

LYNCHING !!

A Fifth Column Attack On National Unity

By JOSEPH JOHNSON

Article VI

IN THIS SERIES on lynching, the real reason for the social practice of lynching has been laid bare for the first time. There remains now the need to explain the first and last measures necessary to put an end to lynching and the threat of lynching.

The fight against lynching has gone on for many years. One of the most important facts to remember about the fight against lynching in America is that it was first organized and directed by a woman—a Negro woman—and was first brought to public attention in the following account:

"An effort was made at this time, 1893 to so organize foreign public opinion that it would be directly effective in putting an end to the practice of lynching. Miss Ida B. Wells, colored, who was editor of the FREE SPEECH published at Memphis, Tenn., and whose paper was suppressed because she so fiercely denounced the lynching of some colored young men and arraigned the authorities for failing to punish the lynchers, gave a series of lectures in England in 1893-1894, and started a crusade against lynching by organizing anti-lynching societies enrolling as members several men of international prominence.

"These bodies proposed to send a committee to this country 'to collect statistics and quietly to investigate the subject of lynchings in the United States.' The South rose en masse against such a visit and the governors of the southern states with one or two exceptions vehemently denounced the whole project. The statement of Governor O'Ferrall of Virginia, himself an anti-lynching man, is typical of the southern sentiment. 'Things have come to a pretty pass in this country,' he said in the New York World, 'when we are to have a lot of English moralists sticking their noses into our internal affairs. It is the quintessence of brass and impudence.' The English committee never came to this country, and Miss Wells at length recognized the futility of further work in England and returned home. She organized anti-lynching societies in various parts of the North and as chairman of the anti-lynching Bureau of the National Afro-American Council, to all appearances worked principally among her own people, urging them to take steps to prevent lynching.

"Out of all this discussion, agitation, and censure there came proposals for various remedies for lynching. Various reasons were assigned for the prevalence of the practice and consequently there was little agreement in the measures which were proposed for its prevention or suppression, but most of the proposed measures were of the nature of new or additional laws directed specifically against lynching or mob violence."¹

Thus it is clear that not only was the fight against lynching begun by a woman—a Negro woman, Miss Ida B. Wells—but the attempt to remedy the condition is essentially the same today as it was a result of her efforts fifty years ago (Miss Ida B. Wells began the crusade against lynching in March of 1892), that is, "additional laws" and more particularly, in recent years, Federal laws.

The most notable achievement that has been scored in the fight against lynching to date came as the result of vigor of Miss Wells' writing and the brilliance of her lectures in denouncing lynching and the lynchers. It would seem, on the basis of the material quoted above, that her lecture tour in England was a failure. Actually, such was not the case. As a result of the international storm caused by her lectures, several southern states passed anti-lynching laws! Two of them were Georgia and North Carolina.

The Anti-Lynching Law of Georgia was passed by the General Assembly of the State of Georgia December 20, 1893. The provisions of that law are of interest. The Georgia Anti-Lynching Law provided that any officer of that state who had knowledge of an attempt of mob violence against any citizen was compelled to call to his assistance any citizen in the neighborhood or county to aid in suppressing the violence, if such assistance was needed; every possible means was to be used to prevent mob violence; any person "engaged in mobbing or lynching any citizen" was guilty of a felony and was to be committed to jail and if convicted such a person was to "be punished by imprisonment in the penitentiary for a term of not less than one nor longer than 20 years; if, however, death resulted from such mob violence, 'then the person or persons causing said death shall be subject to indictment and trial for the offense of murder under existing laws;" officers who failed to carry out their duty were subject to the penal code as well as persons who failed to assist officers when demand was made upon them to do so; officers could notify persons assisting them to bring firearms and they and the officers could use them, "in order to prevent human life from being taken by mob violence, take the life of any person or persons attempting mob violence, in order to prevent it; PROVIDED, life shall not be taken, UNLESS it be necessary to save the life or lives of the person or persons being mobbed, or to protect lives of such arresting officers or his posse."

The Anti-Lynching Law of North Carolina was passed by the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina March 6, 1893. That law was in a general way like the Anti-Lynching Law of Georgia. There are, however, some provisions worth noting. It provided among other

things that a conspiracy to break into jail, to kill prisoner was a felony; anyone convicted of such a felony was subject to a minimum fine of \$500, minimum imprisonment of two years, and a maximum imprisonment of 15 years; "If (county—J. J.) commissioners fail to furnish guard and jail is broken and prisoner killed, county liable in damages to personal representative of deceased."

