

We Charge Genocide: The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief From a Crime of The United States Government Against the Negro People (1951)

Introduction:

Out of the inhuman black ghettos of American cities, out of the cotton plantations of the South, comes this record of mass slayings on the basis of race, of lives deliberately warped and distorted by the willful creation of conditions making for premature death, poverty and disease., It is a record that calls aloud for condemnation, for an end to these terrible injustices that constitute a daily and ever-increasing violation of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

It is sometimes incorrectly thought that genocide means the complete and definitive destruction of a race or people. The Genocide Convention, however, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 9, 1948, defines genocide as any killings on the basis of race, or, in its specific words, as "killing members of the group." Any intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, racial, ethnic or religious group is genocide, according to the Convention. Thus, the Convention states, "causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group," is genocide as well as "killing members of the group."

We maintain, therefore, that the oppressed Negro citizens of the United States, segregated, discriminated against and long the target of violence, suffer from genocide as the result of the consistent, conscious, unified policies of every branch of government.

The Civil Rights Congress has prepared and submits this petition to the General Assembly of the United Nations on behalf of the Negro people in the interest of peace and democracy, charging the Government of the United States of America with violation of the Charter of the United Nations and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

We believe that in issuing this document we are discharging an historic responsibility to the American people, as well as rendering a service of inestimable value to progressive mankind. We speak of the American people because millions

of white Americans in the ranks of labor and the middle class, and particularly those who live in the southern states and are often contemptuously called poor whites, are themselves suffering to an ever-greater degree from the consequences of the Jim Crow segregation policy of government in its relations with Negro citizens. We speak of progressive mankind because a policy of discrimination at home must inevitably create racist commodities for export abroad-must inevitably tend toward war.

We have not dealt here with the cruel and inhuman policy of this government toward the people of Puerto Rico. Impoverished and reduced to a semi-literate state through the wanton exploitation and oppression by gigantic American concerns, through the merciless frame-up and imprisonment of hundred of its sons and daughter, this colony of the rulers of the United States reveals in all its stark nakedness the moral bankruptcy of this government and those who control its home and foreign policies.

History has shown that the racist theory of government of the U.S.A. is not the private affair of Americans, but the concern of mankind everywhere.

It is our hope, and we fervently believe that it was the hope and aspiration of every black American whose voice was silenced forever through premature death at the hands of racist-minded hooligans or Klan terrorists, that the truth recorded here will be made known to the world; that it will speak with a tongue of fire loosing an unquenchable moral crusade, the universal response to which will sound the death knell of all racist theories.

We have scrupulously kept within the purview of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide which is held to embrace those "acts committed with intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnic, racial or religious group as such."

We particularly pray for the most careful reading of this material by those who have always regarded genocide as a term to be used only where the acts of terror evinced an intent to destroy a whole nation. We further submit that this Convention on Genocide is, by virtue of our avowed acceptance of the Covenant of the United Nations, an inseparable part of the law of the United States of America.

According to international law, and according to our own law, the Genocide Convention, as well as the provisions of the United Nations Charter, supersedes, negates and displaces all discriminatory racist law on the books of the United States and the several states.

The Hitler crimes, of awful magnitude, beginning as they did against the heroic Jewish people, finally drenched the world in blood, and left a record of maimed and tortured bodies, and devastated areas such as mankind had never seen before. Justice Robert H. Jackson, who now sits upon the United States Supreme Court bench, described this holocaust to the world in the powerful language with which he opened the Nuremberg trials of the Nazi leaders. Every word he voiced against the monstrous Nazi beast applies with equal weight, we believe, to those who are guilty of the crimes herein set forth.

Here we present the documented crimes of federal, state and municipal governments in the United States of America, the dominant nation in the United Nations, against 15,000,000 of its own nationals—the Negro people of the United States. These crimes are of the gravest concern to mankind. The General Assembly of the United Nations, by reason of the United Nations Charter and the Genocide Convention, itself is invested with power to receive this indictment and act on it.

