

World War I, African American Soldiers, and America's War for Democracy

by Ron Nash

OVERVIEW

This lesson is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History resources, designed to align to the Common Core State Standards. It can also be modified to conform to the C3 Framework. These resources were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original documents of historical significance. Students will practice the skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned viewpoints on these source materials.

This lesson provides an opportunity to analyze written texts and political cartoons in order to both understand the participation of black soldiers in World War I and sharpen literacy skills related to the distinction between *imply* and *infer*.

An essential skill tied to both historical thinking and literacy involves knowing and applying the distinction between inferring (inference) and implying (implication). The terms are often confused. A writer or speaker implies something without explicitly stating it. Conversely, a reader or listener infers something by drawing conclusions that are not explicitly stated. To imply is to put the suggestion into the message (the sender implies). To infer is to take the suggestion out of the message (receiver infers).

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Analyze a primary source document using close-reading strategies
- Summarize the essential message of a written document
- Demonstrate understanding of both literal and inferential aspects of text-based evidence
- Draw conclusions based on direct evidence found in the text
- Interpret, analyze, and demonstrate understanding of political cartoons

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How did World War I affect (or impact) the lives of African Americans?
- To what extent did the patriotism of African Americans in World War I result in greater civil rights and racial justice?

NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS: 1–2

GRADE LEVEL: 7–12

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COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.6: Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

“When the United States declared war against Germany in April of 1917, War Department planners quickly realized that the standing army of 126,000 men was insufficient to ensure victory overseas. The standard volunteer system also was inadequate in raising an army. So on May 18, 1917, Congress passed the Selective Service Act requiring all male citizens between the ages of 21 and 31 to register for the draft. Even before the act was passed, African American males from all over the country eagerly joined the war effort. They viewed the conflict as an opportunity to prove their loyalty, patriotism, and worthiness for equal treatment in the United States.

“There were four all-black regiments in the US Army when the war started; the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry. The men in these units were considered heroes in their communities. Within one week of Wilson’s declaration of war, the War Department had to stop accepting black volunteers because the quotas for African Americans were filled.

“Although technically eligible for many positions in the Army, very few blacks had the opportunity to serve in combat units. Most were limited to labor battalions. The combat elements of the US Army were kept completely segregated. The four established all-black Regular Army regiments were not used in overseas combat roles but instead were diffused throughout American-held territory. The backlash from the African American community, however, forced the War Department to create the 92nd and 93rd Divisions in 1917. Both were designated as combat units.”¹

Historian Chad Williams, in *Torchbearers of Democracy*, has observed that “the place of black soldiers in the war has too often been treated as tangential to the larger history of American involvement and the place of the conflict in American memory.”² Oftentimes the war experience of black soldiers and civilians has been characterized only with a negative narrative. “Most African Americans nevertheless saw the war as an opportunity to demonstrate their patriotism and their place as equal citizens in the nation. Black political leaders believed that if the race sacrificed for the war effort, the government would have

¹ Jami Bryan, “Fighting for Respect: African-American Soldiers in WWI,” *On Point*, 2003.

² Chad Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy; African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2010), p. 5.

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no choice but to reward them with greater civil rights. ‘Colored folks should be patriotic,’ the *Richmond Planet* insisted. ‘Do not let us be chargeable with being disloyal to the flag.’ Black men and women for the most part approached the war with a sense of civic duty. Over one million African Americans responded to their draft calls, and roughly 370,000 black men were inducted into the Army. Charles Brodnax, a farmer from Virginia, recalled, ‘I felt that I belonged to the Government of my country and should answer to the call and obey the orders in defense of Democracy.’”³

