

CURRENT OPINION

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NEW PHASES OF THE FIGHT AGAINST LYNCHING

THE first National Conference on lynching, held recently in New York and attended by representatives of twenty-five states of the Union, has served to bring into prominence some of the efforts now being made to wipe out a national disgrace. Among those who participated in the Conference were ex-Governor Emmet O'Neal, of Alabama, Rabbi Stephen Wise, Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, General John H. Sherburne and Charles Evan Hughes. Mr. Hughes sounded the key-note of the occasion in his declaration: "Little can be done in the cause of international justice unless nations establish strongly and securely the foundations of justice within their own borders. . . . It has been said in the most formal manner in the covenant of the League of Nations that the well-being and development of [the backward] peoples is the most sacred trust of civilization. I say that duty begins at home."

At this conference figures were presented showing that in the last thirty years 3,224 persons have been killed by lynching, 2,834 of them in Southern States which once were slave-holding. Georgia has lynched 386—or an average of over thirty a year. Sixty-three negroes, five of them women, were lynched in 1918; and four white men. In discussing these figures, James Weldon Johnson, field secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and himself a colored man, said:

"I ask not only black Americans but white Americans, are you not ashamed of lynching? Do you not hang your head in humiliation to think that this is the only civilized country in the world, no, more than that, the only spot on earth where a human being may be tortured with hot irons and then burned alive. The nation is to-day striving to lead the

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moral forces of the world in the support of the weak against the strong; well, I'll tell you it can't do it until it conquers and crushes out this monster in its own midst.

"A great deal has been said about the atrocities committed during this terrible war by Huns and Turks; but there are millions of intelligent Americans who do not know, who are not concerned with the fact that every year atrocities are committed in this enlightened land that would cause envy in the heart of the most benighted Turk."

Several practical measures were proposed and acted upon. A prompt and thorough investigation of the lynching evil by Congress was demanded. A fund for the prosecution of a campaign against lynching was started, and a committee appointed to administer and sustain it. Most important of all, a resolution was passed by unanimous vote recommending that lynching be made a federal crime, to be punished by federal courts.

"A good beginning is made towards the suppression of this great evil," the *Boston Transcript* comments. Lynching, the same paper points out, is not by any means a local or a sectional evil. Under the same provocation it is about as likely to take place in one section as another. The worst wholesale lynchings on record took place at Springfield, Ohio, and East St. Louis, Ill., and lynchings have been narrowly averted in New York and Philadelphia. "The cooperation of the Northern and Southern anti-lynchers and white and black anti-lynchers," the *Transcript* remarks, "is a most hopeful sign, and the elevation of an ever-increasing number of colored people into the class of the well-to-do citizens is a pledge that they will be the better able to take care of their race." The *Transcript* continues:

"The great trouble is to find an effective means of combating lynching. Naturally it does no good merely to pass laws against it. Every lynching is a sudden and violent outburst against the law. It is a passionate protest against what is regarded as the insufficiency and impotence of the law. It is an explosion of

fury, operating so suddenly, or else by so irresistible a development of local sentiment, that the officers of the law are powerless against it. The force of prevention can be applied only in two ways—by establishing so strong a sentiment of opposition and hatred of such passionate methods that it is impossible to organize a lynching party, or else by punishing the participants so severely and so certainly that people will carry in their hearts a fear to violate the law. The first method of cure is good, and it is now in operation. Lynchings on the whole are diminishing in number. But the cure along this line is slow. It may take a generation or two to make it completely effective. And it has been found impossible to prevent lynchings by the punishment of the lynchers. Not only is evasion easy, but when the passion of a community is aroused the fear of retribution vanishes.

“At the anti-lynching conference in New York it was suggested that the best way to restrain lynchings is to penalize the communities—to compel the offending town or county to pay a large fine, or to boycott its business. There does not seem to be much sense or reason in such a proposition as that. It would punish the innocent with the guilty, and in fact would punish the innocent more than the guilty; for the majority of the lynchers in most cases are irresponsible individuals who would feel the penalty very little, while the protesting and responsible elements would have to shoulder the heavier part of the penalty.

“The evil must be abated by arousing the sentiment of the whole community against it. The violent means of murder against murder, or murder against any other crime or offence, must become an abhorrent thing.”