W.E.B. DuBOIS / a recorded autobiography / interview by Moses Asch

W.E.B. DuBOIS

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"For at all the levels of our national life, each man is sometimes called upon to stand for what he believes to be right against the pressures and opinions of friends, fellow workers, constituents or the force of popular attitude. At such a time each individual must look within himself for the resources to pursue his own course. But all the rest of us can contribute to the vitality of our democracy by refusing to join in unreasoning attacks upon those with whom we disagree; and by respecting them for having the strength to wage such a lonely struggle." President John F. Kennedy
W. E. B. DuBois -- a recorded autobiography

interviewed by Moses Asch

photo by Lotte Jacobi

SIDE I, Band 1:

I went from my home in Massachusetts when I was 17 down to Fisk University in Tennessee. There I stayed three years. Then I came from there to Harvard University in the fall of '85 and stayed there four years--two years in the College and two years in the Graduate Department. Then I went to Berlin and stayed two years.

At Fisk we had an institution for Negroes--taught for the most part by white people who were graduates of Oberlin and of Yale. The College was after the New England tradition. The regular college was Latin and Greek and mathematics and history and so forth. Comparatively small classes because in the whole College Department, there were only about 25 very good teachers and the general surroundings (except the white city,) but the general surroundings inside the College were excellent. For instance I think that my long years of life are due perhaps more to one thing that I learned at Fisk and that was to go to bed at 10:30 at night. Then of course, there was what was to me, the new experience of being with my own group of people. In New England I was usually the one colored pupil with surrounding white pupils. It wasn't until I began to get along on the teams that I felt any differences and there the differences were comparatively small. And yet as I look back I can see that probably I felt myself rather the exception. Now on the other hand I go down to Fisk University and suddenly I am in a Negro world where all the people except the teachers (and the teachers in their thought and action) belong to this colored world and the world was almost complete. I mean, we acted and thought as people belonging to this group. And I got the idea that my work was in that group. That while I was in the long run, going to try to break down segregation and separateness, yet for the time I was quite willing to be a Negro and to work within a Negro group. Now I came from there to Harvard and there was a change and yet I met it in a peculiar sort of way. I mean, if I'd gone directly from my high school in Great Barrington to Harvard, I would've thought of myself as a Massachusetts man and my fellows would've been the whites there. But coming back from Fisk I brought with me the feeling of a separate race. I never felt myself a Harvard man as I'd felt myself a Fisk man. I was coming to Harvard for a particular purpose--to try to carry further the education that I'd received at Fisk but to work by myself, to seek no contact with my fellows. If they wanted to know me they had to make the effort on their part. So that out of my class of 300 I don't suppose I knew 10 really, intimately at all.

SIDE I, Band 2:

Now of course in Boston there were colored people. There were some colored students in other institutions, there were a few colored students at Harvard, only one or two besides myself during my whole term there. But there were colored people in Massachusetts and I had a very pleasant social life with them so I was not lonely at all and I enjoyed the life there. Then too Harvard was in an exceptional state of being at that time. I don't think that from 1885 to this day, there's been quite an aggregation of teachers and preachers and lecturers as there were then. My closest friend for instance, as a teacher, was William James, the great sociologist, the brother of Henry James. I knew him well. I was invited to his house and we talked together. Then there was George Santayana who died at a ripe old age not very long ago. He and I read the "critique d'kleinen Farnumff" together alone up in an attic room. There was Channing, the historian and a great many of the greater names in history were connected more or less with the institution. Moreover the institution was going through a change. It had been up until that time, dis-
tinently a New England institution with Puritan ancestry and rather provincial. But the men who had come in the last few years wanted it to be more of a national institution and therefore they offered scholarships to people in the Middle West, and in the South. Now it happened that I had come out of a boy, and I was going to Harvard because it was the largest institution and it was in my own state. But I had, as a matter of fact, no money to go there and so a scholarship was offered me at Fisk and I went to Fisk with the idea that sometime I was going to Harvard, therefore, there were scholarships were offered I applied and I got a scholarship which would pay my expenses and something more and therefore, went to Harvard at this time. Now that landed me at Harvard at the time of a great intellectual activity and of a new freedom of thought and action.

