

148. African-Americans and the Four Freedoms (1944)

Source: Charles Wesley: "The Negro Has Always Wanted the Four Freedoms," from *What the Negro Wants* edited by Rayford W. Logan. Copyright © 1944 by the University of North Carolina Press, renewed 1972 by Rayford W. Logan. Used by permission of the publisher.

World War II reinvigorated the black struggle for equality in America. In 1944 the University of North Carolina Press published *What the Negro Wants*, a book of essays by fourteen prominent black leaders. Virtually every contributor called for the right to vote in the South, the dismantling of segregation, and access to the "American standard of living." Several essays also linked the black movement for racial justice with movements against European imperialism in Africa and Asia. Many whites could not accept these demands. When he read the manuscript, W. T. Couch, the director of the press was stunned. "If this is what the Negro wants," he told the book's editor, "nothing could be clearer than what he needs, and needs most urgently, is to revise his wants." In this excerpt, the historian Charles H. Wesley explains that blacks are denied each of the Four Freedoms, and also illustrates how the war strengthened black internationalism.

[NEGROES] HAVE WANTED what other citizens of the United States have wanted. They have wanted freedom and opportunity. They have wanted the pursuit of the life vouchsafed to all citizens of the United States by our own liberty documents. They have wanted freedom of speech, [but] they were supposed to be silently acquiescent in all aspects of their life. . . . They have wanted freedom of religion, for they had been compelled to "steal away to Jesus" . . . in order to worship God as they desired. . . . They have wanted freedom from want. . . . However, the Negro has remained a marginal worker and the competition with white workers has left him in want in many localities of an economically sufficient nation. They have wanted freedom from fear. They have been cowed, brow-beaten or beaten, as they have marched through the years of American life. . . .

The Negro wants ultimately the abolition of segregation in education and the equalization of educational opportunity as an immediate step. The segregated Negro school is usually an inferior school and a disparity in the bi-racial system continues to develop. . . . This inequality is represented by inequalities in school terms, salaries, training of teachers, buildings and equipment. The inequalities extend from the elementary schools through the graduate school. . . .

The Negro wants democracy to begin at home. As one was heard to say . . . "I would rather die for democracy here than in Germany." . . . Some are already beginning to doubt that this war is a war for freedom or democracy. . . . They are beginning to be disillusioned when they think of the result of the first world war to save the world for democracy. The future of our democratic life is insecure so long as the hatred, disdain and disparagement of Americans of African ancestry exist. . . .

The Negro wants not only to win the war but also to win the peace. . . . He wants the peace to be free of race and color restrictions, of imperialism and exploitation, and inclusive of the participation of minorities all over the world in their own governments. When it is said that we are fighting for freedom, the Negro asks, "Whose freedom?" Is it the freedom of a peace to exploit, suppress, exclude, debase and restrict colored peoples in India, China, Africa, Malaya in the usual ways? . . . Will Great Britain and the United States specifically omit from the Four Freedoms their minorities and subject peoples? The Negro does not want such a peace.