The proof of this face is its action upon the similar complaint of the Government of India against South Africa.

We call upon the United Nations to act and to call the government of the United States to account.

We believe that the test of the basic goals of a foreign policy is inherent in the manner in which a government treats its own nationals and is not to be found in the lofty platitudes that pervade so many treaties or constitutions. The essence lies not in the form, but rather, in the substance.

The Civil Rights Congress is a defender of constitutional liberties, human rights, and of peace. It is the implacable enemy of every creed, philosophy, social system or

way of life that denies democratic rights or one iota of human dignity to any human being because of color, creed, nationality or political belief.

We ask all men and women of good will to unite to realize the objective set forth in the summary and prayer concluding this petition. We believe that this program can go far toward ending the threat of a third world war. We believe it can contribute to the establishment of a people's democracy on a universal scale.

But may we add as a final note that the Negro people desire equality of opportunity in this land where their contributions to the economic, political and social developments have been of splendid proportions and in quality second to none. They will accept nothing less, and continued efforts to force them into the category of second-class citizens through force and violence, through segregation, racist law and an institutionalized oppression, can only end in disaster for those responsible.

Respectfully submitted by the Civil Rights Congress as a service to the peoples of the world, and particularly to the lovers of peace and democracy in the United States of America

William L. Patterson
National Executive Secretary Civil Rights Congress

To the General Assembly of the United Nations:

The responsibility of being the first in history to charge the government of the United States of America with the crime of genocide is not one your petitioners take lightly. The responsibility is particularly grave when citizens must charge their own government with mass murder of its own nationals, with institutionalized oppression and persistent slaughter of the Negro people in the United States on a basis of "race," a crime abhorred by mankind and prohibited by the conscience of the world as expressed in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 9, 1948.

Genocide Leads to Fascism and to War

If our duty is unpleasant it is historically necessary both for the welfare of the American people and for the peace of the world. We petition as American patriots, sufficiently anxious to save our countrymen and all mankind from the horrors of war to shoulder a task as painful as it is important. We cannot forget Hitler's demonstration that genocide at home can become wider massacre abroad, that domestic genocide develops into the larger genocide that is predatory war. The wrongs of which we complain are so much the expression of predatory American reaction and its government that civilization cannot ignore them nor risk their continuance without courting its own destruction. We agree with those members of the General Assembly who declared that genocide is a matter of world concern because its practice imperils world safety.

But if the responsibility of your petitioners is great, it is dwarfed by the responsibility of those guilty of the crime we charge. Seldom in human annals has so iniquitous a conspiracy been so gilded with the trappings of respectability. Seldom has mass murder on the score of "race" been so sanctified by law, so justified by those who demand free elections abroad even as they kill their fellow citizens who demand free elections at home. Never have so many individuals been so ruthlessly destroyed amid many tributes to the sacredness of the individual. The distinctive trait of this genocide is a cant that mouths aphorisms of Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence even as it kills.

The genocide of which we complain is as much a fact as gravity. The whole world knows of it. The proof is in every day's newspapers, in every one's sight and hearing in these United States. In one form or another it has been practiced for more than three hundred years although never with such sinister implications for the welfare and peace of the world as at present. Its very familiarity disguises its horror. It is a crime so embedded in law, so explained away by specious rationale, so hidden by talk of liberty, that even the conscience of the tender minded is sometimes dulled. Yet the conscience of mankind cannot be beguiled from its duty by the pious phrases and the deadly legal euphemisms with which its perpetrators seek to transform their guilt into high moral purpose.

Killing Members of the Group

Your petitioners will prove that the crime of which we complain is in fact genocide within the terms and meaning of the United Nations Convention providing for the prevention and punishment of this crime. We shall submit evidence, tragically voluminous, of "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group as such," – in this case the 15,000,000 Negro people of the United States.

