

■ “What Does American Democracy Mean to Me?”

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Author: Mary McLeod Bethune

Genre: address; speech

Summary Overview

Black responses to the New Deal were complex and varied. Many African Americans supported the New Deal because it provided jobs, social programs, and economic relief amid the Great Depression. However, they often faced racial discrimination: New Deal programs were sometimes segregated, and some policies excluded or marginalized Black workers.

In 1939, the United States was still mired in the Great Depression as war began to engulf Europe once again. At such a time, civil rights for Black Americans was not very high on the agenda of most white Americans. But Mary McLeod Bethune was ahead of her time in many ways. She had already seen both the best Black Americans could offer their country and the worst with which America had repaid them. She had held prominent positions in civil rights organizations and in the federal government. She had the ear of both President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. And in this speech to a national radio audience, she answered a very simple question: “What does American democracy mean to me?” Her response to that question would outline what she felt needed to be done in order to make the United States “a more perfect union.”

Defining Moment

The Great Depression was devastating for many Americans, but doubly so for African Americans. Many, still sharecropping in the South, suffered as cotton prices plummeted. In the North, factory jobs became harder to find, and many of those that were available were controlled by labor unions, many of which excluded Black workers. As jobs became more and more scarce, even positions traditionally held by Black people, such as train porters, cooks, maids, and garbage men, went to unemployed whites. Unemployment among Black Americans was about twice the national rate throughout the 1930s. Racial tensions increased with the economic pressure felt by many whites. Jim Crow laws and white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan kept Blacks in a subservient position throughout the nation.

These factors did not change suddenly when Franklin D. Roosevelt became president in 1933. Many Black voters were loyal Republicans, since



Mary McLeod Bethune. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

that was the party of the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln. However, the way Roosevelt attacked the problems of the Depression impressed many African Americans. His ability to communicate and empathize with the plight of the populace made many Black Americans feel a sense of belonging. However, needing the votes of Southern senators to pass his New Deal reforms, Roosevelt did little to directly benefit African Americans during his first term. However, Eleanor Roosevelt, an outspoken opponent of prejudice, pushed the president to move toward a more progressive position. The president began to speak publicly on issues important to African Americans, such as lynching. Over time, many African Americans, such as Mary McLeod Bethune, changed their party affiliation from Republican to Democrat.

Though discrimination and segregation were a part of many New Deal programs, and Roosevelt's perspective on civil rights is best described as moderate, his administration marked a shift from the national leaders that preceded him. Over the course of Roosevelt's time in office, a higher share of New Deal agency jobs went to Black workers, and by the late 1930s, Black income from government relief and work programs was nearly equal to Black income from private employment. Roosevelt also began to bring Black leaders into the White House, consulting with them on matters of civil rights.

Black leaders such as A. Philip Randolph and Mary McLeod Bethune became nationally known. Bethune's position in the National Youth Admin-

istration and as an advisor to Roosevelt made her a personality who occasionally appeared on radio programs, and it was with the history of African Americans both before and during the Great Depression in mind that she appeared on NBC's *America's Town Meeting of the Air* broadcast, along with a number of other panelists, to answer the question, "What does American democracy mean to me?"

Author Biography

Mary McLeod Bethune was one generation removed from slavery. Born in South Carolina in 1875, she grew up doing exactly what her parents had done: picking cotton. However, she did it on land that her family owned, and she had the drive to pursue the best educational opportunities available to a Black girl at the time. After graduating from Scotia Seminary, she was denied a missionary posting in Africa because of her race. Instead, she began teaching in Augusta, Georgia, before marrying and eventually moving to Florida where she opened the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls in 1904. During the 1920s and 1930s, Bethune led various women's civil rights organizations, and worked as director of the Division of Negro Affairs in the National Youth Administration. In this position, she became friends with Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt, forming the Federal Council of Negro Affairs, popularly known as the Roosevelt's "Black Cabinet." As such, she became one of the best-known and most influential Black women in the nation.



Historical Document

“What Does American Democracy Mean to Me?”

Democracy is for me, and for 12 million black Americans, a goal towards which our nation is marching. It is a dream and an ideal in whose ultimate realization we have a deep and abiding faith. For me, it is based on Christianity, in which we confidently entrust our destiny as a people. Under God's guidance in this great democracy, we are rising out of the darkness of slavery into the light of freedom. Here my race has been afforded [the] opportunity to advance from a people 80 percent illiterate to a people 80 percent literate; from abject poverty to the ownership and operation of a million farms and 750,000 homes; from total disfranchisement to participation in government; from the status of chattels to recognized contributors to the American culture.