MATERIALS

- Historical Background
- Guide Questions for a Letter to W. E. B. Du Bois from an African American Soldier
- Transcript of a Letter to W. E. B. Du Bois from an African American Soldier
- Images of a Letter to W. E. B. Du Bois from an African American Soldier, undated, W. E. B. Du Bois World War I Papers, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, Massachusetts
- Analyzing a Cartoon
- Implication/Inference Chart
- Cartoons
 - Cartoon #1: “Loyalty,” *Richmond Planet*, June 16, 1917
 - Cartoon #2: “The Dawn of a New Day,” *Richmond Planet*, June 23, 1917
 - Cartoon #3: “Speak Out, Mr. President!” *New York Age*, July 19, 1917
 - Cartoon #4: “Real Democracy,” *New York Age*, November 29, 1917
 - Cartoon #5: “Contraband Goods,” *Chicago Defender*, February 2, 1918
 - Cartoon #6: “The Old Mob and the New Keeper,” *Chicago Defender*, February 16, 1918
 - Cartoon # 7: “As We Bow Our Heads in Prayer,” *Chicago Defender*, March 23, 1918
 - Cartoon # 8: “Will Uncle Sam Stand for this Cross,” *Chicago Defender*, April 5, 1919
 - Cartoon #9: “Wake up Uncle or You Are Going to Fall,” *Baltimore African American*, August 8, 1919
 - Cartoon # 10: “The Mark of the American Hun,” *Baltimore African American*, January 24, 1919
 - Cartoon # 11: “A Tip from One Who Knows,” *Chicago Defender*, December 13, 1919
- “Close Ranks” by W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Crisis*, 16, no. 3 (July 1918): 111
- “Returning Soldiers” by W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Crisis* 18, no. 1 (May 1919): 14-15

³ Chad Williams, *African Americans and World War I*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-world-war-i.html>.

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PROCEDURE

1. This lesson is a “drill down” exercise into primary source documents. Students will have to apply previous knowledge of the events and context of the World War I.
2. Review the historical background and the history of African American soldiers in World War I with the class. You may distribute the Historical Background reading provided, or discuss material the class learned before this lesson.
3. Take a few minutes to engage the students on the concepts of *inference* (infer) and *implication* (imply). It is best to start with simple examples such as the meaning of a stop sign or other familiar images. You can also have students bring newspaper headlines to class or you can provide headlines using the Newseum website (<http://www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages/>) in order to gauge initial student understanding of the concepts.
4. Distribute copies of the anonymous letter written to W. E. B. Du Bois and the Guide Questions for the letter. You may provide the images of the original document and the transcript. For purposes of this lesson, paragraph numbers have been inserted to chunk the letter for the students. The students can work individually or in small groups.
5. “Share read” the letter with the students. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
6. The students should now reread the letter and use the Guide Questions as they read. If you are having students work with partners or in groups, have them negotiate their answers.
7. Break the class into small groups, if you did not do so for the first exercise, and distribute copies of the first five WWI cartoons from the black press.
8. Distribute the activity sheets for students to record their findings. You may use either the Analyzing a Cartoon worksheet or the Implication/Inference worksheet, or both, depending on the time available. If you use the Analyzing a Cartoon activity sheet, the students will answer the questions provided for each cartoon. If you use the Implication/Inference activity sheet, for each of the cartoons, the students should record in the chart what the creator was implying and what they can infer from the cartoon.
9. Reassemble the class and lead a discussion of their responses. Ensure that everyone has demonstrated an understanding of *imply* and *infer*.
10. Provide the students with copies of the remaining six cartoons to analyze for homework as well as enough activity sheets to complete the assignment. Debrief the homework during the next lesson.

ASSESSMENT AND EXTENSION:

Assessment and Extension 1: The students can compare and contrast the different texts (the letter and the cartoons) and develop an overview of the complexity related to the lesson’s essential questions:

- How did World War I affect (or impact) the lives of African American soldiers?

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- To what extent did the patriotism of African Americans in World War I result in greater civil rights and racial justice?

Students should choose one of the topics to answer and use the facts in the documents to support their answers.

Assessment and Extension 2: Distribute the two *Crisis* magazine editorials written by W.E.B. Du Bois, “Close Ranks” (1918) and “Returning Soldiers” (1919). You may follow the close reading strategies suggested earlier in this lesson or extend the literacy component by using the key word strategy (organizers attached). Students can work individually or in groups to complete the organizers. They must select 8 to 10 key words in each of the three chunks of text, use those words to write a brief summary of the text, and then restate the summary in their own words in order to demonstrate understanding of the author’s main points.

Historical Background: African American Soldiers in World War I

“When the United States declared war against Germany in April of 1917, War Department planners quickly realized that the standing army of 126,000 men was insufficient to ensure victory overseas. The standard volunteer system also was inadequate in raising an army. So on May 18, 1917, Congress passed the Selective Service Act requiring all male citizens between the ages of 21 and 31 to register for the draft. Even before the act was passed, African American males from all over the country eagerly joined the war effort. They viewed the conflict as an opportunity to prove their loyalty, patriotism, and worthiness for equal treatment in the United States.