We shall submit evidence proving "killing members of the group," in violation of Article II of the Convention. We cite killings by police, killings by incited gangs, killings at night by masked men, killings always on the basis of "race," killings by the Ku Klux Klan, that organization which is chartered by the several states as a semi-official arm of government and even granted the tax exemptions of a benevolent society.

Our evidence concerns the thousands of Negroes who over the years have been beaten to death on chain gangs and in the back rooms of sheriff's offices, in the cells of county jails, in precinct police stations and on city streets, who have been framed and murdered by sham legal forms and by a legal bureaucracy. It concerns those Negroes who have been killed, allegedly for failure to say "sir" or tip their hats or move aside quickly enough, or, more often, on trumped up charges of "rape," but in reality for trying to vote or otherwise demanding the legal and inalienable rights and privileges of United States citizenship formally guaranteed them by the Constitution of the United States, rights denied them on the basis of "race," in violation of the Constitution of the United States, the United Nations Charter, and the Genocide Convention.

Economic Genocide

We shall offer proof of economic genocide, or in the words of the Convention, proof of "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its destruction in whole or in part." We shall prove that such conditions so swell the infant and maternal death rate and the death rate from disease, that the American Negro is deprived, when compared with the remainder of the population of the United States, of eight years of life on the average.

Further we shall show a deliberate national oppression of these 15,000,000 Negro

Americans on the basis of "race" to perpetuate these "conditions of life." Negroes are the last hired and the first fired. They are forced into city ghettos or their rural equivalents. They are segregated legally or through sanctioned violence into filthy, disease-bearing housing, and deprived by law of adequate medical care and education. From birth to death, Negro Americans are humiliated and persecuted, in violation of the Charter and Convention. They are forced by threat of violence and imprisonment into inferior, segregated accommodations, into jim crow busses, jim crow trains, jim crow hospitals, jim crow schools, jim crow theaters, jim crow restaurants, jim crow housing, and finally into jim crow cemeteries.

We shall prove that the object of this genocide, as of all genocide, is the perpetuation of economic and political power by the few through the destruction of political protest by the many. Its method is to demoralize and divide an entire nation; its end is to increase the profits and unchallenged control by a reactionary clique. We shall show that those responsible for this crime are not the humble but the so-called great, not the American people but their misleaders, not the convict but the robed judge, not the criminal but the police, not the spontaneous mob but organized terrorists licensed and approved by the state to incite to a Roman holiday.

We shall offer evidence that this genocide is not plotted in the dark but incited over the radio into the ears of millions, urged in the glare of public forums by Senators and Governors. It is offered as an article of faith by powerful political organizations, such as the Dixiecrats, and defended by influential newspapers, all in violation of the United Nations charter and the Convention forbidding genocide.

This proof does not come from the enemies of the white supremacists but from their own mouths, their own writings, their political resolutions, their racist laws, and from photographs of their handiwork. Neither Hitler nor Goebbels wrote obscurantist racial incitements more voluminously or viciously than do their American counterparts, nor did such incitements circulate in Nazi mails any more than they do in the mails of the United States.

Through this and other evidence we shall prove this crime of genocide is the result of a massive conspiracy, more deadly in that it is sometimes "understood" rather than expressed, a part of the mores of the ruling class often concealed by

euphemisms, but always directed to oppressing the Negro people. Its members are so well-drilled, so rehearsed over the generations, that they can carry out their parts automatically and with a minimum of spoken direction. They have inherited their plot and their business is but to implement it daily so that it works daily. This implementation is sufficiently expressed in decision and statute, in depressed wages, in robbing millions of the vote and millions more of the land, and in countless other political and economic facts, as to reveal definitively the existence of a conspiracy backed by reactionary interests in which are meshed all the organs of the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches of government. It is manifest that a people cannot be consistently killed over the years on the basis of "race" – and more than 10,000 Negroes have so suffered death – cannot be uniformly segregated, despoiled, impoverished, and denied equal protection before the law, unless it is the result of the deliberate, all-pervasive policy of government and those who control it.