William James was beginning his pragmatism. There was wide study of and understanding the Hottentots. There were the new methods in history under Channing and under Albert Busnell Hart. I later became my special teacher. When I went there I had made up my mind I was going to study philosophy. That is, I wanted to think of my thought of what the meaning of the whole universe was. But after I got there and had studied one or two years under James, we had a few talks and James said: "If you've got to study philosophy you will but if you can get out of it better because it's difficult to make you study philosophy. So I gave up philosophy and went into history under Albert Busnell Hart. I began my expenses and something more Negro history and was very much interested in the work that I was doing and it was work also that he particularly wanted done. So that eventually I took several courses for my broader education; courses in chemistry and in mathematics and in geology, and then I began to concentrate on history and especially the history of the Negro in the United States and in Africa. I got a Bachelor's Degree with distinction in 1890 and was one of the six Commencement speakers out of my class of 300. Characteristically, I took as my subject, Jefferson Davis. Jefferson Davis as a representative of civilization and tried to be very fair and frank in saying that the kind of civilization that he represented, the might of the white race oppressing the rest of the world, as the thing that we didn't need and wouldn't want in the next century. It proved a rather popular subject and there was a great deal of talk about it. Then I applied for a fellowship and got a fellowship for a year. In the midst of that year, I was at a party and they said they would give me a fellowship to go to Germany. It was $750 and half of it was a gift and half was to be paid back after I'd finished my education and they finally paid it back with interest at 6%

SIDE I, Band 4: Well, I came back from Berlin in 1892. And then there was the question as to where and what I was going to work in the U.S. There's of course, the slightest chance of my getting any position in a white University, in spite of the fact that I had had a better education than the professors that had had. First I tried to see if I could get into a colored school, either a college or a high school. One public school down in Tennessee considered me for a while but thought I had rather too much education for them and so they got an offer from Wilburforce. Now I knew something about Wilburforce. Wilburforce at first was known as Tuskegee Springs out in Southern Ohio, where a good many Southerners used to come up for their vacations. Then it became a place where they sent their colored children for an education. And finally it was bought by a Negro church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and they established a college there. And I was offered the position there which I accepted immediately, $600 a year. Before I had accepted that, I got an offer from Tuskegee from Booker Washington and I don't think that offer first I'd have taken it but I'd already promised to go to Wilburforce so that I didn't. Then I got another offer from Wilburforce and I accepted it and we had a beautiful trip up the Rhine from Rotterdam to Cologne. It was a new experience of civilization and a very inspiring one. Then I went to Eisenmarch in the Rhinefall and spent a summer with this family of a professor, an Austrian professor, and we had a lovely summer. And from there in the fall I went back to Berlin. In Berlin I had the chance to get into a seminar which was rather unusual for a foreigner. You were allowed in this seminar on economics under two of the most prominent professors and for 3 semesters I studied there. I wanted to take the examination but the rule was that you could not come up for an examination until you had been 3 semesters at the university and I'd only been two and that's because I only had money for that. They tried to make an exception but the English professors had a lot of candidates so that no difference could be made. I brought to their attention the fact that I had already had 2 years at Harvard but they didn't recognize Harvard as being of the same rank as Berlin. So that I had to come back without my degree. On the other hand it's rather interesting to know that last year, when I was in Berlin, the University brought out a record and gave me the degree that I didn't get some 70 years before.