As we have been extended a measure of democracy, we have brought to the nation rich gifts. We have helped to build America with our labor, strengthened it with our faith and enriched it with our song. We have given you Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Booker T. Washington, Marian Anderson and George Washington Carver. But even these are only the first fruits of a rich harvest, which will be reaped when new and wider fields are opened to us.

The democratic doors of equal opportunity have not been opened wide to Negroes. In the Deep South, Negro youth is offered only one-fifteenth of the educational opportunity of the average American child. The great masses of Negro workers are depressed and unprotected in the lowest levels of agriculture and domestic service, while the black workers in industry are barred from certain unions and generally assigned to the more laborious and poorly paid work. Their housing and living conditions are sordid and unhealthy. They live too often in terror of the lynch mob; are deprived too often of the Constitutional right of suffrage; and are humiliated too often by the denial of civil liberties. We do not believe that justice and common decency will allow these conditions to continue.

Our faith envisions a fundamental change as mutual respect and understanding between our races come in the path of spiritual awakening. Certainly there have been times when we may have delayed this mutual understanding by being slow to assume a fuller share of our national responsibility because of the denial of full equality. And yet, we have always been loyal when the ideals of American democracy have been attacked. We have given our blood in its defense—from Crispus Attucks on Boston Commons to the battlefields of France. We have fought for the democratic principles of equality under the law, equality of opportunity, equality at the ballot box, for the guarantees of

life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We have fought to preserve one nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Yes, we have fought for America with all her imperfections, not so much for what she is, but for what we know she can be.

Perhaps the greatest battle is before us, the fight for a new America: fearless, free, united, morally re-armed, in which 12 million Negroes, shoulder to shoulder with their fellow Americans, will strive that this nation under God will have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, for the people and by the people shall not perish from the earth. This dream, this idea, this aspiration, this is what American democracy means to me.

[applause]



Glossary

chattels: property; slaves

sordid: squalid; wretched

Document Analysis

In her answer to the question, “What does American democracy mean to me?,” Mary McLeod Bethune takes the occasion first to praise the things American democracy has given Black Americans, then to demonstrate how, even so, the promise of that democracy has not come close to being fully realized for the nation’s Black population. Bethune made clear what had been accomplished, the promise of what could be accomplished, and the distance between the two.

Bethune mentions her “deep and abiding faith” in the dream of full inclusion in American democracy; her belief that God’s providence has led Black people from slavery to freedom; from illiteracy to literacy; from poverty to ownership of property and businesses. After discussing how far African Americans have come, Bethune notes the important contributions many famous Black people have made to science, literature, and the performing arts.

Despite such progress, Bethune points out, the African American story in 1939 was still one of little educational opportunity, few job prospects, extreme poverty, and fear of racial oppression at the hands of groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Bethune makes clear that America is still a work in progress, and that the founding documents of American democracy set forth ideals that have not yet been met, but toward which the nation and its people continually strive.

That is the reason for her hope and what, in the end, American democracy means to her—that, quoting Abraham Lincoln, “this nation under God will have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, for the people and by the people shall not perish from the earth.”

Essential Themes

When viewed in the context of the decades that followed Bethune’s radio address, her words seem prophetic. But Bethune wasn’t the first to point out the hypocrisy of American democracy. Frederick Douglass expressed many of the same sentiments—that America had not yet lived up to its stated mission because of its treatment of Blacks—in his speeches and writings. Those same sentiments infused the

words of civil rights leaders during the 1950s and 1960s. Using the rhetoric of American liberty to point out that liberty was being denied to the nation’s Black population was effective in pricking the conscience of many Americans.

When the United States entered World War II, job discrimination in the defense industries and in the military itself was still accepted. It was only after United Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union leader A. Philip Randolph threatened a massive march on Washington, D.C., that Roosevelt relented and issued Executive Order 8802, which allowed anyone, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, to be free from discrimination by federal agencies and any companies or unions involved in the war effort.

Once the war was over, African American men returned home from the fighting with a distinct feeling that they had earned the right to be full participants in American society, which made a return to discrimination even less acceptable. It was in that context—and because of the groundwork laid by people like Mary McLeod Bethune—that the NAACP pursued the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that outlawed segregation in public schools; that nine Black students in Little Rock, Arkansas, braved hate-filled crowds in 1957 to attend the previously all-white Central High School; and that a new cadre of national leaders, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., would push for civil and voting rights legislation in the mid-1960s.

—Steven L. Danver, PhD

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