“There were four all-black regiments in the US Army when the war started; the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry. The men in these units were considered heroes in their communities. Within one week of Wilson’s declaration of war, the War Department had to stop accepting black volunteers because the quotas for African Americans were filled.

“Although technically eligible for many positions in the Army, very few blacks had the opportunity to serve in combat units. Most were limited to labor battalions. The combat elements of the US Army were kept completely segregated. The four established all-black Regular Army regiments were not used in overseas combat roles but instead were diffused throughout American-held territory. The backlash from the African American community, however, forced the War Department to create the 92nd and 93rd Divisions in 1917. Both were designated as combat units.”¹

Historian Chad Williams, in *Torchbearers of Democracy*, has observed that “the place of black soldiers in the war has too often been treated as tangential to the larger history of American involvement and the place of the conflict in American memory.”² Oftentimes the war experience of black soldiers and civilians has been characterized only with a negative narrative. “Most African Americans nevertheless saw the war as an opportunity to demonstrate their patriotism and their place as equal citizens in the nation. Black political leaders believed that if the race sacrificed for the war effort, the government would have no choice but to reward them with greater civil rights. ‘Colored folks should be patriotic,’ the *Richmond Planet* insisted. ‘Do not let us be chargeable with being disloyal to the flag.’ Black men and women for the most part approached the war with a sense of civic duty. Over one million African Americans responded to their draft calls, and roughly 370,000 black men were inducted into the Army. Charles Brodnax, a farmer from Virginia, recalled, ‘I felt that I belonged to the Government of my country and should answer to the call and obey the orders in defense of Democracy.’”³

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³ Chad Williams, *African Americans and World War I*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-world-war-i.html>.

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Guide Questions for the Letter to W. E. B. Du Bois from an African American Soldier

1. What is the tone of the letter? _____

2. How is Captain Lewis portrayed in the first two lines of the letter?

3. What is implied in the statement “has the advantage ground of both soldiers and civilian as a viewpoint”?

4. What does the letter writer imply by saying “to do their bit for the country and their people” in line 3? What does the phrase Torch Bearers imply? What can you infer? What is your reasoning?

5. What can you infer from the statement “compelling recognition from both friend and foe”? Give reasons to support your conclusions.

6. What does the writer imply in line 4? What do you infer from this section?

7. What is implied in the sentence “we must think of going into this war with the inspiration that characterized the Crusades”?

8. Why capitalize “Our” in the last sentence? What can you infer from the last sentence?

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Transcript of a Letter to W. E. B. Du Bois from an African American Soldier

1. Captain Leonard W. Lewis M.C. 370 Inf is now the ranking colored officer in the US Army in America and is temporarily on duty at Camp Stuart.
2. Captain Lewis is supremely optimistic on the outlook of the Negro in America both during and after the war and has the vantage ground of both soldiers and civilian as a viewpoint.
3. He says the men in his regiment who are “over there” went over very sanguine to do their bit for the country and their people. They are the Torch Bearers to make the world safe for Democracy and America specifically by being men in the truest sense of the word compelling a reluctant recognition from both friend and foe.
4. We must forget and temporarily overlook every thing tending to bar progress, not be sensitive, but be strong and patient.
5. We must think of going into this war with the inspiration that characterized “the Crusades”. With half a million colored troops now in France with the Allies, America is the only country who has sent (colored) men ranking as commissioned officers.
6. This is Our country right or wrong.

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Images of a Letter to W. E. B. Du Bois from an African American Soldier, p. 1

A³²⁻²⁸ 7-28

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370 Inf is now the ranking
Colored officer in the U.S. Army in
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Captain Lewis is supremely
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Negro in America both during and
after the war and has the vantage
ground of both soldier and
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He says the men in his regiment
who are "over there" went over
very sanguine to do their bit
for their country and their people
they are "Fork Bearers" to
make the world safe for democracy
and America especially, by being
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Images of a Letter to W. E. B. Du Bois from an African American Soldier, p. 2

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 We must forget and temporarily
 overlook every thing tending to
 bar progress, not be sensitive,
 but be strong and patient.
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 war with the inspiration that
 characterized "The Crusades."
 With half a million colored troops
 now in France with the Allies,
 America is the only Country
 who has sent men ranking as
 commissioned officers.
 This is our Country right or
 wrong.

