The Niagara Movement, 1905

At the invitation of W. E. B. Du Bois, a group of socially conscious black intellectuals and leaders gathered together at Niagara Falls in 1905. This meeting initiated the Niagara Movement. Many participants were motivated by their opposition to the conservative leadership of Booker T. Washington, who was widely criticized in some circles not simply for his policy of racial accommodationism but also for his heavy-handed political tactics against those who dared to challenge him. Though the Niagara Movement represented the growing voice of dissent within black America and forcefully challenged the racial oppression of Jim Crow, the success of the project was limited. Washington used his influence with major African-American newspapers, churches, and colleges to undermine and discredit his opponents. Tensions between Du Bois and Trotter also contributed to the demise of this group.

Progress: The members of the conference, known as the Niagara Movement, assembled in annual meeting at Buffalo, July 11th, 12th and 13th, 1905, congratulate the Negro-Americans on certain undoubted evidences of progress in the last decade, particularly the increase of intelligence, the buying of property, the checking of crime, the uplift in home life, the advance in literature and art, and the demonstration of constructive and executive ability in the conduct of great religious, economic and educational institutions.

Suffrage: At the same time, we believe that this class of American citizens should protest emphatically and continually against the curtailment of their political rights. We believe in manhood suffrage; we believe that no man is so good, intelligent or wealthy as to be entrusted wholly with the welfare of his neighbor.

Civil Liberty: We believe also in protest against the curtailment of our civil rights. All American citizens have the right to equal treatment in places of public entertainment according to their behavior and deserts.

Economic Opportunity: We especially complain against the denial of equal opportunities to us in economic life; in the rural districts of the South this amounts to peonage and virtual slavery; all over the South it tends to crush labor and small business enterprises; and everywhere American prejudice, helped often by iniquitous laws, is making it more difficult for Negro-Americans to earn a decent living.

Education: Common school education should be free to all American children and compulsory. High school training should be adequately provided for all, and college training should be the monopoly of no class or race in any section of our common country. We believe that, in defense of our own institutions, the United States should aid common school education, particularly in the South, and we
especially recommend concerted agitation to this end. We urge an increase in
public high school facilities in the South, where the Negro-Americans are almost
wholly without such provisions. We favor well-equipped trade and technical
schools for the training of artisans, and the need of adequate and liberal endow-
ment for a few institutions of higher education must be patent to sincere well-
wishers of the race.

Courts: We demand upright judges in courts, juries selected without discrimi-
nation on account of color and the same measure of punishment and the same
efforts at reformation for blacks as for white offenders. We need orphanages and
farm schools for dependent children, juvenile reformatories for delinquents, and
the abolition of the debasing convict-lease system.

Public Opinion: We note with alarm the evident retrogression in this land of
sound public opinion on the subject of manhood rights, republican government
and human brotherhood, and we pray God that this nation will not degenerate
into a mob of boasters and oppressors, but rather will return to the faith of the
fathers, that all men were created free and equal, with certain unalienable rights.

Health: We plead for health—for an opportunity to live in decent houses and
localities, for a chance to rear our children in physical and moral cleanliness.

Employers and Labor Unions: We hold up for public execration the conduct of
two opposite classes of men: The practice among employers of importing ignorant
Negro-American laborers in emergencies, and then affording them neither pro-
tection nor permanent employment; and the practice of labor unions in proscrib-
ing and boycotting and oppressing thousands of their fellow-toilers, simply
because they are black. These methods have accentuated and will accentuate the
war of labor and capital, and they are disgraceful to both sides.

Protest: We refuse to allow the impression to remain that the Negro-American
assents to inferiority, is submissive under oppression and apologetic before
insults. Through helplessness we may submit, but the voice of protest of ten mil-
ion Americans must never cease to assail the ears of their fellows, so long as
America is unjust.

Color-Line: Any discrimination based simply on race or color is barbarous, we
care not how hallowed it be by custom, expediency or prejudice. Differences
made on account of ignorance, immorality, or disease are legitimate methods of
fighting evil, and against them we have no word of protest; but discriminations
based simply and solely on physical peculiarities, place of birth, color of skin, are
relics of that unreasoning human savagery of which the world is and ought to be
thoroughly ashamed.

"Jim Crow" Cars: We protest against the "Jim Crow" car, since its effect is and
must be to make us pay first-class fare for third-class accommodations, render us
open to insults and discomfort and to crucify wantonly our manhood, womanhood
and self-respect.

Soldiers: We regret that this nation has never seen fit adequately to reward the
black soldiers who, in its five wars, have defended their country with their blood,
and yet have been systematically denied the promotions which their abilities
deserve. And we regard as unjust, the exclusion of black boys from the military
and naval training schools.

War Amendments: We urge upon Congress the enactment of appropriate leg-
islation for securing the proper enforcement of those articles of freedom, the thir-
teenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments of the Constitution of the United
States.

Oppression: We repudiate the monstrous doctrine that the oppressor should
be the sole authority as to the rights of the oppressed. The Negro race in
America stolen, ravished and degraded, struggling up through difficulties and
oppression, needs sympathy and receives criticism; needs help and is given hind-
rance, needs protection and is given mob-violence, needs justice and is given
charity, needs leadership and is given cowardice and apology, needs bread and is
given a stone. This nation will never stand justified before God until these things
are changed.

The Church: Especially are we surprised and astonished at the recent attitude
of the church of Christ—of an increase of a desire to bow to racial prejudice, to
narrow the bounds of human brotherhood, and to segregate black men to some
outer sanctuary. This is wrong, unchristian and disgraceful to the twentieth cen-
tury civilization.

Agitation: Of the above grievances we do not hesitate to complain, and to com-
plain loudly and insistently. To ignore, overlook, or apologize for these wrongs is
to prove ourselves unworthy of freedom. Persistent manly agitation is the way to
liberty, and toward this goal the Niagara Movement has started and asks the coop-
eration of all men of all races.

Help: At the same time we want to acknowledge with deep thankfulness the
help of our fellowmen from the abolitionist down to those who today still stand
for equal opportunity and who have given and still give of their wealth and of their
poverty for our advancement.

Duties: And while we are demanding, and ought to demand, and will continue
to demand the rights enumerated above, God forbid that we should ever forget
to urge corresponding duties upon our people:

The duty to vote.  
The duty to respect the rights of others.  
The duty to work.  
The duty to obey the laws.  
The duty to be clean and orderly.  
The duty to send our children to school.  
The duty to respect ourselves, even as we respect others.

This statement, complaint and prayer we submit to the American people, and
Almighty God.

the Cleveland Gazette, July 22, 1905.