SIDE I, Band 3: I went to Germany and there of course I had the tremendous new experience. For the first time in my life I was just a human being and not a particular kind of human being. It was as if I was getting on the boat at Rotterdam to make the Rhine-reise (the journey up the Rhine) and there was a Dutch lady and three daughters and one son. We went twenty miles a day and we got on the boat at Rotterdam to make the Rhine-reise (the journey up the Rhine) and there was a Dutch lady and three daughters and one son. We went twenty miles a day and we got on the boat at Rotterdam to make the Rhine-reise (the journey up the Rhine) and there was a Dutch lady and three daughters and one son. We went twenty miles a day and we got on the boat at Rotterdam to make the Rhine-reise (the journey up the Rhine) and there was a Dutch lady and three daughters and one son. We went twenty miles a day and we got on the boat at Rotterdam to...
two years, rather difficult years. The institution of course rather low-grade but with a great deal of devotion and enthusiasm and I had ideas of turning it into a great German institution. I ran against the religious difficulties, well, in other ways; for instance, I wore my cane and gloves always because if you didn’t wear cane and gloves you were practically naked. I had never been a person with any sort of religion. I was fairly orthodox but certainly not fundamental and so I walked with my cane and gloves into a prayer meeting and sat down at the back and then the student who was carrying on the prayer meeting says, ‘We will be led in prayer by Professor DuBois.’ I said, ‘No you won’t.’ And I came near to losing my job there because the bishops were outraged. Everybody led in prayer there and they had revivals. Well that made initial difficulties and I knew that in the end they would get rid of me because that was the way that I was teaching Latin and Greek when my specialty was sociology and they didn’t have any association in society so they didn’t want me to teach it. Then I got my chance. I was asked to come to the University of Pennsylvania to make a study of the Negro populations of that part of Philadelphia. The people of Philadelphia were quite certain that the bad political actions of these Negroes was all the bad government in Philadelphia. They knew that it was simply a matter of knowledge. That even if people were ignorant of essential matters which they had to do, they couldn’t correct their actions without more realization of just what those difficulties were. I was not only to know them but had to act.

And so I changed from studying the Negro problem to propaganda—to letting people know just what the Negro problem meant in what the colored people were suffering and what they were kept from doing. I was practically compelled to make this change because the people who were supporting Atlanta University were a little bit easy about the way in which I talked about the Negro problem and pressure began to be put upon the University to do without my services. I began to criticize Booker Washington saying it wasn’t enough to teach Negroes trades—the Negroes had to have some voice in their government, they had to have protection in the courts, they had to have trained men to lead them. Well the Secretary put such pressure on Atlanta University that at last I resigned. I mean, they would’ve had to’ve dropped me if they wanted to. They were in the habit of giving philanthropic gifts coming from the rich people of the North. So that I accepted an invitation to come to New York in 1910 and helped the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. I had attended their conventions and I was one of the incorporators and founders of the Association. I came up in 1910 and was slated to be the Secretary of the Association. But I didn’t want to be secretary because secretary raises money I doubt that was ever the sort of thing I wanted to do to write and to talk.
Mary Sylvina Burghardt DuBois, shown with her baby Willie, died in 1884, shortly after her son had graduated from high school.

Graduating class, Fisk University - 1888
W.E.B. DuBois seated, left.

The Niagara Movement was inaugurated at a meeting held at Buffalo, N.Y., July 11-13, 1905. The delegates, including DuBois, 2nd from l, posed for photo above. The next year the movement met at Harpers Ferry, Va., on ground hallowed by the martyrdom of John Brown. DuBois delivered an historic address from which the following is taken: "We shall not be satisfied to take one jot or little less than our full manhood rights. We claim for ourselves every single right that belongs to a freerborn American, political, civil and social; and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America. The battle we wage is not for ourselves alone but for all true Americans." The Niagara Movement was the forerunner of NAACP.

Dr. DuBois, center, marches down New York's Fifth Avenue, in the 1917 Silent Parade Against Lynching.
Dr. Maude Slye, director of Cancer Research, University of Chicago; Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, research director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; and Dr. A. Eustace Haydon, leader, Chicago Ethical Society, reflect the enthusiasm of thousands of Chicagoans gathered at the Crisis Rally, demanding that the U.N. handle aid to Greece and Turkey, held at the Coliseum, April 13, 1947.

Dr. DuBois lecturing on Africa in 1956

Fisk Commencement, 1958
70th Anniversary of graduation.
part the Negroes were used as stevedores rather than fighters. And of course, as the material that was furnished Europe in this war that was of the greatest importance. The fighting of Americans in the First World War was of no particular importance. The treatment of the colored soldiers over there was so bad that the N.A.A.C.P. sent me over just to see how we could bring this about. And I got the idea that there was the chance to do something for Africa, when I wrote to President Wilson and told him that at the Peace Conference in Versailles they ought to take up the matter of the German colonies and since the Allies were now in charge, that they ought to set those colonies up as free independent states and put them under an International Committee on which Africans should be members. Mr. Wilson didn't answer that letter but the American Committee over there considered it and out of that really came the mandate's commission.