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Analyzing a Cartoon

Cartoon # _____

Give the cartoon a title: _____

What is the significance of the central figure(s) or object(s)?

What action is taking place in the cartoon?

What mood or tone is created by the cartoon and what in the image is creating that tone or mood?

What message is the artist giving to the viewer?

Cartoon # _____

Give the cartoon a title: _____

What is the significance of the central figure(s) or object(s)?

What action is taking place in the cartoon?

What mood or tone is created by the cartoon and what in the image is creating that tone or mood?

What message is the artist giving to the viewer?

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Name-

Period-

Date-

Implications and Inferences in WWI Political Cartoons from the Black Press

Implications	Inferences
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

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Name-

Period-

Date-

**Implications and Inferences in WWI Political Cartoons from the Black Press
(continued)**

Implications	Inferences
6.	6.
7.	7.
8.	8.
9.	9.
10.	10.
11.	11.

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Cartoon #1



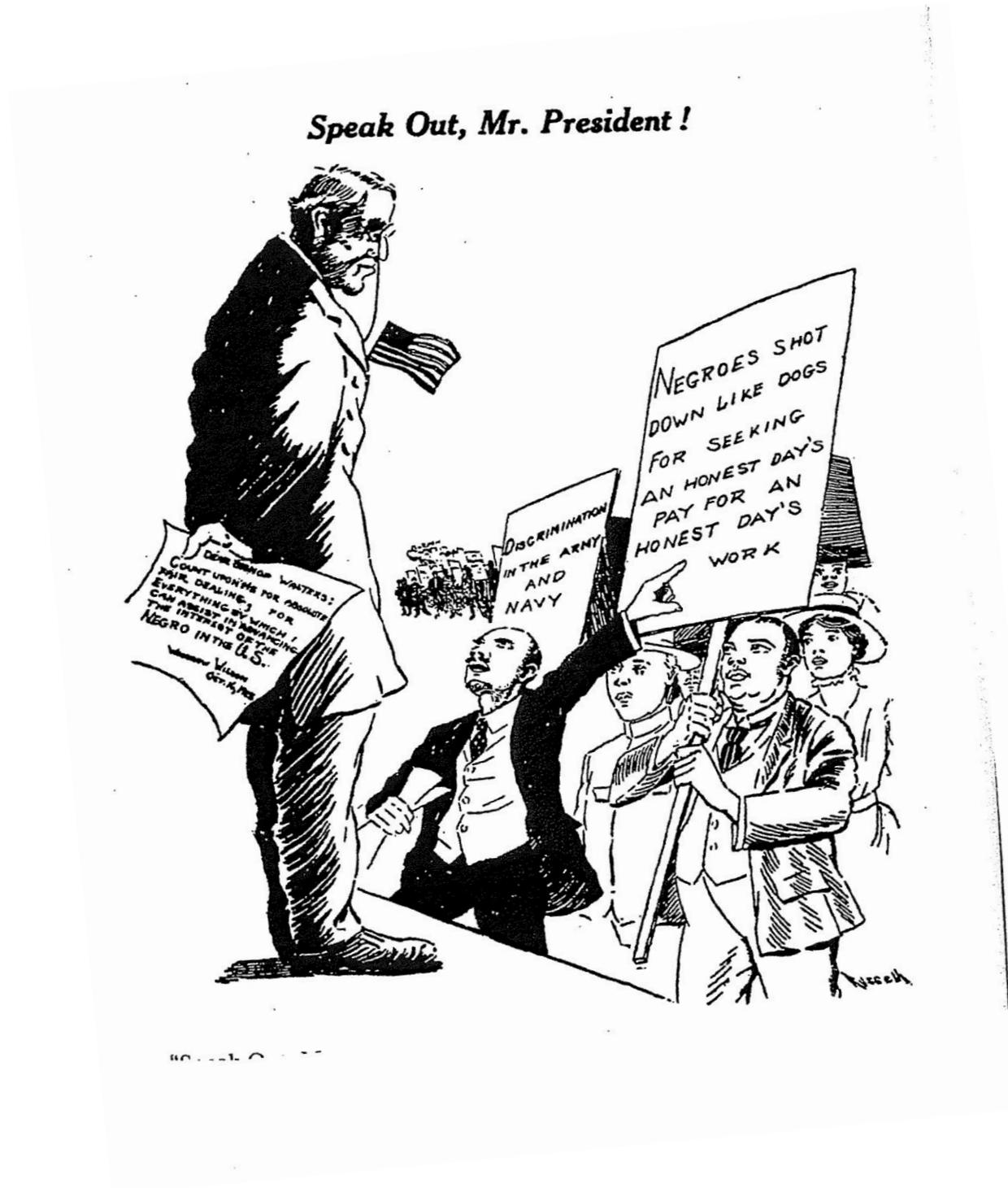
WORKSHOP USE ONLY—NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Cartoon #2