Emasculation of Democracy

We shall show, more particularly, how terror, how "killing members of the group," in violation of Article II of the Genocide Convention, has been used to prevent the Negro people from voting in huge and decisive areas of the United States in which they are the preponderant population, thus dividing the whole American people, emasculating mass movements for democracy and securing the grip of predatory reaction on the federal, state, county and city governments. We shall prove that the crimes of genocide offered for your action and the world's attention have in fact been incited, a punishable crime under Article III of the Convention, often by such officials as Governors, Senators, Judges and peace officers whose phrases about white supremacy and the necessity of maintaining inviolate a white electorate resulted in bloodshed as surely as more direct incitement.

We shall submit evidence showing the existence of a mass of American law, written as was Hitler's law solely on the basis of "race," providing for segregation and otherwise penalizing the Negro people, in violation not only of Articles II and III of the Convention but also in violation of the Charter of the United Nations. Finally we shall offer proof that a conspiracy exists in which the Government of the United States, its Supreme Court, its Congress, its Executive branch, as well as the various state, county and municipal governments, consciously effectuate policies which

result | the crime of genocide being consistently and constantly practiced against the Negro people of the United States.

The Negro Petitioners

Many of your petitioners are Negro citizens to whom the charges herein described are not mere words. They are facts felt on our bodies, crimes inflicted on our dignity. We struggle for deliverance, not without pride in our valor, but we warn mankind that our fate is theirs. We solemnly declare that continuance of this American crime against the Negro people of the United States will strengthen those reactionary American forces driving towards World War III as certainly as the unrebuked Nazi genocide against the Jewish people strengthened Hitler in his successful drive to World War II.

We, Negro petitioners whose communities have been laid waste, whose homes have been burned and looted, whose children have been killed, whose women have been raped, have noted with peculiar horror that the genocidal doctrines and actions of the American white supremacists have already been exported to the colored peoples of Asia. We solemnly warn that a nation which practices genocide against its own nationals may not be long deterred, if it has the power, from genocide elsewhere. White supremacy at home makes for colored massacres abroad. Both reveal contempt for human life in a colored skin. Jellied gasoline in Korea and the lynchers' faggot at home are connected in more ways than that both result in death by fire. The lyncher and the atom bomber are related. The first cannot murder unpunished and unrebuked without so encouraging the latter that the peace of the world and the lives of millions are endangered. Nor is this metaphysics. The tie binding both is economic profit and political control. It was not without significance that it was President Truman who spoke of the possibility of using the atom bomb on the colored peoples of Asia, that it is American statesmen who prate constantly of "Asiatic hordes."

"Our Humanity Denied and Mocked"

We Negro petitioners protest this genocide as Negroes and we protest it as Americans, as patriots. We know that no American can be truly free while 15,000,000 other Americans are persecuted on the grounds of "race," that few

Americans can be prosperous while 15,000,000 are deliberately pauperized. Our country can never know true democracy while millions of its citizens are denied the vote on the basis of their color.

But above all we protest this genocide as human beings whose very humanity is denied and mocked. We cannot forget that after Congressman Henderson Lovelace Lanham, of Rome, Georgia, speaking in the halls of Congress, called William L. Paterson, one of the leaders of the Negro people, "a God-damned black son-of-bitch," he added, "We gotta keep the black apes down." We cannot forget it because this is the animating sentiment of the white supremacists, of a powerful segment of American life. We cannot forget that in many American states it is a crime for a white person to marry a Negro on the racist theory that Negroes are "inherently inferior as an immutable fact of Nature." The whole institution of segregation, which is training for killing, education for genocide, is based on the Hitler-like theory of the "inherent inferiority of the Negro." The tragic fact of segregation is the basis for the statement, too often heard after murder, particularly in the South, "Why I think no more of killing a n---r, than of killing a dog."