On the other hand, when I got to Paris, then I heard about a Pan-African Congress. There had been a pan-African Congress in 1910 which I had attended and wrote the resolutions. But that didn't succeed. When I tried to organize this Pan-African Congress I was told that Pan-Africanism was militant and said that we couldn't have anything of that sort. The Americans discouraged it. But the black man who was instrumental in bringing something like 100,000 black soldiers from Africa to help in the First World War and then helped turn back the Germans. And D'Anou went to the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister said that I could have the Congress but of course America and Great Britain wouldn't allow anybody to have passports to get over there so the Congress was rather small, we had 57 delegates, people-Negroes who happened to be in Paris at the time, a few African-Americans, some whites. We had this first pan-African Congress in 1919 at the Grand Hotel and then after the war, in 1921 we held a much larger Congress with some 2 or 3 hundred people and a good many from Africa. And that aroused the colonial powers. They got very much excited because they thought I was trying to start a revolution in Africa which I wasn't at all. What I was trying to do was to get educated Africans in various parts of the world together to know each other and to talk with each other and to see what kind of program could be laid down for the emancipation of the Africans in their own country. There was held several pan-African Congresses after that, there were none that were as great and comprehensive as the second in 1921 but there was one in 1923 in which a leading Englishman took part. That took place in London and Paris and in 1926 I think in Lisbon where we got members of the Portuguese parliament and some of the colonial officials.

Then from there I went to Africa because I'd never been there and while I was there the President of the U.S., Coolidge, appointed me Minister to the Imperial Government of Japan and Envoy-extraordinary to attend the inauguration of the President-King. The real reason of that was that Liberia had gotten any of the money that the U.S. was throwing about the world during the First World War was the last to buy any late in applying. And when they did apply congress wouldn't give it to them. So Coolidge wanted to ally any bad feeling and give me this appointment. That made me Dean of the Diplomatic Corps in Monrovia and I had a very important role to play. I tried to help Liberia of the friendship of the U.S. Then I came back to the U.S. and the next thing of importance was our anti-lynching campaign. We marched down Fifth Avenue--a silent march with placards--we spent some $20,000 in running advertisements in the great papers of the U.S. We took a whole page in the New York Times. And we had a meeting here in New York where the leading citizens of the country and really did something toward stopping the shame of lynching. Then I became interested in Russia. I had heard about the Revolution of 1917 and tried to follow but there wasn't very much news at that time. And then when a delegation of Soviet citizens came over here to try to induce Roosevelt to help them once in the new government, they came to me to think perhaps I had some political influence so as to get recognition. I tried to tell them that I didn't have any political influence with Mr. Roosevelt or anybody else. And that I couldn't say much about Russia because I didn't know much about the news so contradictory. Well, they asked me if I wouldn't like to go to Russia and I said I would provide I could go without any strings attached, and they said I could. And in 1925, I made my first trip to Russia I traveled rather widely in Leningrad, in Moscow, in Gorky which used to be called Niemenograd, in the Ukraine and down to Russia and when I went across the Trans-Siberian Railroad from Moscow to Manchuria. And again in 1932 I spoke to the Russian Peace Congress and in 1933 the last time. So my interest in Russia became very great and my belief in her work and future tremendous. On the other hand the U.S. after the World War and after the beginning of the rather feverish prosperity, I began to realize that something was going wrong with our economic organization because the income of the laborers began to fall off and I began to see that Negroes were losing their jobs, the opposition to them in the trade union ranks was strong, and it was clear that the Crisis, as the depression went on, was not going to pay for itself--it was not going to be self-supporting. Now that brought an inevitable change. So long as the Crisis was self-supporting, we were practically independent within certain wide limits of what I was saying to the public. But the National Association had to support the Crisis, then of course the National Association had a right to have the last word as to what was to be said and it would become an orphan. And orphans are never read because they're not interesting, they become whatever the Board of Trustees vote. So I made up my mind that probably my job in propaganda was over.