WORKSHOP USE ONLY—NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Cartoon #3



WORKSHOP USE ONLY—NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Cartoon #4



"Real Democracy." Uncle Sam prepares to serve a dish of "real democracy"

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Cartoon #5



WORKSHOP USE ONLY—NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

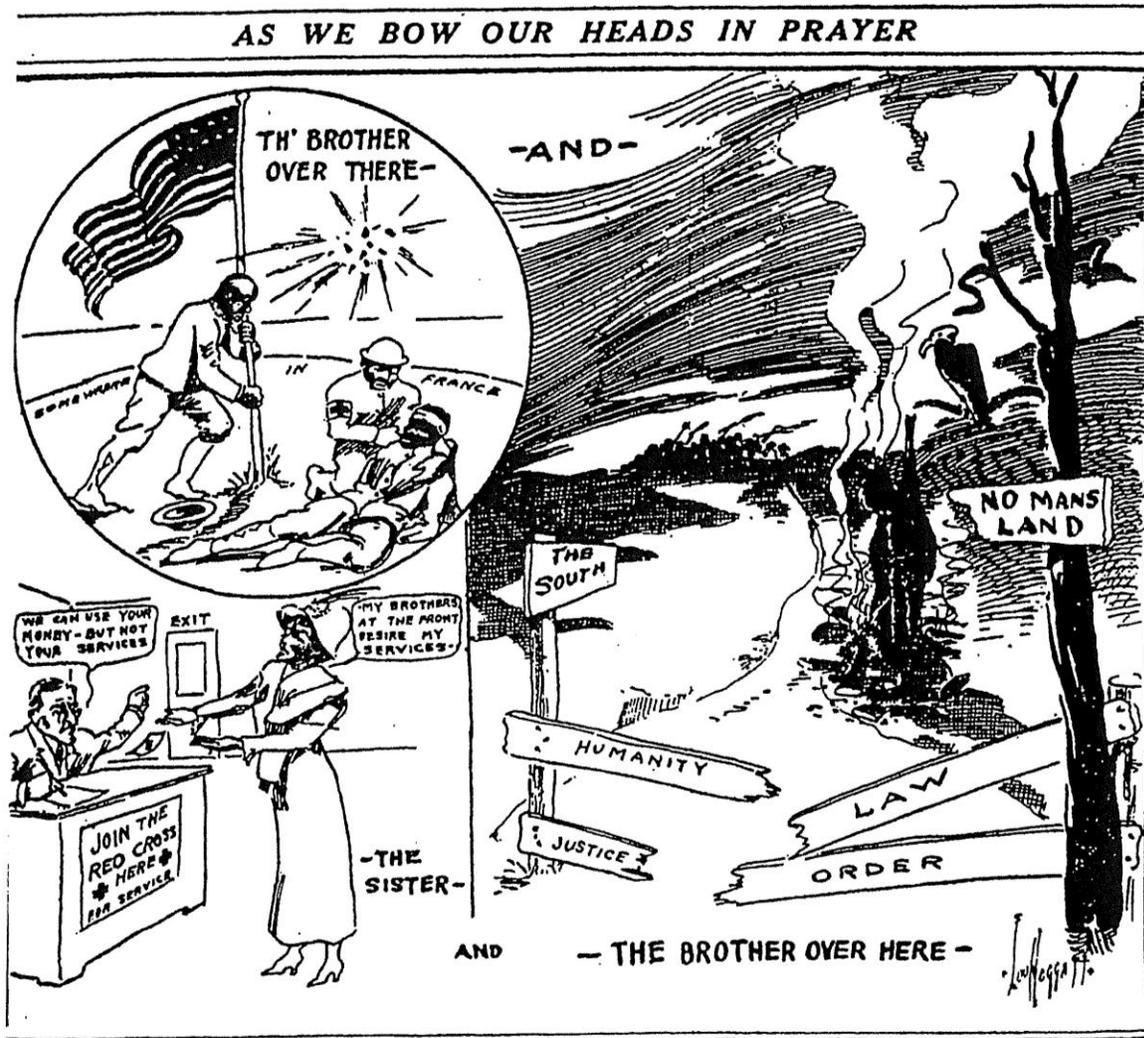
Cartoon #6

The Old Mob and the New Keeper



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Cartoon #7



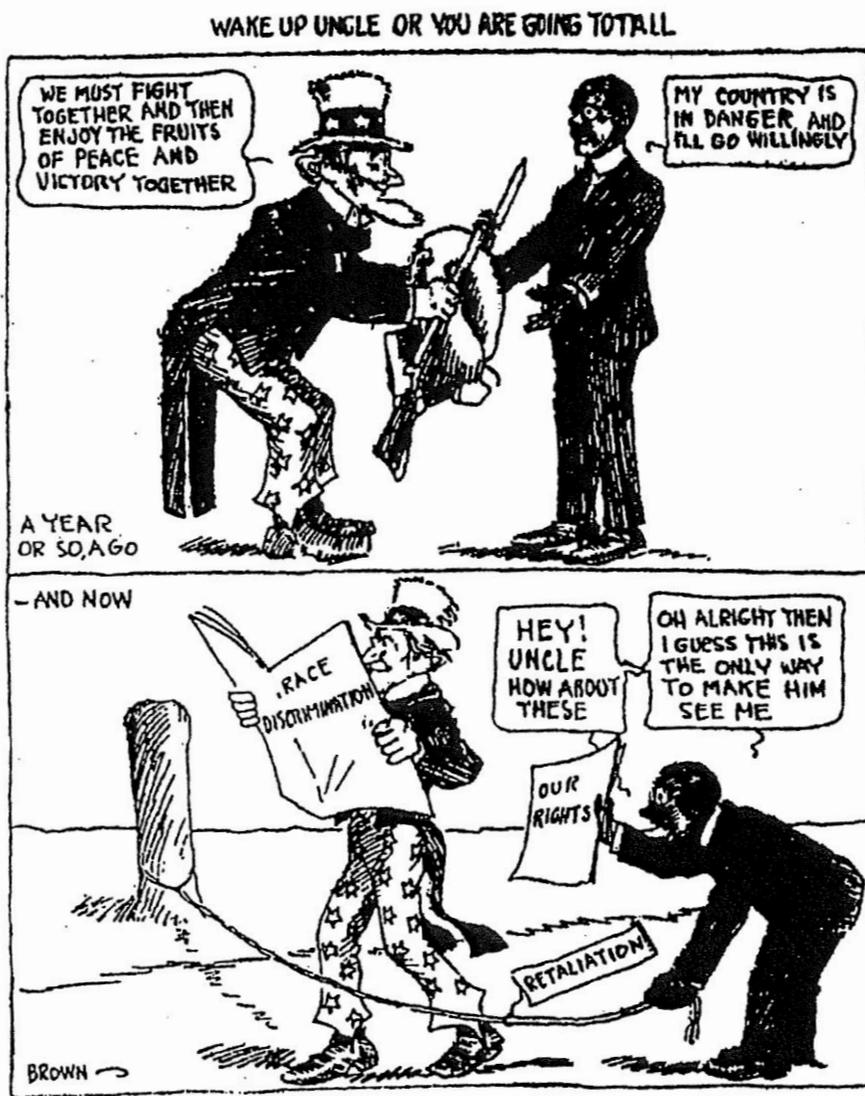
WORKSHOP USE ONLY—NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Cartoon #8



WORKSHOP USE ONLY—NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Cartoon #9



WORKSHOP USE ONLY—NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Cartoon #10

THE MARK OF THE AMERICAN HUN—BLOT IT OUT



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Cartoon #11



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“Close Ranks” by W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Crisis* 16, no. 3 (July 1918)

This is the crisis of the world. For all the long years to come men will point to the year 1918 as the great Day of Decision, the day when the world decided whether it would submit to military despotism and an endless armed peace—if peace it could be called— or whether they would put down the menace of German militarism and inaugurate the United States of the World.

