

THE GENTLEMEN'S AGREEMENT AND THE NEGRO VOTE

By James Weldon Johnson

This article appeared in the fall 2009 and October 1924 issue of The CRISIS, the official magazine of the NAACP.

There are twelve million Negroes in the United States, born American citizens, yet they constitute the least influential and least effective political unit in the whole country. The Negro demands less by his ballot; not only in actual results but even in mere respect for himself as a voter than any of all the groups that go to make up the American citizenry; although some of the groups are far smaller in numbers and even weaker economically. For all his mass of numbers and his increase in education and wealth, the Negro remains as near being a political nonentity as is possible for a group of citizens in a country with anything that resembles a democratic form of government.

This is a condition that demands analysis and study. This is emphatically true, since the Negro, more than any other group, needs whatever benefits the ballot is able to gain. There are, of course, reasons why this condition exists, and these reasons ought to be found and the facts faced. It is only by such a process that the situation can be changed and remedied.

Why is it that twelve million colored Americans are, in a positive sense, a political nonentity? I say in a positive sense, because, negatively, the Negro has been for a hundred years a dominant factor in politics. In the twelve states of the real South the whole structure of politics and all political activities are based on the Negro. In these states the Negro constitutes the prime, and, often, the only political issue; indeed, he is the reason for politics. From each of these states men have been elected to the governorship and to Congress solely because in "damning the nigger" they outdid their rivals.