SIDE II, Band 2:

I was getting to be a old man and I had a very attractive offer from my friend John Hope down in Atlanta University where I'd taught before. John Hope had been made the President of the new University, which consisted of the old Atlanta University and of some colored institutions, which were given a sufficient sum of money by the General Education Board, to begin a new lease of life. And Hope was one of my closest friends and he came several times to New York to ask me to come down there and help him start a real University. Now it seemed to me that this was the time. My independence in the Crisis had to be given up and here was the time for me to return to my ivory tower and go to work in study and writing. And when I resigned in 1933 the N.A.A.C.P. gave me some very fine applause and did not want me to leave but I thought it was the best thing for me so I went down to Atlanta University and stayed there 10 years. Unfortunately Hope died the day I left. So I went there--worked himself to death. There succeeded a young man whom I'd joined in recommending but who as a matter of fact I think was a very great man. I made up my mind that a University should be and had no idea of the plans that Hope and I had. Then too one of the institutions that I'd helped making of this new University, Spellman College, a school for girls, also had its head a woman who had worked for a long time for the Rockefellers, (The Rockefellers had furnished the endowment for Spellman) and she held back with this death and with the holding back of President Reed it was a long time before I could get anything started. So I got started a new quarterly magazine called Phylon which is the Greek word for thought. And I went down to the Negro land-grant Colleges to cooperate. Now the Negro land-grant Colleges which were colleges supported by Federal funds, there were some 20 colored and 20 or 30 white. And as a matter of fact the white institutions got nearly all the money. The colored institutions got scraps and for a long time were really second-rate imitations of colleges. They had begun to get more because they were getting a better class of presidents and in the 30's what they needed was a program. Some of them were headed by men whom I had taught and heads of others knew about me. So that I succeeded in getting those colleges to come together in an organization and to make Atlanta University the center of a new comprehensive study of the Negro problem. In fact if I could've carried through that scheme it would have been the most important sociological study that the world knew. There was bound to be quite enough money for it because if the Negro colleges got their legal share
of Federal appropriations they would have 3 or 4 times as much money as they were getting. So that this looked like our great chance. We got the leading sociologists on our side. Southern sociologists like Odm of North Carolina, like the head of the Sociological Institute in the University of Louisiana, a large number of Northern sociologists. We held one preliminary conference down in Atlanta, then another one down there where the thing really got going and then the President of Atlanta University retired from me for age. So that suddenly all of the plan just fell apart because these institutions have naturally a good deal of respect for Atlanta University and its development, and I simply had to give it up. It was self-support that anyone was getting. I had to give it up. It was going to be up in that hotel on Central Park South, and then those I had been interested in, I had not been connected with it. But that was an unkind job and the witch-hunt had begun in the U.S. so that colored people were afraid to join this membership-organization and its income fell off.

It was proposed however that before I withdraw from it that they should unite in celebrating my 83rd birthday and we arranged a dinner of that sort, it was going to be up in that hotel on Central Park South, and then the great Congress of Arts and Sciences here at the Waldorf-Astoria where a large number of Russians came. And we had a fine meeting except that it was ruined by an extraordinary attack through nearly all the leading papers of the U.S., one of the worst things that has happened in the U.S. This was a meeting for peace and it had some of the great leaders of the world although certain leaders like Picasso, Bernsault and others were not given permits at any rate we did have a good meeting and then the same year, '49, I went to Paris to attend the great Paris Peace Congress which was I think the whole, the greatest meeting of human beings I've ever attended. It was a meeting for peace and I had taken part and especially talked about colonies and emancipating colonies. Paul Robeson flew from Prague and said that he didn't believe that the colored man would ever join in any war against Russia, the Chinese were not allowed to come but they telephoned the fall of Nanking from the United Nations—I had been a consultant at the U.N. for the W.A.A.C.P. when it was formed in 1945—that we should appeal to them and said was to take up the matter of the treatment of Negroes in the United States. I edited a report of that sort which I got other writers to help me writing different chapters and Walter made difficulty about that. He wanted to write a preface which wasn't needed because my work in that was the preface and that made more difficulty. And then he made difficulty for me to make reports and so forth about what the U.N. should do and I didn't see that it was necessary at the time, there was nothing going to be done until somebody in the U.N. took up this matter and nobody was going to do it against the U.S. Then some inkling of this got out into the press. I didn't send it to the press but I told the Board of Directors afterwards that if the press had asked me I would've told them because there wasn't anything secret about it. It was preposterously dismissed in '48 after I'd been there 4 years.

