

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DH - 23
Race in Athens, U.S.A.

Oct. 15, 1963
22 Cedar Lane
Princeton, N.J.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

When we returned from Africa after two years, the Negro Revolution was the most obvious change that had taken place while we were away. Here are some personal impressions of that revolution in our community.

Princeton, a town of 23,000, is a stronghold of what someone once called the bourgeois intelligentsia. Education is the town's main industry, and its residents are well above the national average in the number of dollars they earn and the number of degrees they hold. It is a company town, and the company, Princeton University, sets the tone of a community in which it is the leading political and economic force. Like other universities, Princeton's interests are increasingly intertwined with those of government; its aura is less that of dissent and more that of the affluent status quo. In the self-admiring eyes of many of its residents, Princeton is 'the Athens of America' (the term was coined by a magazine writer). It is, however, unsophisticated to say the phrase out loud.

Negroes make up almost 10 percent of the population, which is roughly the national average. They are better off than most American Negroes, but, since the whites are better off than most whites, the gap between the races is at least as great here as elsewhere, and in some ways it is more painful. Many Negro families came here before the Civil War as slaves of students or wealthy residents; the Negro ghetto lies alongside the Western section where the old-money homes are located. The University has had a strong Southern flavor, and segregation was the rule in the town. In fact, it seems that housing segregation has become more complete as the Negroes have been gradually pushed back into the ghetto.

Chinks in the wall of segregation began to appear a generation ago. The University began taking Negro students in 1943, and five years later the town desegregated its public schools. An organization was formed to seek housing for Negroes outside the ghetto. A few years ago, the University suffered one of its rare political defeats on an issue involving Princeton's Negroes. A real estate operation controlled by the University wanted, by means of urban renewal, to take possession of potentially lucrative land occupied by

one-family Negro homes. The effect of the 'renewal' would have been to make the ghetto still smaller, for the Negroes, with no place else to go, were to be resettled in apartments within the ghetto. The town council voted the area 'blighted', which could only happen in a town where a planner is said to have remarked: "If a house costs less than \$40,000, it doesn't pay for itself." The Negroes fought the project. Eventually it was thrown out in court on the grounds of conflict of interest: the council's 'blight' decision was made with the votes of two councilmen who were members of the University faculty. (In retrospect, it seems odd that this was not foreseen.) In the 1961 town election, a shift in the Negro vote was responsible for the defeat as mayor of the Democratic incumbent by a Republican who was unequivocally opposed to the urban renewal project.

Still, when we left two years ago, Princeton's traditional pattern of segregation was little changed despite the outward mask of integration. The housing group had worked hard, but only a handful of Negro families lived outside the ghetto, and they were mostly in two small integrated projects. The gates of opportunity had opened only a crack, and the cruel contrast in expectations had its natural effect on the schools. Friendships between Negro and white kids are common in elementary school, before they know the rules; after sixth grade they inexorably drift apart and by high school self-segregation is close to absolute. Schools geared to the needs of a prosperous intelligentsia can offer little to the Negroes. Indeed, a Negro teacher raised here argues that his people's children are worse off than before: teachers in the segregated school were more sympathetic and understanding than they are in the white-run schools. Now they get a poorer education in a better school, he concluded. (To avoid any possible misunderstanding, no one is arguing for segregated schools; the point is that integrated schools in a still-segregated society may be an illusion.) The drop-out rate among Negroes is high. Of 30 who entered the High School some years back, only five were graduated four years later; apparently there is no rise in the number of Negro graduates. Not long ago the board of education was asked what it planned to do about the poor school performance of what was politely called "low socio-economic groups." The smugness of the response was worthy of our American Athens. After much to-ing and fro-ing, the president of the board said that, after all, these low socio-economic kids are getting a better education here than they would in the big cities.

But by this past summer, something had happened in Princeton. On August 28, Princeton fielded 250 people for the March on Washington, more than Trenton, which has five times the population. A few weeks later a meeting of the newly formed Princeton Association for Human Rights (PAHR) drew close to 400; I doubt whether such a meeting two years ago would have been attended by 40 people. An open housing pledge has been signed by 1,200 homeowners. High School students

working in pairs are testing the tacit segregation that prevails in such places as barber shops.