We have learned that the origin of lynching in 1866 and the basis of its continuance today was the destruction by the South Bourbons, in promoting their property interests, of the right of Negroes to elect freely and to be elected freely to public office at all and the restriction of the right of the poor whites to elect freely and to be elected freely to public office.

Moreover, it should be remembered that VIGILANTISM, which is prevalent in the Western States and is practiced primarily against the migratory agricultural workers and is also practiced in many industrial regions in the East, the North, and the Middle West, is lynching. Since these two phases of the problem constitute the very essence of present-day lynching, lynching is not exclusively a Negro problem, although its most revolting practice is directed against Negroes. Negroes have been carrying on the fight against lynching virtually alone, since they general like most supposed that lynching was exclusively a Negro problem.

Now that the fundamental basis of lynching has been laid bare, it should not be hard to get liberals, progressives, and especially the trade unions (Vigilantism which is lynching is practiced against them) to fight relentlessly for the passage of Federal legislation against the social practice of lynching.

The Negro people need not go to those organizations and groups mentioned any longer begging, half-hearted, and ashamed to enlist their aid in the fight against lynching. They can go now confident in the knowledge that in fighting against the social practice of lynching they have been fighting to preserve and extend the most fundamental principle of American democracy—the right to vote.

Will the passage of such legislation put an end to lynching? It will for a time. But the important fact to remember in this connection is that the threat of lynching will remain. As long as the threat of lynching remains its recurrence is likely. What, then, is the ultimate step in the fight against lynching?

Lynching and the threat of lynching will end finally only when we American people will have reached that level of social and political consciousness and thereby, acting in accordance with the task imposed upon us by history, will have, in common effort, reconstituted American life upon a newer higher social basis and will have brought to realization as a part of our everyday social existence Lincoln's immortal words when he spoke to "a committee from the Workingmen's Association of New York March 21, 1864" as follows:

"The most notable feature of a disturbance in your city last summer was the hanging of some working people by other working people. It should never be so. The strongest bond of human sympathy, outside the family relation, should be one uniting all working people, of all nations, and tongues and kindreds."²

General Conclusions

1. Lynching in American began about 1780.
2. It began in the South.
3. There are three distinct periods in the development of lynching (1780-1830, 1830-1860, 1866 to the present) each of which began in the South.
4. At no time was the origin of lynching ever due to "the occurrence of rape by Negro men upon white women."
5. In the first period of its development (1780-1830), lynching was due to the attempt by the pioneers in the frontier district to curb the activities of anti-social elements. In the second period of its development (1830-1860), lynching was due to the attempt by the slaveowners to smash the Abolitionist movement. In the third period of its development (1866 to the present), lynching was due to the effort of the Bourbons organized and directed Ku Klux Klan to destroy the Reconstruction government based on Negro suffrage—the

right of Negroes to vote in the southern states.

6. Vigilantism, which is practiced against the migratory agricultural workers particularly in the West and Southwest and against the trade unionists in the industrial regions of the North, South, East and West, is lynching.

7. The first person in America to organize and direct the fight against lynching was a woman—a Negro—Miss Ida B. Wells.

8. There have been more than 450,000 lynchings from 1866 to the present.

9. Due to Miss Ida B. Wells national and international fight against lynching, several southern states were the first states to pass anti-lynching law. Georgia and North Carolina passed Anti-Lynching Laws in 1893.

With such facts before us, let our slogans in the present grave world crisis be: The lynchers are dishonoring our country and assaulting national unity by attacking one of the "four freedoms," that is, "freedom from fear"—for our lives! They are endangering America's security! They are guilty of treason! They must be made to pay for their crimes! **The Georgia Anti-Lynching Law of 1893 recog-**

nized lynching resulting in death as murder! Death to the lynchers! Pass a Federal anti-lynching bill now!

¹ James E. Cutler, *Lynch Law* (New York: Langmans, Green and Co., 1905), pp. 220-230.
² From *THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN*, by William E. Barton, Copyright 1925, H. S. S. Used by special permission of the publishers, the Bobbs-Merrill company.