We petition in the first instance because we are compelled to speak by the unending slaughter of Negroes. The fact of our ethnic origin, of which we are proud—our ancestors were building the world's first civilizations 3,000 years before our oppressors emerged from barbarism in the forests of western Europe—is daily made the signal for segregation and murder. There is infinite variety in the cruelty we will catalogue, but each case has the common denominator of racism. This opening statement is not the place to present our evidence in detail. Still, in this summary of what is to be proved, we believe it necessary to show something of the crux of our case, something of the pattern of genocidal murder, the technique of incitement to genocide, and the methods of mass terror.

Our evidence begins with 1945 and continues to the present. It gains in deadliness and in number of cases almost in direct ratio to the surge towards war. We are compelled to hold to this six years span if this document is to be brought into manageable proportions.

The Evidence

There was a time when racist violence had its center in the South. But as the Negro people spread to the north, east and west seeking to escape the southern hell, the violence, impelled in the first instance by economic motives, followed them, its cause also economic. Once most of the violence against Negroes occurred in the countryside, but that was before the Negro emigrations of the twenties and thirties. Now there is not a great American city from New York to Cleveland or Detroit, from Washington, the nation's capital, to Chicago, from Memphis to Atlanta or Birmingham, from New Orleans to Los Angeles, that is not disgraced by the wanton killing of innocent Negroes. It is no longer a sectional phenomenon.

Once the classic method of lynching was the rope. Now it is the policeman's bullet. To many an American the police are the government, certainly its most visible representative. We submit that the evidence suggests that the killing of Negroes has become police policy in the United States and that police policy is the most practical expression of government policy.

Our evidence is admittedly incomplete. It is our hope that the United Nations will complete it. Much of the evidence, particularly of violence, was gained from the files of Negro newspapers, from the labor press, from the annual reports of Negro societies and established Negro year books. A list is appended.

But by far the majority of Negro murders are never recorded, never known except to the perpetrators and the bereaved survivors of the victim. Negro men and women leave their homes and are never seen alive again. Sometimes weeks later their bodies, or bodies thought to be their and often horribly mutilated, are found in the woods or washed up on the shore of a river or lake. This is a well known pattern of American culture. In many sections of the country police do not even bother to record the murder of Negroes. Most white newspapers have a policy of not publishing anything concerning murders of Negroes or assaults upon them. These unrecorded deaths are the rule rather than the exception—thus our evidence, though voluminous, is scanty when compared to the actuality.

Causes Célèbres

We Negro petitioners are anxious that the General Assembly know of our

tragic *causes célèbres*, ignored by the American white press but known nevertheless the world over, but we also wish to inform it of the virtually unknown killed almost casually, as an almost incidental aspect of institutionalized murder.

We want the General Assembly to know of Willie McGee, framed on perjured testimony and murdered in Mississippi because the Supreme Court of the United States refused even to examine vital new evidence proving his innocence. But we also want it to know of the two Negro children, James Lewis, Jr., fourteen years old, and Charles Trudell, fifteen, of Natchez, Mississippi who were electrocuted in 1947, after the Supreme Court of the United States refused to intervene.

We want the General Assembly to know of the martyred Martinsville Seven, who died in Virginia's electric chair for a rape they never committed, in a state that has never executed a white man for that offense. But we want it to know, too, of the eight Negro prisoners who were shot down and murdered on July 11, 1947 at Brunswick, Georgia, because they refused to work in a snake-infested swamp without boots.

We shall inform the Assembly of the Trenton Six, of Paul Washington, the Daniels cousins, Jerry Newsom, Wesley Robert Wells, of Rosalee Ingram, of John Derrick, of Lieutenant Gilbert, of the Columbia, Tennessee destruction, the Freeport slaughter, the Monroe killings—all important cases in which Negroes have been framed on capital charges or have actually been killed. But we want it also to know of the typical and less known—of William Brown, Louisiana farmer, shot in the back and killed when he was out hunting on July 19, 1947 by a white game warden who casually announced his unprovoked crime by saying, "I just shot a n---r. Let his folks know." The game warden, one Charles Ventrill, was not even charged with the crime.