

The Scottsboro Case, Revisited, 1939

Charles Hamilton Houston

This is a speech by Charles Hamilton Houston at the International Labor Defense [ILD] Conference, July 15, 1939. Houston was a civil rights lawyer. At the time he made this speech he was the Chief Legal Counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The Scottsboro Case refers to the arrest and trial of twelve young African American men in Scottsboro, Alabama in 1931, charged on suspiciously false testimony (later proved false) of rape. Both the NAACP and the ILD provided legal advice and services, challenging the false charges. The legal battle for justice lasted for many years, and was widely covered in the media.



Photo: Separate is Not Equal; Smithsonian National Museum of American History

[page 1] ...The essential thing so far as either security of the Negro people or intelligent direction on the part of liberal leaders is concerned, is to emphasize lynching first. It makes no difference and profits little for a Negro or white person to work and save for fifty years when a mob can come through, and burn down his home or throw him out of his living quarters. Such a person has no place to go and he becomes a refugee here in America. That, of course, is what always happens when a mob goes on a rampage. If lynching really was a matter of punishment of crime, the lynching would be over when the victim was dead. But if one studies the record of American lynchings he will find lynchers always drag the victims through the Negro sections and leave them on the steps of a Negro Church or hall as a direct method of terrorization of the whole community.

This brings us to another question which seems particularly important for a Conference such as this, and that question is in fighting for the Negro people, you are not simply fighting for the Negro people as such. It seems to me that one of the things you should realize – at least one of the things I believe – is that the Negro people represent the balance of power – the ultimate balance of power in any liberal movement in the United States. . . .

[page 2]...We are now the balance of power so far as national politics is concerned. Even back so far as the Civil War, it was the two hundred thousand Negro troops in the National Army, representing also a loss of two hundred thousand workers in the Confederacy, which was the balance of manpower which turned the tide of the Civil War. And some of you who know little about Negroes representing the balance of power in America ...Under those circumstances, I am coming back to the proposition of saying, in this struggle for first, physical security for the Negro people is bound up [sic] your struggle for security for labor leaders, your struggle for security for liberals and progressives. In supporting Negroes in this struggle you are also giving courage to Negro masses and inspiring them to take their places alongside other progressive forces in America. Because again, what is the situation in regard to the Negro masses. We can illustrate by the Scottsboro Boys. Those boys were on a freight train going from one place to

another looking for work. Although the particular technique was a judicial lynching, the actual social effect is the same as though the mob had taken them and strung them on a telephone pole – it was an attempt to keep the Negro farmworker and casual workers in subjection, to tie them down to their home localities and prevent them from migrating in search of better work, shorter hours, and more pay, and to isolate them from the other workers of America. . . .

[page 4]...the question that Mr. Moore brought about the Scottsboro Case, represents the next step in the lynching fight. Scottsboro was a judicial lynching. The next development is that these extra-judicial mob lynchings are going to turn into judicial and official lynchings unless the drive of liberal forces is carried way beyond a Federal anti-lynching law, to complete justice in the courts and to true universal suffrage.

But now to get to my specific topic of education. After one has obtained physical security for the population, the next thing is to bring the population to a position where it can cope with the problems of the day. So far as the Negro people are concerned, if my thesis is correct that they hold the balance of power over any sustained period of time, education of the Negro becomes particularly important for the reason that at the present time the Negro is isolated, restricted and eliminated from most of the movements in American life. In other words, we don't get our apprenticeship in the politics, we don't get our apprenticeship in labor organizations, we don't get our apprenticeship in the social services, and therefore it becomes all the more important that we should get a correct and also an equitable opportunity so far as education and preparation for life is concerned.”

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Source curated by Gordon P. Andrews, Associate Professor of History, Grand Valley State University

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