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National Museum of African American History and Culture

Pamphlet: A Negro Looks at War

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A NEGRO LOOKS AT WAR

By John Henry Williams

Cannons are speaking again in Europe.

When this war reaches the stage of "Johnny get your gun" again on this side of the Atlantic, it'll be just a little too late to stop and ask: "what does it mean to me, anyway?"

The American people want know part of this war. To the Negro people, especially, the thought of war brings back sharp and bitter memories.

Let's go back for a few minutes to 1917 and "the war that was to end all wars."

Let's go back with Joe Williams, shipping clerk. Fine fellow, Joe. Make a pretty good living too. Belonged to a famous Negro National Guard regiment in Chicago and knew a little about the business of soldiering.

Here he was surrounded by headlines and posters and talk about atrocities and the Huns' threat to civilization, and every red-blooded man doing his duty. Even at home, in a South Side slum, conversation was filled with what people had seen in the movies, about the poor little Belgian children. Over in the armory there were announcements concerning the Federalizing of all Guardsmen and putting them at the service of Uncle Sam and his allies to make the world "safe for democracy."

Joe was bothered by that talk about democracy. It didn't quite jibe with lynchings and Jim-Crow tenements. But he didn't know the answer.

Then one night there was a meeting at the Y.M.C.A. at which Dr. William deClark Haywood of the Colored People's Advancement Association was to talk about "The Negro and the War." Joe went and listened carefully as the words fell, cultured and suave.

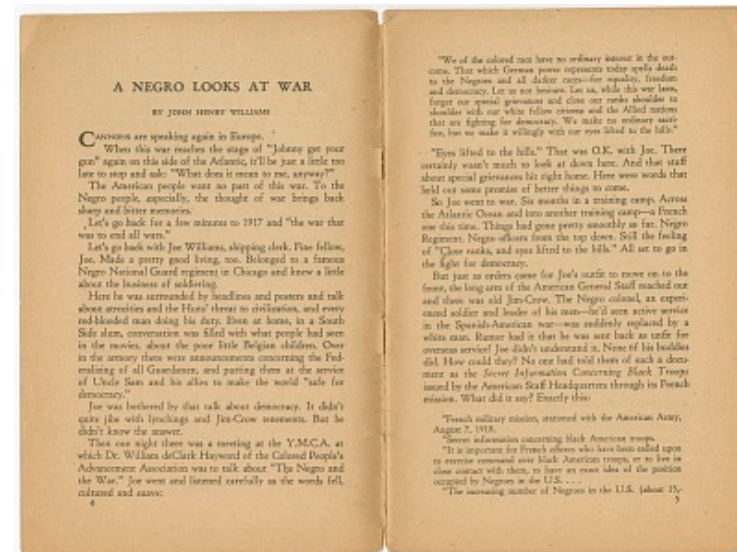
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"We of the colored race have no ordinary interest in the outcome. That which German power represents today spells death to the Negroes and all darker races - for equality, freedom and democracy. Let us not hesitate. Let us, while this war lasts, forget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

"Eyes lifted to the hills." That was O.K. with Joe. There certainly wasn't much to look at down here. And that stuff about special grievances hit right home. Here were words that held out some promise of better things to come.



So Joe went to war. Six months in a training camp. Across the Atlantic Ocean and into another training camp - a French one this time. Things had gone pretty smoothly so far. Negro Regiment. Negro officers from the top down. Still the feeling of "Close ranks, and eyes lifted to the hills." All set to go in the fight for democracy.

But just as orders came for Joe's outfit to move on to the front, the long arm of the American general Staff reached out and there was old Jim-Crow. The Negro colonel, an experienced soldier and leader of this men - he'd seen active service in the Spanish-American war - was suddenly replaced by a white man. Rumor had it that he was sent back as unfit for overseas service! Joe didn't understand it. None of his buddies did. How could they? No one had told them of such a document as the Secret Information Concerning Black Troops issued by the American Staff Headquarters through its French mission. What did it say? Exactly this:

"French military mission, stationed with the American Army, August 7, 1918.

"Secret information concerning black American troops.

"It is important for French officers who have been called upon to exercise command over black American troops, or to live in close contact with them, to have an exact idea of the position occupied by Negroes in the U.S. ...

"The increasing number of Negroes in the U.S. (about 15,-

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