Talk is more honest these days. At one meeting, we heard Bruce Wright, a successful attorney, speak on what it was like to grow up black in the Princeton of the 1930's. With a quiet bitterness more moving than oratory, Wright spoke of the self-hatred that poisoned his youth: he would neither dance nor sing, because those were Negro activities; he would not go out for track in High School because Negroes' heels are said to be so constructed that they make better runners. He did not spare his people's accommodating leadership. "We did not protest because our elders did not protest," he said. Nor did he spare the Company. He told of his refusal by the University, which he was well qualified to attend. He said that the Dean of the Chapel told him to accept segregation. "That cured me of Christianity," Wright said to a group whose leadership is mostly Protestant ministers. While refusing his application, the Dean of Admissions told him how fond he was of his Negro orderly in World War I. Seldom, in our polite Athens, has the ugliness of its segregation been laid bare before so large an audience. After Wright had finished, a white lady rose to offer an irrelevant defense of the University; though he was clearly telling his experience of 30 years ago, she felt it necessary to point out that the University now has about a dozen Negro students, which was no news to the audience. But, at another meeting, President Goheen of the University, who lived here as a child, stated his agreement with Wright.

In these last few months, integration has clearly drawn a lot of support it never had before. The quality of that support of course may differ with individuals; a cynic might say that integration has just become fashionable, like Danish furniture. Most of those who attend PAHR meetings are of the bourgeois intelligentsia; on the white side, WASP (White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant) ministers are particularly active. On the Negro side, today's leaders are a far cry from the Uncle Toms of yesterday. Unfortunately, Negroes are in a minority as yet in the integration movement here. On the March, no more than one-third of the Princeton delegation was Negro. PAHR meetings now draw the people who run our town. At one meeting, a Negro murmured to me: "Look - the whole white power structure is here." On another occasion, President Goheen himself spoke: he committed the University to active intervention in the town in favor of integration. The hard core of opposition comes, as might be expected, from the whites low on the scale: mainly the Italian-American community, which is just one step above the Negroes on the socio-economic ladder. The ironic result is that it is easier for a Negro to buy a \$40,000 house than to buy or rent in the cheaper white sections of the town.

What next? It seems likely that the present momentum will eli-

minate segregation in our public places; more jobs will doubtless be opened to Negroes. Beyond that lie much harder questions: a school system responsive, as ours is not, to the needs of the whole community, not just to those who need it least; an equality of opportunity that is real instead of empty formal (today, in the French saying, "the law in its majesty forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under the bridges of Paris"); a community in which Negroes too can be Athenians.

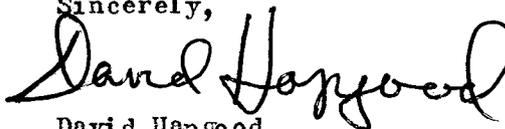
The infectious enthusiasm that pervades PAIR meetings holds out the implicit promise that the Promised Land is very near. What happens after the easy goals are reached? Will the white intelligentsia turn to other interests? Above all, will the Negroes be tough-minded enough to hold us all, black as well as white, to the promises so casually made in the summer of 1963?

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So now we have returned to our starting point, and it is time to say good-bye. Thanks to the Institute, our last two years have been a great adventure, and we are better people for it. An intellectual adventure, which I hope we have described in our newsletters: we had expected that, though it did not work out always as we had planned - it was full of interesting surprises. What we could not know was what an intense personal experience Africa was to be: it is part of our lives in ways we can never fully describe.

For this experience, our most profound thanks, and they can never be more than inadequate, go to you, Mr. Nolte, and the Institute and its staff for support that was far more than financial, and to the Ford Foundation as well. As for our future, which is what the Institute invested in, let me quote George Orwell: "Saints should always be considered guilty until proven innocent." So it is with Fellows of the Institute: the social return on your investment can only come gradually over a period of years. Time will tell.

Sincerely,



David Hangoood

Received in New York October 21, 1963.