SIDE II, Band 8:

For a while I didn't know what I was going to do. The problem even of self-support came up. I had a wife and daughter. The daughter was self-supporting but I'd built a new home in Baltimore to be near where there was teaching. And I had several offers of temporary work—lecturing at Fisk and Durham and so on, but one unexpected offer came from the W.A.A.C.P. They wanted me to come back to the W.A.A.C.P. and to do anything I was interested in and that anyone was getting. I'd be perfectly free to end my life as I wished. Well I hesitated because the head of the W.A.A.C.P. was Walter White and I didn't like Walter White. He was a hard worker, he had built up the organization since I'd left it until it was a wide organization but he was a phenomenally selfish man and I laid down certain conditions and then I didn't want to interfere with the regular work of the W.A.A.C.P. at all. I didn't want to come back and try to resume my position as member of the Board and there were certain things, particularly connected with Africa and its development, which I would like to take up and I wanted two offices, one for myself and one for my secretary and library. That was all agreed to and I came back. And immediately I ran into the difficulties I was afraid of. I didn't work at all, I didn't seem to be able to find one, or Walter didn't. And I couldn't get a clear program and I began to realize that what Walter had in mind was that I should write speeches and reports and represent him. Which was not what I had in mind at all. I finally did get a Pan-African Congress or rather the trade unionists in Africa got one and invited me to Manchester and I went in 1946 and there I met some of the great present leaders of Africa—Nkrumah of Ghana, Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, and Tanjata of Kenya, and began to see the new spirit that was starting in Africa. But when I came back it was proposed that we appeal to the new leaders of Africa—I had been a consultant at the U.N. for the W.A.A.C.P. when it was formed in 1945—that we should appeal to them and said was to take up the matter of the treatment of Negroes in the United States. I edited a report of that sort which I got other writers to help me writing different chapters and Walter made difficulty about that. He wanted to write a preface which wasn't needed because my work in that was the preface and that made more difficulty. And then he made difficulty for me to make reports and so forth about what the U.N. should do and I didn't see that it was necessary at the time, there was nothing going to be done until somebody in the U.N. took up this matter and nobody was going to do it against the U.S. Then some inkling of this got out into the press. I didn't send it to the press but I told the Board of Directors afterwards that if the press had asked me I would've told them because there wasn't anything secret about it. It was preposterously dismissed in '48 after I'd been there 4 years.

SIDE II, Band 5:

Then I took up work as Assistant-Chairman of the Council on African Affairs of which Paul Robeson was Chairman and which I had been interested in for many years. I had not been connected with it. But that was an unkind job and the witch-hunt had begun in the U.S. so that colored people were afraid to join this membership-organization and its income fell off.

It was proposed however that before I withdrew from it that they should unite in celebrating my 83rd birthday and we arranged a dinner of that sort, it was going to be up in that hotel on Central Park South, and then the great Congress of Arts and Sciences here at the Waldorf-Astoria where a large number of Russians came. And we had a fine meeting except that it was ruined by an extraordinary attack through nearly all the leading papers of the U.S., one of the worst things that has happened in the U.S. This was a meeting for peace and it had some of the great leaders of the world although certain leaders like Picasso, Bernsault and others were not given permits at any rate we did have a good meeting and then the same year, '49, I went to Paris to attend the great Paris Peace Congress which was I think the whole, the greatest meeting of human beings I've ever attended. It was a meeting for peace and I had taken part and especially talked about colonies and emancipating colonies. Paul Robeson flew from Prague and said that he didn't believe that the colored man would ever join in any war against Russia, the Chinese were not allowed to come but they telephoned the fall of Nanking from the United Nations—I had been a consultant at the U.N. for the W.A.A.C.P. when it was formed in 1945—that we should appeal to them and said was to take up the matter of the treatment of Negroes in the United States. I edited a report of that sort which I got other writers to help me writing different chapters and Walter made difficulty about that. He wanted to write a preface which wasn't needed because my work in that was the preface and that made more difficulty. And then he made difficulty for me to make reports and so forth about what the U.N. should do and I didn't see that it was necessary at the time, there was nothing going to be done until somebody in the U.N. took up this matter and nobody was going to do it against the U.S. Then some inkling of this got out into the press. I didn't send it to the press but I told the Board of Directors afterwards that if the press had asked me I would've told them because there wasn't anything secret about it. It was preposterously dismissed in '48 after I'd been there 4 years.

