro, the First Lady would work for "complete economic equality" and citizenship rights, but not for social equality, which "might well wait. . . ." She "would not do too much demanding," but would seek every opportunity to prove her worth, knowing that in the end, even though recognition is slow, "good performance has to be acknowledged."

With reference to racial discrimination in the armed forces, Mrs. Roosevelt (were she a Negro) "would accept every advance . . . made by the Army and Navy," but she "would not try to bring those advances about any more quickly than they were offered." She "would certainly affiliate with the labor movement because there is the greatest opportunity for men to work side by side" and discover those common interests which transcend race or color.

Finally, to quote the concluding paragraph in full: "I would try to remember that unfair and unkind treatment will not harm me if I do not let it touch my spirit. Evil emotions harm the man or woman who harbors them, so I would try to fight down resentment, the desire for revenge and bitterness. I would try to sustain my own faith in myself by counting over my friends and among them there would undoubtedly be some white people."

What is the essence of this wartime advice to the Negro people?

First, there is the none too subtle suggestion that Negroes ought to be thankful for the blessings which three centuries of slavery and semi-freedom have brought them; that they should work hard, keep kindly in spirit, and find solace in the thought that "some white people" are their friends. Mrs. Roosevelt obviously does not realize—as she would were she a Negro—that these are "quieting" doctrines which, through long years of struggle for

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freedom, the Negro people have learned to associate with reaction.

Second, there is the time-worn liberal declaration of faith in gradualism: Accept the slow advances "offered," avoid sharp conflicts, prove your quality and ability and, in good time, everything will be all right. Mrs. Roosevelt appears not to understand—as does the scientific student of society—that entrenched patterns of racial discrimination yield only to compelling counter-pressures; that with the Negro, as with all peoples in all ages, the history of social progress is a record of sharp struggles against oppression.

Third, there is the tendency to view the Negro's struggle for freedom and the nation's struggle for victory as separate—indeed contradictory—movements. The obvious motivation for Mrs. Roosevelt's article is anxiety lest the former interfere with the latter. She fails completely to grasp the essential unity of the two. As has been demonstrated in relation to other issues, the First Lady still does not sense the full practical implications of the concept of "national unity."

Of course, the Negro people should "participate fully in this war," but not *despite* current discriminations and because of the post-war "principles . . . enunciated by leaders of the United Nations." Negroes must support the war because their own lives and freedom depend upon the complete extirpation of fascism from the world; and further, because in the very process of this liberating war their freedom goals must—and are—being attained.

Of course, the Negro people should "affiliate with the labor movement," but not solely because the common union struggles of black and white workers tend to dissipate racial prejudices. The Negro must seek to enter and strengthen the labor movement also because organized labor is the very backbone of the war effort upon which his whole future depends; and further, because labor is the most powerful ally in the Negro's struggle for freedom.

Quite contrary to Mrs. Roosevelt's advice, the Negro and all other win-the-war forces must demand and fight for the prompt and complete uprooting of every form of racial discrimination in the armed forces. They must do this not solely because it is right, but also because it is necessary. Maximum military efficiency and real national unity on the home front, require the quickest possible elimination of Jim Crowism from the armed forces and all other areas of our national life.

Mrs. Roosevelt has long since demonstrated her sincerity and courage in championing the cause of Negro freedom. None can question her motives. However, if she would make her maximum contribution toward enlisting the full support of the Negro people for the war, she will have to grasp the basic fact that the Negro's struggle for freedom and the nation's struggle for survival are now inseparably merged. Both must move forward together.