

DR. DUBOIS IS NINETY

— In this article the famous American scholar of African descent, Dr. W. E. B. DuBois, noted fighter for Negro rights, looks backward, and forward, from his ninetieth birthday, February 23, 1958.

This is the month of my 90th birthday, I have lived to an age which is increasingly distasteful to this nation. Unless by 60 a man has gained possession of enough to support himself without paid employment, he faces the distinct possibility of starvation. He is liable to lose his job and to refusal if he seeks another. At 70 he is frowned upon by the Church and if he is foolish enough to survive until 90, he is often regarded as a freak. This is because in the face of human experience the United States has discovered that Youth knows more than Age. When a man of 35 becomes president of a great institution of learning or United States Senator or head of a multi-million dollar corporation, a cry of triumph rings in the land. Why? To pretend that 15 years bring of themselves more wisdom and understanding than 50 is a contradiction in terms.

Given a fool, a hundred years will not make him wise; but given an idiot, he will not be wise at 20. Youth is more courageous than age because it knows less. Age is wiser than youth because it knows more. This all mankind has affirmed from Egypt and China 5,000 years ago to Britain and Germany today. The United States knows better. I would have been hailed with approval if I had died at 50. At 75 my death was practically requested. If living does not give value, wisdom and meaning to life, then there is no sense in living at all. If immature and inexperienced men rule the earth, then the earth deserves what it gets: the repetition of age-old mistakes, and wild welcome for what men knew a thousands years ago was disaster. I do not apologise for living long. High on the ramparts of this blistering hell of life, I sit and see the Truth. I look it full in the face, and I will not lie about it, neither to myself nor to the world. I see my country as what Cedric Belfrage aptly characterises as a 'Frightened Giant', afraid of the Truth, afraid of Peace. I see a land which is degenerating and faces decadence, unless it has sense enough to turn about and start back.

It is no sin to fail. It is the habit of man. It is a disaster to go on when you know you are going wrong. I judge this land not merely by statistics or reading lies agreed upon by historians. I judge by what I have seen, heard and lived through for near a century. There was a day when the world rightly called Americans honest even if crude; earning their living by hard work; telling the truth no matter whom it hurt; and going to war only in what they believed a just cause after nothing else

scemed possible. Today we are lying, stealing and killing. We call all this by finer names: Advertising, Free Enterprise, and National Defence. But names in the end deceive no one; today we use science to help deceive our fellows; we take wealth that we never earned and we are devoting all our energies to kill, maim, and drive insane, men, women and children who dare refuse to do what we want done.

No nation threatens us. We threaten the world. Our President says that Foster Dulles is the wisest man he knows. If Dulles is wise, God help our fools — the fools who rule us. They know why we fail — these military masters of men — we haven't taught our children mathematics and physics. No, it is because we have not taught our children to read and write or to behave like human beings and not like hoodlums

Criticism is treason, and treason or the hint of treason testified to by hired liars may be punished by shameful death. I saw Ethel Rosenberg lying beautiful in her coffin beside her mate. I tried to stammer futile words above her grave. But not over graves should we shout this failure of justice, but from the housetops of the world. Honest men may and must criticise America: describe how she has ruined her democracy, sold out her jury system, and led her seats of justice astray. The only question that may arise is whether this criticism is based on truth, not whether it may be openly expressed. What is truth? What can it be when the President of the United States, guiding the nation, stands up in public and says: 'The world also thinks of us as a land which has never enslaved anyone'.

Everyone who heard this knew it was not true. Yet here stands the successor of George Washington who bought, owned, and sold slaves; the successor to Abraham Lincoln who freed four million slaves after they had helped him win victory over the slave-holding South. And so far as I have seen, not a single periodical, not even a Negro weekly, has dared challenge or even criticise that extraordinary falsehood. This is what I call decadence. It could not have happened 50 years ago. In the day of our fiercest controversy we have not dared thus publicly to silence opinion. I have lived through disagreement, vilification, and war and war again. But in all that time, I have never seen the right of human beings to think so challenged and denied as today. The day after I was born, Andrew Johnson was impeached. He deserved punishment as a traitor to the poor Southern whites and poorer freedmen. Yet during his life, no one denied him the right to defend himself. A half-century ago, in 1910, I tried to state and carry into realisation unpopular ideas against a powerful opposition — in the white South, in the reactionary North, and even among my own people. I found my thought being misconstrued and I planned an organ of propaganda — *The Crisis* — where I would be free to say what I believed.

This was no easy sailing. My magazine reached but a fraction of the nation. It was bitterly attacked and once the government suppressed it. But in the end I maintained a platform of radical thinking on the Negro question which influenced many minds. War and depression ended my independence of thought and forced me to return to teaching, but with the certainty that I had at least started a new line of belief and action.

As a result of my work and that of others, the Supreme Court began to restore democracy in the South and finally outlawed discrimination in public services based on colour. This caused rebellion in the South which the nation is afraid to meet. The Negro stands bewildered and attempt is made by appointments to unimportant offices and trips abroad to bribe him into silence. His art and literature cease to function. He is scared. Only the children like those at Little Rock stand and fight. The Yale Sophomore who replaced a periodical of brains by a book of pictures concealed in advertisements, proposed that America rule the world. This failed because we could not rule ourselves. But Texas to the rescue, as Lyndon Johnson proposes that America take over outer space. Somewhere beyond the moon there must be sentient creatures rolling in inextinguishable laughter at the antics of our earth. We tax ourselves into poverty and crime so as to make the rich richer and bring more crime and poverty. We know the cause of this: it is to permit our rich business interests to stop socialism and to prevent the ideals of communism from ever triumphing on earth. The aim is impossible.

Socialism progresses and will progress. All we can do is to silence and jail its promoters. I believe in socialism. I seek a world where its ideals will triumph — to each according to his need; from each according to his ability. For this I will work as long as I live. And I still live.