SIDE II, Band 6:

Lately I've been encouraged by the fact that the young people—the students have resumed leadership which I was afraid that they had given up during the McCarthy era. I spoke at several institutions—I spoke at Princeton, Chicago and I think the industriousness of liberal students—a number but the students didn't respond, they seemed to me awfully dull and I just made up my mind that this was an age where we were not
going to have the inspiration of the young. And now suddenly without any encouragement on my part and little encouragement on the part of others, one of these sit-downs the students have put their finger on a very important point. The Negro problem is thus the problem of mob violence and disenfranchisement, and of the injustice in the courts, and of difficulties in getting decent jobs. In addition to that, the Negro problem is a series of little manœuvres which are of little importance, that help nobody and yet which all of the Negroes have to meet and which most of them simply meet and say nothing. I mean the sit-downs. I mean the African Methodist Episcopal Church tried to encourage some migration to Africa but didn't succeed. And now with my pan-African Congress movement there came the idea that American Negroes, having a better chance at education and so forth, could help the African but that was bitterly opposed by the colonial powers. They didn't want American Negroes stirring up trouble and the Negroes in America were not particularly enthusiastic; for instance, the A.P.U. supported the first two pan-African Congresses but not the others because as some of the Trustees said, "We've got enough problems in the U.S. without going to Africa to look up others. So that there wasn't much American Negro support for the pan-African movement. Now on the other hand, there comes through the African trade unions my simple thought and ambition among a new generation of Africans. When the African members of trade unions set in Paris with a bunch of trade unionists of the world, they found to their surprise and they fought it, that the English fought to keep the bread and a degree. And they've been doing. And they've been doing. And for that reason the split that came in the trade unions movement. Meantime the Africans there asked for a 5th pan-African Congress and that's the reason that the 5th pan-African Congress began. And for that reason the Africans who went back to Africa and began this new movement and today the leadership of the Negro race is going to come from Africa and not from America or the West Indies. In fact they are going to inspire the world, which we haven't been doing. And for that reason you have this tremendous beginning of independence, of free money and freedom from white rule in Africa. Now on the other hand, the American Negroes have become very much American, and a good number of the American Negroes see now a chance in Africa to make money. And of course, the whites have always seen that chance. So that you have here in New York City today some 4 organizations which are African organizations and which believe themselves or pretend to believe that they are helping the African movement. As a matter of fact most of them are trying to help American investors get in on the ground floor in Africa. And that I've tried to set myself against. Africa needs capital but what I've said is--I broadcasted from China last year--you need capital and you must make your own capital just as much as possible. You must avoid getting capital from the U.S. which is going to tie you down so that you'll have to do this or be really free if you are part of the investment system. That if you can get capital from the U.S., the Soviet Union at 2% you ought to get it, if you can get it from China--help of that sort, the point is to get capital but to get it as cheap as possible, save it for yourself and not tie yourself up by spending a whole lot for consumers' goods that you have gotten on without for a long time-- gotten on for a long time without refrigerators or automobiles in Africa, you can get on a little further than that. And for that reason, I'm not a member of any of these African organizations and haven't been asked to be a member. And I have warned the Negroes as I have said--I was asked to go to Ghana when the country first became independent and I couldn't get a passport. Now again Ghana is going to become a republic and I'm going to be invited there and I've applied for a passport. I probably won't get it but if I do get it I'm going there and tell 'em the same thing with emphasis! A good many of the Americans, and the African Negroes particularly are naive about that; for instance, there is a firm down on Wall Street of colored investors, who are telling the Negro people, "Now you ought to invest in bonds and get some of this income." But what I'm saying to them, "There's no use your going into that gambling organization and think you're going to get anything out of it! That's simply throwing away your money!" But a number of American Negroes don't understand this. A man came the other day here; I think personally he was honest, with a whole lot of my books which he wanted me to autograph. Well, I thought here's a friend of mine who's collecting books and I'd autograph 'em and I sat down there and wrote my name in these books for about an hour. Then as I was writing, it suddenly occurred to me, well this is a little queer and I find out he's acting as agent for a Baldwin Avenue Organization which was collecting my books! And I (laughter) so when he came with another batch I told him he could take them back I wasn't autographing any more. Well now I don't think he was personally dishonest, but that's his idea of American business. It's too bad because I don't think that the Africans are going to fall for it. I'm going to be rather careful and build up a new independent organization for the benefit of the mass of the people instead of for the making of millionaires who are going to cooperate with the millionaires in England and in America.