We of the colored race have no ordinary interest in the outcome. That which the German power represents today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and all darker races for equality, freedom and democracy. Let us not hesitate. Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy. We make no ordinary sacrifice, but we make it gladly and willingly with our eyes lifted to the hills.

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“Returning Soldiers,” W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Crisis* 17, May 1919

We are returning from war! THE CRISIS and tens of thousands of black men were drafted into a great struggle. For bleeding France and what she means and has meant and will mean to us and humanity and against the threat of German race arrogance, we fought gladly and to the last drop of blood; for America and her highest ideals, we fought in far-off hope; for the dominant southern oligarchy entrenched in Washington, we fought in bitter resignation. For the America that represents and gloats in lynching, disfranchisement, caste, brutality and devilish insult—for this, in the hateful upturning and mixing of things, we were forced by vindictive fate to fight, also.

But today we return! We return from the slavery of uniform which the world’s madness demanded us to don to the freedom of civil garb. We stand again to look America squarely in the face and call a spade a spade. We sing: This country of ours, despite all its better souls have done and dreamed, is yet a shameful land.

It *lynches*.

And lynching is barbarism of a degree of contemptible nastiness unparalleled in human history. Yet for fifty years we have lynched two Negroes a week, and we have kept this up right through the war.

It *disfranchises* its own citizens.

Disfranchisement is the deliberate theft and robbery of the only protection of poor against rich and black against white. The land that disfranchises its citizens and calls itself a democracy lies and knows it lies.

It encourages *ignorance*.

It has never really tried to educate the Negro. A dominant minority does not want Negroes educated. It wants servants, dogs, whores and monkeys. And when this land allows a reactionary group by its stolen political power to force as many black folk into these categories as it possibly can, it cries in contemptible hypocrisy: "They threaten us with degeneracy; they cannot be educated."

It *steals* from us.

It organizes industry to cheat us. It cheats us out of our land: it cheats us out of our labor. It confiscates our savings. It reduces our wages. It raises our rent. It steals our profit. It taxes us without representation. It keeps us consistently and universally poor, and then feeds us on charity and derides our poverty.

It *insults* us.

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It has organized a nation-wide and latterly a world-wide propaganda of deliberate and continuous insult and defamation of black blood wherever found. It decrees that it shall not be possible in travel nor residence, work nor play, education nor instruction for a black man to exist without tacit or open acknowledgment of his inferiority to the dirtiest white dog. And it looks upon any attempt to question or even discuss this dogma as arrogance, unwarranted assumption and treason.

This is the country to which we Soldiers of Democracy return. This is the fatherland for which we fought! But it is *our* fatherland. It was right for us to fight. The faults of *our* country are *our* faults. Under similar circumstances, we would fight again. But by the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that that war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land.

We return.

We return from fighting

We return fighting.

Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.

#2 "Returning Soldiers," W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Crisis* 17, May 1919

Original Text:

And lynching is barbarism of a degree of contemptible nastiness unparalleled in human history. Yet for fifty years we have lynched two Negroes a week, and we have kept this up right through the war.

It *disfranchises* its own citizens.

Disfranchisement is the deliberate theft and robbery of the only protection of poor against rich and black against white. The land that disfranchises its citizens and calls itself a democracy lies and knows it lies.

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It has never really tried to educate the Negro. A dominant minority does not want Negroes educated. It wants servants, dogs, whores and monkeys. And when this land allows a reactionary group by its stolen political power to force as many black folk into these categories as it possibly can, it cries in contemptible hypocrisy: "They threaten us with degeneracy; they cannot be educated."

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It *insults* us.

Summary:

In Your Own Words:

Key Words:

#3 “Returning Soldiers,” W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Crisis* 17, no. 1 (May 1919)

Original Text:

It has organized a nation-wide and latterly a world-wide propaganda of deliberate and continuous insult and defamation of black blood wherever found. It decrees that it shall not be possible in travel nor residence, work nor play, education nor instruction for a black man to exist without tacit or open acknowledgment of his inferiority to the dirtiest white dog. And it looks upon any attempt to question or even discuss this dogma as arrogance, unwarranted assumption and treason.

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Summary:

In Your Own Words:

Key Words:
