"THE RED CROSS IS NOT ALL RIGHT!" HERBERT HOOVER'S CONCENTRATION CAMP COVER-UP IN THE 1927 MISSISSIPPI FLOOD

In 1927, water gushed out of the Mississippi River's levees, destroying nearly 100,000 homes and displacing close to 637,000 people in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. In one of the largest fund raising drives in American history to date, the Red Cross, along with Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, deliberately concealed the abuses that black refugees suffered in Red Cross camps in order to obtain donations for the rebuilding effort. In a thorough investigation of newspaper coverage, Myles McMurchy, Dartmouth College '16, highlights the battle between leading black activists who sought to expose these abuses and the media campaign led by Hoover and the Red Cross that characterized the rebuilding effort as one of racial harmony and triumphant success. This event played a pivotal role not only in race relations, but also in Hoover's catapult into the presidency one year later.

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The 1927 Mississippi River Flood was not only one of America's greatest natural disasters, but also one of our greatest cover-ups. The relief efforts that followed the flood, directed by then-Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover in conjunction with the Red Cross, aimed not only to recover the South's 16.5 million acres of inundated land but also to further Hoover's reputation as a national hero deserving of presidential candidacy. Hoover first garnered the title of 'Great Humanitarian' as a result of his efforts to provide food to refugees after World War I; in 1927, his new role as head of flood relief offered a renewed chance to impress Americans by publicly rescuing those in need. Thus, at the center of his relief program was a mass media campaign highlighting his devotion to the 600,000 Americans who had been displaced by the flood. The Red Cross, too, depended upon a positive portrayal of its relief efforts, which relied on public donations.

To this end, it was imperative that media outlets deny the shortcomings of Hoover's Red Cross relief: in many southern areas, local Red Cross leaders held black refugees in what amounted to little more than slavery. Black refugees were forced to perform the heavy labor that supported the camps and were barred from escaping by National Guard members, who oversaw their work with guns at the ready. Whereas white refugees were placed in indoor facilities, black refugees were detained in outdoor camps on the levee and systematically denied adequate food and shelter, with little promise of their homes ever being rebuilt.

Yet the abuses suffered in these camps did not go entirely unnoticed. In the weeks following the flood, northern blacks launched a campaign to expose Hoover and the Red Cross. Leaders such as anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells, NAACP chief Walter White, and investigative journalist J. Winston Harrington wrote to the nation's leading black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender,* with their own reports of Red Cross relief camps—particularly that of Greenville, Mississippi, in which 90 percent of refugees were black. Greenville's relief camp spawned both the worst of the Red Cross' abuses and the greatest of Hoover's media tactics. Even while black flood refugees in Greenville wrote clandestine letters to the *Defender* detailing the Red Cross' malpractice, journalists with *The New York Times* portrayed the flood through stories about hard-working refugees, benevolent Red Cross leaders, and renewed kinship between the South and the North.

In the end, Hoover's media campaign preserved his humanitarian legacy by hiding Red Cross racism from the nation at large. Despite the *Chicago Defender*'s relentless efforts to bring attention to the Red Cross abuses, the paper ultimately did little to tarnish Hoover's reputation. Nonetheless, the newspaper was instrumental in promoting unity between Delta blacks and their Chicago advocates, which encouraged southern blacks' movement out of the Republican Party and out of the South altogether. In Greenville, Mississippi, the Great Flood was a turning point in race relations; in this southern city that held tight to its sharecropping economy, it took a natural disaster to dismantle the relationship between the planters and their sharecroppers. By revealing that in 1927 slavery remained a threat in Greenville, the *Chicago Defender's* exposés encouraged black residents to leave the South for northern cities such as Chicago. The flood campaign also encouraged northern reformers to peer into southern race relations and unite in mass protest—a move

that indeed brought racial issues into the public eye a few years later during the 1931 Scottsboro Boys trial.

"CALL ON NEWSPAPERS": THE INITIAL RESPONSE OF HOOVER AND THE RED CROSS (APRIL 1927)

The Great Flood was a natural disaster of unprecedented proportions that left counties in seven states flooded up to thirty feet high for as long as four months.[1] It began in 1926 when extremely heavy rains throughout the Mississippi River's central basin caused the river's tributaries to swell. In April 1927, the river burst its levees in over 145 places, flooding a region the size of New England. In flooded counties, nearly 30 percent of agricultural acreage was destroyed and an estimated 165,000 livestock drowned.[2] Almost 100,000 homes were damaged or destroyed.[3] Almost all of the 637,000 dislocated were from Arkansas, Mississippi, or Louisiana.[4] In Greenville, Mississippi—an agricultural town located directly on the river—over 13,000 refugees were swept from their homes.

After floodwaters broke the levee at Mound Landing, Mississippi on April 21, newspapers across the country published the testimonies of devastated refugees. One Greenville resident, describing the "waters rushing in from all directions," noted that Greenville's black population was particularly affected: "We couldn't warn [Negroes] when we telephoned all subscribers yesterday. They had no telephones. Others thought the levee would hold. We don't know what's happened to them. Negroes are coming out of the lowlands in boatloads."[5] The "lowlands" referred to the areas of the Delta where black neighborhoods were historically situated, neighborhoods directly in the path of the Mississippi River's regular flooding. As these reports reveal, black residents were the first to be displaced by the flood and also the least able to respond.

The disaster was well beyond the means of local relief agencies, as Mississippi's governor Dennis Murphree expressed to President Coolidge: "Unprecedented floods have created a national emergency…this territory will be water covered one to twenty feet in twenty four hours, contains population 150,000…beyond capacity local and state agencies to relief and control."[6] In response, Coolidge acknowledged the magnitude of the crisis but shrank from direct federal intervention. "The government is giving such aid as lies within its powers," he explained on April 22, "but the burden of caring for the homeless rests upon the agency designated by government charter to provide relief in disaster: the American National Red Cross."[7]

To oversee the Red Cross' efforts, Coolidge appointed Herbert Hoover as chair of a quasi-governmental commission consisting of five Cabinet members and American National Red Cross vice-chairman James Fieser. That afternoon, Hoover met with the team to quickly sketch a national response. The Coast Guard, Army, and Navy would round up refugees and move them to local Red Cross camps. Each Red Cross chapter would be put in charge of relief in its area, with particular power over all state resources granted to the chairmen of each chapter—in Greenville, this was

William Alexander Percy, a powerful planter's son who was also a well-known writer. Hoover and Fieser also set to work creating camps in those areas where no Red Cross chapter existed.

The set up and maintenance of these Red Cross camps required two ingredients: labor and money. "The National Red Cross will bear the expense," Herbert Hoover instructed camp officials, "but we are depending upon your citizens to undertake the work and do its supervision on a voluntary basis."[8] In the Mississippi Delta, the obvious source of cheap labor was black refugees, who already supplied 95 percent of the region's plantation labor. Black refugees were forced to haul supplies off ships and into relief camps, trudging for miles through knee-deep water and mud. Blacks alone repaired broken levees and cleaned polluted cities. When their work ended, they returned to the "colored camps," in which they were forced to sleep on wet ground and eat with their bare hands. While whites enjoyed cooked meat and canned peaches, black refugees received bread and molasses. They lived alongside thousands of livestock, while white refugees often stayed in downtown department stores and hotels. While conditions varied among camps according to local resources and leadership, all Red Cross relief camps were segregated by race. This allowed for white refugees to receive new clothes first, and for white children to receive healthcare before black children. More importantly, segregating camps enabled Red Cross leaders to easily oversee their black refugee labor force.

Though Will Percy had initially intended to evacuate all of Greenville's refugees, plantation owners insisted that the black refugees stay. Planters could not risk losing their agricultural workforce by sending black tenants to other relief camps, such as the one in nearby Vicksburg. "If the government takes our Negroes and our mules, they might as well just take our land," said the head of one camp. Mississippian planters made numerous requests to Governor Murphree and to Adjutant General Curtis T. Green of the National Guard, calling for black refugees to "be guarded against a possible influx of labor agents who would seize this opportunity to take the refugees to the North and give them work."[9]

Will Percy acquiesced and set up camp in Greenville. "We are urging all white women and children to leave the city," he announced. "White men may also go... There is need for Negro men to stay and establish the camp."[10] Black women and children stayed behind with male family members. All supplies for the roughly 50,000 people stranded in Washington County would be shipped to Greenville and unloaded by black workers. While black refugees did the work, the food and supplies they unloaded were delivered elsewhere, regardless of their own immediate need. Herbert Hoover approved the plan, impressing upon one local Red Cross leader that national relief agencies "are depending upon your citizens to undertake the work and do its supervision on a voluntary basis."[11] Black refugees were ordered by whites they did not know to repair their homes and plantations; one sign in Greenville read, "Refugee labor is free to all white men."[12] The National Guard, who patrolled the black camp with rifles and bayonets, practically imprisoning the refugees, kept Greenville's system of peonage in place. Those who tried to avoid work or sneak out were beaten or killed.[13]

Thus, Red Cross leaders like Will Percy found what seemed to be a convenient source of free labor without needing to look beyond their own camps. The reality that black refugees were being physically detained and denied access to food and shelter was not publicly disclosed. However, acquiring the funds necessary to support the camps did require a national media campaign espoused by Hoover, who had at this point become the public face of flood relief. President Coolidge's hands-off approach appropriated no federal funds for the Red Cross, but instead depended upon the goodwill of the American public to donate the necessary five million dollars. In the first weeks of their work, Hoover worked with the Red Cross to prepare media strategies. "In the course of the next few weeks many representatives of magazines, newspapers, and feature syndicate companies will be in the flood area," Hoover wrote to Red Cross personnel. "Give these writers every possible cooperation." In Washington, Fieser separately ordered that it was "Essential [to] push all publicity angles next week or ten days for sake of financial drive."[14]

On April 24, the vice-chairman of Boston's Red Cross called on northern newspapers to arouse public sympathy.

> Relief in any disaster depends almost wholly upon the dramatic nature of the picture the public gets of the need. Something about a flood fails to take hold of the public imagination with the force of a more swiftly acting tragedy…lacking the vivid imaginative appeal of a tornado or an earthquake, the gradually rising flood waters have not yet touched the emotions of the whole people as have great disasters of other kinds.[15]

The same day, *The New York Times* wrote, "Americans living outside of the submerged areas can have but little conception of the havoc made by the flood in river towns and the bottom lands." These remarks acknowledged the disconnect between the flooded South and the distant North: Northerners did not, and could not, know exactly what was happening; their consciousness of Red Cross flood relief was necessarily constructed by the reports crafted by newspapers and radios. To encourage the public's financial support, the Red Cross heralded its relief campaign throughout mainstream media. The *Times* stated Coolidge's belief that "as always, the people will support the Red Cross in its humane task."[16] Coolidge lived up to his nickname of "Silent Cal" as he made few public statements about the natural disaster. As the president remained silent, Red Cross success stories championed their leader, Herbert Hoover. The flood problem on the Mississippi is "Being Solved," boasted the *Christian Science Monitor* on April 25, and "Mr. Hoover is in Charge."[17]

In retrospect, it should come as no surprise that Hoover would pay close attention to media reports of the flood, given his unprecedentedly intimate relationship with the press during his presidency. On his first day in office in 1929, Hoover held a press conference for reporters promising a "new phase of press relations." He asked the group to elect a committee comprised of journalists who could recommend improvements to the White House press conference. As President, Hoover declined to use a spokesperson, asking reporters to quote him directly. In his first 120 days in office,

he held more regular and frequent press conferences than any other President, before or since.[18] His belief in the power of the press was profound – as political theorists have noted, Hoover was the first president to systematically gauge public opinion by creating a quantifiable measurement of newspaper editorials.[19] In 1930, his Administrative Assistant boasted,

> I personally scan daily analyses of editorial opinion covering 700 leading newspapers from every part of the country and representing every shade of opinion, and I also read many representative editorials selected from these papers. Quite the most striking impression received from this daily 'finger on the pulse' is the astonishing degree to which the President retains leadership of public opinion and confidence in the midst of the immense complexities and difficulties of the time.[20]

Hoover's meticulous press relations, evident in the above passage, had their roots in his calculated 1927 Red Cross media campaign – one of the largest funding drives in American history.[21] From the moment that he took on the Red Cross project, his own potential presidency was at stake. Indeed, as Hoover had told his old friend Will Irwin in May of 1927, "I shall be the nominee, probably. It is nearly inevitable."[22] His top priority was to closely follow the press.

"JIM CROW RELIEF CAMPS": BLACK EXPOSÉS AND ROBERT MOTON'S APPOINTMENT (APRIL-JUNE 1927)

Early reports emphasized the great difficulties facing Red Cross workers, as well as their great successes. On April 22 the Red Cross attempted to reach Greenville via riverboat "to take the [10,000] refugees to the camps at Vicksburg," but wire and rail communication had been crippled as river front levees continued to inundate Washington County, leaving many refugees stranded in trees.[23] To add to the difficulty, thousands of black refugees allegedly declined offers to go to Vicksburg, preferring "to remain on the 'big levee,' where their handful of belongings could be watched."[24] While some refugees may indeed have wished to stay, they did not really have a choice, as Percy ultimately forced thousands of blacks to remain on Greenville's levee, even as whites were whisked away by ferry. While whites were relocated to second floors of offices or hotels, the National Guard kept some 13,000 black refugees on the levee.[25] Some black refugees did indeed move to the Vicksburg camp, and the next day the *Times* celebrated their arrival, depicting "a mass of Negroes upon the embankment, waiting for the direction of the relief workers, quite willing to do as they were told and trustful that the 'white folks' would continue to provide their daily food." The report described the black refugees as kind but clueless, who "knew only that they were fleeing from the hostile waters" and "had little to say of the conditions in Greenville other than that the water covered the city."[26]

Yet if newly arrived refugees had little to say about conditions in Greenville, a report pub-

lished later that week provided some clue as to the town's nervous state of affairs. "Stirred by sporadic looting of business houses by Negroes," the town imposed a curfew on black refugees, and the National Guard in Greenville was "given orders to 'shoot to hit' unless summons to halt is obeyed, and to arrest all persons found on the streets after the curfew hour." Five black refugees had been arrested for looting, and "National Guard authorities declare no mercy will be shown." Still, the *Times* concluded that "conditions in the refugee camp and the town generally are satisfactory."[27] In Greenville, a week after the flooding, approximately 4,000 whites remained on second floors of local buildings, while 13,000 black refugees lived on the levee, and another 5,000 were crowded into warehouses and oil mills.[28]

Even in Southerners' reports of racial harmony and goodwill in relief camps, there persisted an undercurrent of fear over the loss of their black agricultural workforce. This was a concern that planters had been facing for a decade, as southern blacks began migrating to northern industrial cities en masse after the First World War. The 1927 Mississippi River flood posed a new threat to the stability of the sharecropping system by displacing the already dissipating black workforce. Papers as foreign to the southern states as *The Manchester Guardian* described Red Cross efforts to "prevent any black sheep breaking away" among refugee laborers.[29] To thwart the escape or rebellion of black refugees, Will Percy ordered 200 additional National Guard troops to Greenville on April 27.[30]

If casual reports that the National Guard had been ordered to "shoot to hit" and "show no mercy" did not provoke public suspicion of mistreatment, J. Winston Harrington's May 7 exposé in the *Chicago Defender* brought to light the "peonage" of Mississippi's "Jim Crow relief camps." In large print, the paper described "Refugees herded like cattle to stop escape from peonage," forced to wear numbered tags on their shirt to ensure their easy identification. Harrington had been informed by Mr. Del Weber, a white Greenville resident who witnessed black refugees being detained. Harrington decried the presence of the National Guard, which earlier that week shot a black refugee from Cary, Mississippi "when he attempted to take food and clothing into a relief camp occupied by members of our Race." A white worker declared that the death would be "a lesson for the rest of the Niggers." As black refugees were being killed for taking food and clothing, white refugees in Greenville were "confined in downtown department stores and hotels, experiencing little or no suffering from the flood." Harrington condemned the Red Cross camps as "worse treatment than our forefathers experienced before the signing of the emancipation proclamation."[31]

In addition, Harrington revealed that the Red Cross was misappropriating the donations that *Defender* readers sent on behalf of black refugees. "In many cases," he wrote, "the food and clothing sent to the relief camps never reach the men and women of our Race. Heads of white relief camps confiscate the goods and distribute them."[32] The *Defender* thus inspired church and welfare organizations in Chicago to stage their own relief efforts to aid black refugees. By endorsing these independent relief missions led by Chicago charities, the *Defender* encouraged black readers to break away from Herbert Hoover's Red Cross campaign, which failed in its duty to help all flood refugees. The paper had a vested interest in forging a link between black communities in the

North and the South: as the nation's leading black newspaper, the *Defender* promulgated the Great Migration of southern blacks into northern industrial cities as early as 1915.[33] Thus by 1927, the paper was poised to point out the problems facing blacks in the South and highlight the solidarity available in cities like Chicago.

That month, Walter White of the NAACP also reported on his visit to Greenville's refugee camps. A passionate and prominent black journalist, White conducted an investigation at Greenville that threatened Hoover's media agenda. Prominent social activists contacted Hoover in concern, including Jane Addams, who relayed "charges of race discrimination which are being rumored" and urged him to remedy the situation in his Red Cross camps.[34] Fieser wired Hoover the following telegram: "Chicago Defender leading colored paper carries article concerning… Greenville… Chicago Tribune is interesting itself in article and asks for statement. Rush wire reply." The need to silence Walter White and his peers at the *Chicago Defender* quickly became clear in Washington. Will Irwin, a journalist and friend of Hoover's, described White as "a fanatic… literally the nigger in the woodpile and if anything can be done to placate or squelch him I think there will be no more trouble." Irwin suggested that "perhaps if some of the big Negroes would communicate with him they might tone him down."[35] Such "big Negroes" referred to powerful black figures, such as those in the NAACP or Tuskegee Institute, and particularly black leaders in the Republican Party, in which blacks held sway in Northern cities such as Chicago.[36]

Hoover promptly took action to curb the threat of black media. First, he contacted Henry Baker, the disaster relief director of the Red Cross, and ordered him to contact every Red Cross representative in the field in order to investigate the conditions of black refugees. "Any such action would be a negation of the spirit of the Red Cross," Hoover said regarding accusations of refugee abuse, "and I do not believe it exists….See that no such activity exists….Send me a report at once."[37] He also contacted Walter White to personally dismiss his charges, stating, "I can say emphatically that I am sure that neither the Red Cross nor any other decent person would stand for unfair practices of the type you suggest."[38] Hoover did not want to acknowledge the race problem at Greenville any more than was necessary, in order to keep it hidden from the public. To achieve this, he followed Will Irwin's advice and called the biggest of the "big Negroes" to placate the black community. On May 24th he contacted Robert Moton, principal administrator of Tuskegee Institute:

> With a view to making certain the proper treatment of the colored people in the concentration camps of the flood district and with a view to inquire into any complaints, I would like you to advise me as to the appointment of a commission of representative colored citizens who can visit these camps and who can make investigation of any complaint or criticisms. Mr. Fieser who is the acting head of the Red Cross joins me in this request.[39]

Hoover's focus was to make the complaints and criticisms stop. Beyond this, he never actually addressed the atrocities occurring in his Red Cross camps. He hoped that with a team of black leaders

by his side to parrot his message of color-blind humanitarianism, whistleblowers like Walter White would fade away. And so, on May 28, he appointed Robert Moton to lead a newly created Colored Advisory Commission that would issue its own report on the conditions in Red Cross camps. Writers at the *Chicago Defender* seemed content with the creation of the Commission, claiming that their initial investigations into Greenville had "brought forth a storm of protest" and left Hoover "faced with certain unfavorable publicity."[40]

Herbert Hoover publicly asserted that flood relief remained successful and equitable. From New Orleans, Hoover "denounced a statement printed in the North that Negroes are being brutally treated in refugee camps as absolutely without foundation," avowing that "they are being splendidly treated and cared for." On May 29, the *Times* applauded Hoover's creation of a "Board of Negroes" to "work with rehabilitation organizations for the relief of colored victims."[41] The image of black leaders supporting Hoover's campaign successfully propagated his depiction as the 'Great Humanitarian' and turned the focus away from allegations of race discrimination. His goal of silencing criticisms by creating the Colored Advisory Commission seemed to have succeeded. This complimentary moment sparked dialogue about Hoover's potential candidacy for President. *The Boise Idaho Statesman* proclaimed, "America is sold on the organizing and directing genius of Hoover…no wonder this man is persistently advanced as the logical man for the swivel chair behind the big desk in the White House!"[42] A week later, *The Oakland Tribune* concurred, determining that "in personal fitness for the presidency there is no other American, even remotely, in Mr. Hoover's class."[43]

It was particularly easy to champion Secretary Hoover, often photographed touring relief camps in knee-high boots, in contrast to Calvin Coolidge's perceived inadequacy at dealing with the flood crisis. Coolidge's failure to call a special session of Congress for federal aid was "embarrassing to the President," given that by mid-May the Red Cross Relief Fund was deemed "certain to be inadequate."[44] Coolidge refused to so much as visit the flooded areas.[45] During one visit to the relief camp in Little Rock, the *Times* reported, "only Mr. Hoover mentioned the President's name. The Arkansans wanted to laud Mr. Hoover. They had made up their minds that he was going to get all of the honors, and he did."[46]

As Silent Cal left the Red Cross starved for funds, Hoover stepped up. A natural master of the press, Hoover asked for donations in a lengthy radio address to the American public. This was a prime moment to reflect on the successes of the Red Cross, thank Americans for their support, and assuage fears that refugees were being mistreated. Hoover described the flood problem in three stages: "the rescue stage, the stage of exile from homes, and the stage of return and reconstruction." He asserted that the nation now was in the reconstruction stage—a term "used advisedly, because I should like to turn the implications of that term in the relations of the North to the South into a term of sympathy instead of a term of hate." Hoover's reimagining of national relations was not to come to fruition, however, as he did little to live up to this sympathetic ideology and allowed black refugees to suffer.

Central to the success of Hoover's Red Cross campaign was rhetoric of interregional and

interracial unity. "We of the North have the duty to bind their wounds because they are of our own country," Hoover reminded listeners, subsequently asking the "generous public" for two million dollars to keep reconstruction alive. He described the "lights and shades of the tragedy" – the lights being the Red Cross, an organization of "systematic leadership and human understanding" and the shades being the affected refugees, including "an elderly colored lady who spent a night in a tree" before being taken by the Red Cross. Upon her arrival at the camp, the woman was said to have remarked, "Go away, I don't want no hot meal now, I don't want no comfortable bed now, I just wants to sit and be grateful." And this remark, said Hoover, expressed "the instantaneous sentiment of all the people coming out of the flood."[47]

Yet in Greenville, as William Percy's regime grew more authoritarian and violent, the sentiment of black refugees was anything but grateful. In early June, Percy posted a public edict further restricting black refugees' access to material relief. In seven points, he outlined his new rules. Among them, black women and children would not receive rations unless there was a man in their family, and black men would not receive rations unless they worked. In both instances, a white person had to certify that black refugees met these conditions before they could receive relief.[48] J. Winston Harrington published Percy's "work or starve order" in the *Defender*, alerting black readers that Greenville's injustices were ongoing and that Hoover's reassurances of equality were untrue, as "[Percy] has made it clear that discrimination and segregation will be carried to the fullest extent despite the fact that agencies throughout the country are endeavoring to see that all refugees are given an equal chance." Indeed, African-American refugees felt anything but the sentiment of gratitude Hoover described in his May 29 radio address. In Greenville, a "near-riot" occurred when a black woman was thrown into jail for protesting her husband's work order, and in Geismar, Louisiana, violence broke out when a 19-year-old black laborer was struck on the head with a gun for asking to rest. Only the arrival of national guardsmen prevented escalation.[49]

But riots and violence were not the images that the press chose to associate with refugee labor. Hoover and the Red Cross recognized the *Defender*'s complaints about Percy's work order but insisted on the nondiscriminatory nature of the relief camps. M.R. Reddy, executive secretary of the Chicago Red Cross, acknowledged that "tales of discrimination…have been sifting through to Chicago friends of Negro refugees," but asserted that "the Red Cross is giving a substantial service to everyone, irrespective of color." Reddy denied that Percy's edict was out of line with Red Cross policy, stating that "with regards to the statement that Negro men in Greenville or their families will not be rationed unless the men join labor gangs, it has always been the policy of the Red Cross to refuse full rations to people who have jobs offered to them by which they could gain a livelihood for their families."[50] This ignored that Percy's rule pertained only to black refugees, not all able-bodied men—a point the *Chicago Defender* later reported.[51] On June 4, the same day that Harrington first exposed Percy's "work or starve order," the *Washington Post* highlighted that Greenville's relief camp brought together "business man, planter, negro and convict [working] side by side."[52] Hoover also acknowledged refugee labor in his national radio address for Red Cross donations, praising the

"self-sufficiency" of the refugees, who "need loans, not assistance." He was proud to tell American donors that "the work of the camps is done by the refugees themselves."[53]

Describing refugee laborers as self-sufficient and productive was a powerful rhetorical device. Most importantly, it negated the possibility of peonage; the noble image of laborers "gaining a livelihood for the families" was far from the reality of black refugees held at gunpoint to work for meager rations. It allowed mainstream media to turn a story of natural disaster and racial violence into one of rebirth and opportunity. "The trials which the flood brought to the Negro plantation worker in the rich delta lands of Mississippi, the Red Cross is trying to turn into blessings," wrote *The Christian Science Monitor*, outlining a vision of reconstruction that would offer black workers economic opportunities. A. L. Shafer, state director of the Mississippi Red Cross, claimed landowners were canceling debts and "giving the Negroes a new start." His vision for Mississippi's reconstruction would "give Negroes a little stock, help them to raise crops for feeding…so they will not be so largely dependent on the merchants and plantation owners and have a little independence." This envisioned plan would also alleviate planters' ongoing fear of losing their laborers. "The Negroes are very migratory, and one of the great problems of the delta is the shifting of labor," Shafer remarked. "But if they have pigs and chickens…they will think twice before going. It will make the Negro more contented, [and] will ultimately advance the interests of the plantation owners, as well."[54] Thus, mainstream media did frequently address black refugee labor, but only as it bolstered the interests of Hoover (by assuring Americans their donations aided "self-sufficient" laborers), of the Red Cross (by allegedly encouraging class conciliation and freeing indebted black laborers), and of southern planters (by keeping black tenants in a subservient position).

"SEE ATTEMPTS TO HIDE FACTS": THE COLORED ADVISORY COMMISSION & THE CHICAGO DEFENDER (JUNE-JULY 1927)

Describing the flood as a modern-day Biblical Deluge allowed Hoover to craft enticing stories about what lay in store for southern blacks—stories he used to persuade Robert Moton to follow his commands. As Hoover's official liaison between the Red Cross and the black community, he had to channel the messages that Hoover wanted to be heard. To win Moton's favor, Hoover promised that should he become President the next year, and if the American people would support him enough, he would improve life for African-Americans, and "Moton and his people would play a role in his administration unprecedented in the nation's history."[55] Hoover told Moton of a vision of economic and agricultural transformation for African-Americans, as had been espoused by Mississippi's Red Cross director. His "land resettlement" plan would break up large southern plantations, replacing them with tens of thousands of small farms designed for blacks, financed through mortgages for purchasing twenty-acre farms, animals, and equipment. Hoover's grand plan had the potential to transform the entire region.[56]

Moton was thrilled by the possibility of lifting blacks out of poverty and improving their

status in the Delta. He became infatuated with Hoover's relief campaign and hinted at its promises to other black leaders. "I am not at liberty to give you details but you will hear about it soon," he mentioned at a meeting of the National Negro Business League. "The Red Cross fund will doubtless be the instrument for doing something on behalf of the Negro more significant than anything which has happened since Emancipation."[57] At the request of Hoover and his colleagues, Moton agreed to broadcast a radio appeal urging blacks to remain in the South. In this appeal, he insisted that "whatever might be said to the contrary, the white man of the South loves the Negro. Many who have gone north have not found conditions as they had expected…there is less reason now for Negroes to leave the South than ever before."[58]

As head of the Colored Advisory Commission, Robert Moton led his team of prominent African-Americans in the first official survey of black welfare in Red Cross camps in early June. Their report, presented to Hoover on June 14, disclosed that black refugees were beaten and forced to work. Claude Barnett judged Greenville "the seat of what trouble there was."[59] But the full extent of the Commission's findings was never made public, as Hoover revised and sanitized the report before its publication. Indeed, Moton had politely noted, "You may feel free to make any changes or additions that may seem desirable to you."[60]

The published report requested various reforms but addressed none of the camps' major abuses; its first two points advised that "recreational activities be established" in Greenville and that "a screened structure with tables and seats be erected for the serving of food." Regarding racial inequities, the plan only proposed improving only the clothing distribution system, since black refugees often received clothes leftover from whites and "the distribution system [caused] a great amount of confusion and unpleasantness." As in his radio broadcast, Moton's report also encouraged black refugees to stay in their relief camps: he advised the Red Cross to employ "Negro industrial insurance companies and Negro fraternal organizations to urge [black refugees] to remain in the camps until their communities have been put into livable condition."[61] Because he wished to remain in Hoover's good graces in hopes of eventual "land resettlement," Moton did little to "make certain as to the proper treatment of colored folks in the concentration camps," as Hoover had initially asked of him.[62]

Those at the *Chicago Defender* saw through Moton's vacuous report. Ida B. Wells wrote to Hoover with concerns that conditions in Greenville were worse than reported; Hoover curtly replied on June 4th,

> I have appointed a committee of Colored leaders, under the chairmanship of Dr. Moton, to make a complete investigation of conditions in all Colored camps in the flood area… the reports of these committees do not confirm the statements you mention. In case you desire further information in this connection, I would suggest that you address Dr. Moton direct.[63]

In one swoop, Hoover absolved himself of responsibility for whatever was happening in his relief camps, at least as far as race was concerned. With the reports of the Colored Advisory Committee as evidence that all was well, he was able to save face as he rejected Ms. Wells' inquiry. In light of Hoover's letter, Wells-Barnett decried black officials in the South as unable to "get the facts, or if they got them they would not dare publish them."

Over the next few weeks, Wells and others at the *Defender* turned from exasperation to anger—particularly toward complacent African-Americans working for white southern leaders. "Blame 'Uncle Tom' ministers for the suffering among our people," J. Winston Harrington asserted. "Ministers have been called together and told by the whites to instruct members of our Race of the necessity of assisting their white brethren to recover from the flood. They have also advised our people… not to leave for the North, since the South is the best place for 'niggers.'"[64]

On July 16, Ida B. Wells published a follow-up to her report on Hoover's letter, in which she cynically described a recent conversation with "Claude Barnett of the Associated Negro Press [and] one of Mr. Hoover's 'Negro committee.'" Barnett had given Wells a copy of his Red Cross reports with "assurance the National Red Cross has been just and fair, 'although local committees frequently have misinterpreted their policies.'" For Barnett to claim that "the National Red Cross is all right" was unacceptable to Wells; citing Percy's "work or starve" order as evidence of continued peonage, she criticized Barnett's ambivalence, asserting that "nowhere does he tell whether the Red Cross has removed the W.A. Percys."[65] Fuming that the Colored Committee enabled Hoover to ignore refugees' suffering, Wells wrote, "These people of our race…are giving Mr. Hoover a loving cup in appreciation of his 'good work' for them, while their own people are being treated like slaves."[66]

While Ida B. Wells lacked official confirmation of Red Cross atrocities, she was informed in letters from black refugees of the violence and neglect they faced in the camps. "Who knows better than the sufferers themselves how they are treated?" she asked.[67] The letters revealed that black refugees themselves despaired that their condition was being misrepresented to the public. One refugee from Greenville, "the gridiron of hell," bravely wrote to Wells, indignant that Moton had observed no abuses worth reporting. "No, I guess not," she wrote; "It is due to where the Colored committeemen are living." She insisted, "I can't tell the half of [the abuses] on paper. I am afraid for what I have written, but I want you to know that the committee sent here by Mr. Moton did not see such treatment…those [Moton spoke to] are being used as catpaws by the white people." Echoing Harrington's condemnation of "Uncle Tom" ministers, the anonymous refugee included a clipping from *The Greenville Democrat Times,* "the leading paper published in this town," which quoted Greenville's black preachers "commending the white people of Greenville and thanking W.A. Percy for their assistance and urging Colored people to remain in Greenville."[68] These "Negro preachers are the only ones south of the Mason Dixon line who meet the white people," she attested. She herself would have spoken to a committee member but was "in hiding, for fear I would be made to work like a dog under a gun and club and tagged like a bale of cotton."[69]

In addition to clandestine letters from black refugees, the *Defender* was informed by Walter White's own field reports in the Delta. On July 2, White reported in *The Nation* on conditions "In The Flood District." He sought to expose that relief camps were in fact slave camps, governed by the "enslaving customs" of forcing black sharecroppers to work for plantation owners and preventing their movement out of the camps. This report was subsequently republished in *The Nation*, which was not a black newspaper, but instead a Northern magazine published for a white progressive audience. Though not a direct call to action, the column did stress that these injustices, "if persisted in, would recreate and crystallize a new slavery almost as miserable as the old."[70] One refugee's letter to Ida B. Wells confronted their reality more directly, asserting, "Our people are in slavery."[71] To those readers of the *Defender* and the *Nation*, it became clear that Hoover's proclaimed "stage of reconstruction" failed to uplift black flood victims, as its name might have symbolically suggested.

Ida B. Wells called upon *Defender* readers to take action. Black refugees had brought forth their testimonies and letters; readers, Wells argued, were responsible for responding to the cries for help. Wells seemed initially optimistic that the federal government would hear their cries. When she first published Hoover's dismissive letter on June 11, she implored "we who can speak" to "send a united cry to the federal government for fuller investigation…let every Negro organization send resolutions to President Coolidge and Secretary Hoover, and to Senator Dencen here in Chicago."[72] Wells seemed to maintain faith in Secretary Hoover and believe that he was simply unaware that his Colored Committee was not witnessing the full extent of his camp's abuses.

However, weeks passed, no formal investigation took place, and the refugees' letters remained fearful. By the end of July, Wells seemed to realize that the federal government would not listen. On July 30, she published a column detailing "Death in Government Controlled Camps." That she described the camps as "government controlled" suggests she had come to consider these abuses as stemming not solely from W.A. Percy, but from Hoover himself. "Only race can act," she remarked. "Nobody else is going to do anything about it if we don't. So far the Defender is the only journal making any protest I can see." This was indeed true; virtually no other paper covered Greenville's abuses to any extent. Remarkably, Wells' rhetoric was at points identical to Hoover's in his April radio appeal for Red Cross donations; much as Hoover had called on the "generous public" to support the ailing south, Ida B. Wells called for the "combined influence of all our people in the North, East, and West, *where our votes count*, to put a stop to the slavery that is going on in [the South]." Her plea seemed almost a response to Hoover's request for money, as she wrote, "It is the moment for us to demand that the South do justice to our people *before she receives help from the nation*."[73] If Hoover would not listen to letters sent by Chicago's African-Americans, ran Wells' logic, he might recognize when they stopped donating to the Red Cross.

Defender readers heeded the paper's call to action. Mrs. Fredericka Banks of Colorado wrote to the editor, "I sent clippings of your June 4th paper on the treatment of our people in the flood district to Judge Cunningham, of Colorado Springs, who writes the random comments in our local paper. He was very greatly surprised to know that such barbarous conditions existed under the Red

Cross and he has written a letter and sent the [*Defender*] clipping to Herbert Hoover protesting… He says the Negroes all over the country should send in protests."[74] Hoover also received a letter from Senator Arthur Capper (Republican of Kansas), "[voicing] the protest of the colored citizens of Topeka against alleged mistreatment of Negro refugees." Like Judge Cunningham, Senator Capper included a *Defender* piece detailing Greenville's abuses, calling the report "reliable."[75] Hoover might have been able to ignore Wells' individual criticisms, but he certainly noticed when judges and senators from thousands of miles away sent copies of her columns in protest.

Even if Ida B. Wells stressed that one newspaper alone could not solve the Greenville problem, still the *Defender* recognized its influence as the most-read black newspaper in the United States.[76] "The Chicago Defender [has] brought forth a storm of protest that is now shaking the Southland and bids fair to rival any investigation ever held in this country from the point of view of its importance," one writer claimed. "Since the Defender published its Harrington dispatch, [the National Guard's] troops have been removed from Greenville and the city is again under police law."[77] Indeed, the National Guard had been asked to leave Greenville in July, but black refugees continued to suffer under the direction of Greenville police. Though conditions in Greenville had yet to substantially improve even after months of "the greatest protests," the *Defender* still occasionally commended itself on a job well done.

DAMAGE CONTROL: "HEROIC HOOVER," "HAPPY NEGROES," AND MISSISSIPPI TOURISM (JUNE-AUGUST 1927)

Larger newspapers did not follow the *Defender's* investigations, and no white-run newspaper criticized Hoover personally. The most contentious issue in the press was Hoover's credit plan to finance 'reconstruction,' and when papers did criticize his scheme, Hoover "let nothing pass unanswered." To every newspaper that called his plan inadequate, the media mogul wrote lengthy responses that often ran as special articles.[78] Regarding Greenville, Claude Barnett assured Hoover and Fieser that the Colored Committee's report had assuaged media panic: "The Defender demands 'a probe of flood conditions.' It is a weak and hollow cry, used to bolster their attempt to take credit."[79] *The New York Times* was anything but critical of Hoover: in the three month period after the flood, the paper referenced Hoover three times as often as during the months before. These references lavished him with praise: "Arkansas Acclaims Hoover as Savior," one headline read. Hoover was "the man who will live longest in the grateful memory of the people, a man worthy of any honor that can bestowed upon him." He was "Chief, and his word is law." He was "one of the most approachable and genial of all great Americans," but also "as plain as an old shoe." He was "the nation's first citizen" and "hero of the flooded South." [80]

By the end of summer, such praise also insisted on Hoover's appeal to African-Americans. This rhetorical shift was likely a response to the ceaseless accusations by Ida B. Wells. On July 31, the day after Wells wrote "Only Race Can Act," the *Times* titled a column, "Destitute Negroes Put

Implicit Faith in Leader of Relief." As Wells had included the anonymous accounts of black refugees in hiding, the *Times* responded with a lengthy story of one "Uncle Eph" from New Orleans. "Sho' would have had a hard time didn't Mr. Hoover come to fetch us on de high ground," said Uncle Eph. "No wonder de niggers thinks well of Mr. Hoover. Sho' would make a noble president." And this, wrote the *Times,* was "the verdict of the Afro-American of the Mississippi Valley."[81] This was also a caricatured dialect of the Afro-American of the Mississippi Valley that instead reflected the racial bias inherent in news media, even in northern publications like the *Times*.

Not only stories about Hoover, but also other flood reports spoke in terms of race relations—and always, race relations were depicted as positive. *The Los Angeles Times* featured a 12-part series written by Harris Dickson, an author of short stories with a fascination for "the negro in the United States."[82] His series gave romantic depictions of black refugee lives, focusing particularly on refugee heroism. One piece featured a black refugee's valiant dash to get fellow tenants on the ferry to Vicksburg.[83] A similar story titled "Humble Heroism" described Samuel White, "a New Orleans negro," who constructed a "crude raft [and] made repeated trips until he had rescued twenty-five families." Such selflessness, Dickson concluded, "illustrates the truth that bravery is not a matter of race or color, and tells how members of the negro race can rise heroically in emergencies."[84] As flattering (though likely fictionalized—and certainly patronizing) as Dickson's stories may have been, they did not advance the cause of black flood refugees. These stories gave national readers the assurance that the only evil facing refugees was "Father Mississippi, that pestiferous river," and that black refugees were helping themselves through their own heroics.[85] Dickson's accounts often ended with instructions of how to donate to the Red Cross.

Mainstream media heralded black refugees as important not only for their heroics, but also for their work ethic. "The Negro tenant is coming to the front. He is a very important factor in the re-establishment of agriculture, for in some sections of the flooded area he does practically all the farm work," said H.C. Couch, chairman of the Arkansas Flood Commission. T. Roy Reid, an Arkansas Red Cross leader, concurred: "Let the Negro get to following a plow, and he'll whistle and sing. He'll work, too. They don't observe any eight-hour days." Both men remarked in awe, "There is lots of hope."[86]

Such stories of laborers being "happy to work" complemented another item on the media's agenda: the approaching wave of tourists. Though half of Greenville remained underwater by late June, the town was "getting its house in order" for "thousands of tourists expected this summer to view the results of the Mississippi River flood." This preparation, of course, was made possible by the free labor provided by "singing, whistling" Negroes, who "closely [followed] the receding waters…with hammers and saws, getting things in shape for what is expected to be a banner tourist season."[87] However, these workers only attended to choice sections of Greenville; as J. Winston Harrington noted, "Clean-up squads are now working in the white sections of the city keeping the streets and alleys in sanitary condition, while…sections of the city where our people live are used as dumping grounds for disease-breeding trash from the white sections."[88]

For Greenville to bounce back in time for tourists and spring planting required not just black laborers, but also national donations to the Red Cross. As the task of feeding 400,000 persons threatened to exhaust Red Cross funds, Wade Negus, president of the First National Bank of Greenville, feared that Americans had "forgotten almost half a million of their own people." To writers at *The Chicago Defender* advocating tirelessly on behalf of these black refugees, such a remark must have seemed a slap in the face. "The nation has failed to grasp the magnitude of this disaster," Negus insisted. "Herbert Hoover and the Red Cross have done a great work, but they are limited by their resources, which are contributions of the American people."[89] If Greenville's leaders in fact feared the American public had forgotten about flood victims, this would suggest the *Defender*'s investigations failed to arouse national concern. What aroused Americans were stories of heroism and benevolence, of Chief Hoover and Uncle Eph.

"WE DIDN'T KNOW THE RED CROSS WAS SUPPOSED TO HELP US": CONTRASTING ACCOUNTS OF RELIEF (OCTOBER-DECEMBER 1927)

On October 3, President Coolidge spoke at the annual American Red Cross meeting to summarize the national flood response, which began "on April 21st, when the city of Greenville, Miss., was inundated, [and] it was realized that a serious catastrophe was impending." In Coolidge's mind, the impending catastrophe was environmental, not social; concerning national relations, Coolidge asserted that the flood was in fact "one of the fine chapters in American history," which "brought closer [the North and the South] in the bonds of sympathy and understanding." Most of Coolidge's address was spent thanking relief agencies, railroad companies, the Navy, farm banks, and the Rockefeller Foundation. Not once was race mentioned. Coolidge testified that the Red Cross' "great humanitarian work in the Mississippi Valley" transcended national and racial divides, coming to be "recognized universally as the symbol of love, sympathy, and charity for all those in suffering and distress." He assured Red Cross agents that those in the South were "most appreciative of the assistance given to their stricken states."[90]

Yet less than two weeks later, the *Defender* published an open letter penned by Mrs. Willis Jones, a former Mississippi flood refugee, that offered a story of the Red Cross so radically different that the contrast is nearly comical. "We didn't know the Red Cross was supposed to help us till by chance we saw a Chicago Defender," Mrs. Jones wrote. "We were shocked to see that money and clothes were collected for our benefit while mothers and children lay on straw and naked floors. The most unkind words we received were when we asked for clothes and food from the Red Cross." Such a remark inflamed the *Defender*'s black readers in Chicago, who had consistently donated to the Red Cross with the intention of supporting black refugees in the South. Months beforehand, the executive secretary of the Chicago chapter of the Red Cross had admitted that "the Negro colony of Chicago had been very generous in its contributions to relief funds" and was "justified in their effort to ascertain that their offerings reached the proper destinations."[91] Mrs. Willis Jones' let-

ter revealed that the offerings had in fact not reached the proper destinations, and that black money was not being used to support black refugees.

Nonetheless, Mrs. Willis Jones was indeed most grateful "to those in the North who ministered unto us," as Coolidge had boasted in his Red Cross address. But contrary to Coolidge's sermon, Mrs. Jones was not grateful to the North at large but specifically to Chicago's public and the *Defender*, who sent "angels of mercy" with clothes, food, and literature, to sing and pray with black refugees. As refugee letters revealed, *Defender* investigators traveled with charity workers in Chicago to provide relief to black refugees who were not being provided for by the Red Cross. "The Chicago Defender dared at such a time to give support to our people," and so she gave thanks as "the prayer of a grateful family."[92]

Such charges against the Red Cross inflamed Hoover and his colleagues. In November he complained to Fieser, the Red Cross Vice Chairman, that "The colored complex has again arisen."[93] For months, Hoover had directed race-related grievances to Moton, as he had in his June letter to Ida B. Wells. But in November, W.E.B. Du Bois questioned Moton's credibility in the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine:

> We have grave suspicions that [Moton's] committee…will be sorely tempted to whitewash the whole situation, to pat Mr. Hoover loudly on the back, and to make no real effort to investigate the desperate and evil conditions of that section of our country…the one fatal thing for them to do, and the one thing for which the American negro will never forgive them, is spineless surrender to the administration and flattery for the guilty Red Cross.[94]

Du Bois concluded, "Next month we shall have more to say."[95]

Hoover feared that Du Bois could publicly discredit the Colored Advisory Committee and put an end to his media success as the presidential election drew closer. He ordered Moton to conduct a November inspection tour of the Red Cross camps in preparation for another Colored Advisory Commission report. On December 12, Claude Barnett presented Moton's report to Hoover, Fieser, and other Red Cross officials; Moton was unable to meet due to an automobile accident. The men were shocked to hear a report much more explicit and damaging than anticipated—a report detailing fearful black tenants scared of being whipped by white planters who stole refugees' supplies. The report even suggested that the Colored Advisory Commission itself was ill equipped to correctly diagnose the level of racist abuse in the camps:

> Obviously, the colored people who have for so many years lived in fear of ill treatment as a result of the plantation system will not tell... The responsibility for checking on situations like this should not be left to Negroes when the facts are known and are admitted by Red Cross officials. Confidential investigators from Washington would be able to make some interesting discoveries.[96]

Staff of the *Defender* may have been pleased to learn that the Colored Advisory Commission agreed with their protests—that black officials in the South were unable to get the facts—but they would never know, because the report Barnett presented on December 12 was not released. A furious Herbert Hoover met with Moton on December 17 to demand that he rewrite the report. That night, Hoover called Fieser to brag that he had "laid Dr. Moton out." Though Barnett pleaded that "the changes [to the report] suggested should not be made…because of the state of mind of the colored people of the country as it regards the flood," Moton caved nonetheless, revising the report and issuing a press release fully endorsing the actions of the Red Cross.[97] It became clear that Hoover was content to falsify the official story of his Red Cross camps for the sake of maintaining his own reputation.

The Colored Advisory Commission issued its final report in 1929.[98] The publication included an introductory letter from John Payne, chair of the Red Cross, expressing "sincere appreciation" of the Commission for "its excellent presentation of the essential facts." The Colored Advisory Commission had "pointed out every disadvantage and inequality uncovered" and given "stricken suffers a new hope and a new vision for the future." The report did mention that in Greenville, "Complaints were received from some of the colored refugees" because "at first there was some disorganization, confusion, and restlessness." But the Commission insisted the Red Cross had listened to Moton's findings and, as per his recommendations, supplied knives, forks, and spoons; improved clothing distribution; and continued reporting to Hoover. The Commission's final report skirted issues of peonage and near-slavery with vague language: "Extremities of human relations were bound to show exaggeration of already unsettled states of mind and sordid conditions due not alone to the current flood crisis, but to economic personal and group experiences which had long preceded the problems here related." While it is hard to imagine that a team of black leaders could so quickly dismiss racist crimes as beyond their control, their non-offensive report likely did not represent their actual findings but instead reflected Hoover and Fieser's editorializing.

The Red Cross also released its own final report that year. A lengthy document of almost 200 pages, it had little to say about race—those issues were supposed to be thoroughly covered in the Colored Advisory Commission's separate report (though, as we have seen, they were not). Addressing the fact that "in large sections of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi most of the residents were colored," the Red Cross assured it had "considered the special needs of all these racial groups in formulating rehabilitation plans."[99] The report included photos of white nurses at work, administering vaccinations and providing bottled milk; it contained only one photo of black refugees, subtitled "Colored children pose with fly traps." Another photo showed "the scene of an important reconstruction task," but it was an aerial view taken from afar, obscuring the actual workers.

The healthcare and reconstruction depicted in these photos was made possible by the "great spirit of the press in behalf of relief work throughout the flood." Thanks to "the close and cordial

liaison service between the newspapers and the Red Cross National Headquarters" and the "wholehearted aid given by the radio broadcasting stations of the country," Americans in every state were kept abreast of flood updates and encouraged to donate. In fact, as the Red Cross explained, "several chapters reported having raised almost their total fund through radio broadcasting alone."[100] The news media not only encouraged Americans to donate to the Red Cross, but also ensured that Americans never learned of the racist abuses in flood relief camps. In the same way as *The New York Times* had reported that "Americans living outside of the submerged areas can have but little conception of the havoc made by the flood," Americans also had little conception of the havoc made by the Red Cross itself.

By 1929 the final reports of the official agencies managing flood relief—the Colored Advisory Commission and the Red Cross—had cemented in national history the idea that Hoover's relief camps were a resounding success. As much as *The Chicago Defender* claimed credit for "[succeeding] in having better treatment accorded to [African-Americans]," the newspaper's actual systemic impact was marginal. Never did news agencies follow the "rigid investigation" launched by Harrington, White, and Wells; nor did their efforts convince Herbert Hoover or Robert Moton to tackle the likes of William Percy. This is not to discredit the *Defender's* accomplishments; the newspaper likely gave hope to many near-enslaved refugees with its slightly grandiose claims. As the letter from Mrs. Willis Jones showed, the *Defender* and its charitable partners in Chicago offered inspiration "that will live with me and hundreds of others forever."[101] For a refugee woman sleeping on straw and bare floors, castigated by Red Cross officials for asking for a change of clothes, it made a profound difference to know that her voice was being heard and taken seriously. And to whatever extent it could send charity workers to the camps, the *Defender* provided direct relief of its own to compensate for Red Cross' neglect toward black refugees.

CLOSING THE FLOODGATES: HOOVER'S PRESIDENCY AND THE END OF THE MEDIA MAELSTROM (1928 ONWARD)

With the help of Moton, Barnett, and the Tuskegee machine, Hoover avoided scandal and won the presidency, sweeping 40 states. He capitalized on the flood during his campaign, creating the first presidential election campaign film, titled "Master of Emergencies," which featured his work in the Mississippi Delta.[102] Once Hoover was elected, mainstream media turned away from flood relief; that "fine chapter in American history" was over. Even the *Defender* ended its attempts to expose Hoover and the Red Cross for their injustices. On November 10, 1928, the *Defender* paused to acknowledge "the tremendous good the Red Cross has done" and encourage African-Americans to enroll in it, "in the consciousness that we, too, have helped in the noble cause."[103] The same day, it admitted, "The campaign is over… Mr. Hoover will enter the White House and he will represent ALL the American people. We hope that, in spite of the things which have stood out so glaringly against Mr. Hoover, he will prove to be above them."[104] Hoover continued to enjoy

an amiable relationship with the press – at least, until the 1929 stock market crash, when he began screening reporters and greatly reducing his availability.[105] While he may have been able to keep journalists from mentioning Red Cross slave camps, he could not keep them from mentioning the infamous "Hoovervilles."

Though the press stopped reporting on Greenville's flood camp, the town's issues persisted. As late as March 1928, 12,000 residents of Washington County were still being fed by the Red Cross, but its funds had dried up along with the floodwaters.[106] Hoover announced Congress would fund "adequate flood control measures," but "no relief to flood sufferers."[107] His "resettlement plan" never came to fruition, prompting faithful Moton to finally declare that blacks doubted Hoover's "personal concern for the welfare and progress of one tenth of the citizens of the United States."[108]

Greenville, once the "Queen's City of the Delta," never saw its anticipated comeback.[109] Black residents remained inflamed by the abuses their community endured under Will Percy, prompting many to leave town. By early 1928 as many as 50 percent of blacks left Washington County, a migration promulgated in part by the *Defender* itself (not coincidentally, many former flood refugees headed to Chicago[110]). The *Defender* had explicitly promoted the "Great Migration" as early as 1916, and its 1927 coverage of the Red Cross camps continued that effort.[111] Moreover, the *Defender* gave black readers reason to distrust many widely-read newspapers and their Republican patrons. Black media showed flood refugees that Herbert Hoover's Red Cross campaign was a fraud, that Robert Moton and "Uncle Tom ministers" overlooked their struggles, and that millions of Red Cross dollars sent by supporters in Chicago had been robbed from them. In October 1928, the *Defender* remembered Hoover's "lily-white" betrayals: "The Colored folk in the North who have the ballot will not be unmindful of this shift in the attitude of the party which has always posed as the friend of their people." That year, Hoover lost 15 percent of the black vote as compared to the previous presidential election; as the *Defender* noted, "strange as it may seem, the Democrats are more favorable to the political and social aspirations of the black man than are the Republicans."[112] Although Hoover's concentration camp cover-up was drowned out by mainstream media, it created a tidal wave of African-American protest and solidarity that would ripple for years to come.

NOTES

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3. Ibid., 7.

4. American National Red Cross. 1929. *The final report of the Colored Advisory Commission appointed to cooperate with the American National Red Cross and the President's Committee on relief Work in the Mississippi Valley flood disaster of 1927*. Washington

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6. Quoted in Barry 262.

7. "The Executive Branch's Response to the Flood of 1927." *History News Network*. George Mason

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8. Hoover quoted in Barry 283.

9. Winston J. Harrington. "USE TROOPS IN FLOOD AREA TO IMPRISON FARM HANDS." *The Chicago Defender.* May 7, 1927.

10. Quoted in Barry 310.

11. Hoover to L.G. Porter, May 21, 1927. Quoted In Spencer.

12. Harrington. "WORK OR GO HUNGRY EDICT PERILS RACE: Flood Victims Driven by Labor Bosses." *The Chicago Defender (*hereafter '*Defender*'.) June 11, 1927.

13. Spencer 177.

14. Quoted in Barry 273.

15. "RED CROSS FINDS DISASTER GROWING." *Boston Daily Globe.* April 24, 1927.

16. "The Call of the Red Cross." *The New York Times* (hereafter *NYT)*. April 24, 1927.

17. "FLOOD PROBLEM ON MISSISSIPPI BEING SOLVED: Mr. Hoover Is in Charge…" *The Christian Science Monitor.* April 25, 1927.

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24. "Homeless Now 100,000." *NYT*. April 24, 1927.

25. Swinford 159; Berry 311-12.

26. "Vicksburg Welcomes Refugees." *NYT.* April 24, 1927

27. "Looting in Greenville." *NYT*. April 28, 1927.

28. Barry 312.

29. "LIFEBOAT RESCUES FROM U.S. FLOODS: Surf-Boats Busy Among the Rapids." *The Manchester Guardian.* May 17, 1927.

30. Quoted in Barry 314.

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33. Alan DeSantis, (1998). "Selling the American Dream Myth to Black Southerners: The Chicago Defender and the Great Migration of 1915-1919". *Western Journal of Communication* 62 (4).

34. Barry 319.

35. Quoted in Barry 321.

36. Berry 318.

37. Ibid., 320.

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39. Hoover to Moton, May 24 1927. Quoted in *Final Report of the Colored Advisory Commission*.

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49. Harrington, J. Winston. "WORK OR GO HUNGRY EDICT PERILS RACE: Flood Victims Driven by Labor Bosses." *Defender.* June 11, 1927.

50. "Charge of Short Rationing Negro Flood Victims Probed." *Chicago Daily Tribune.* June 9, 1927. Pg. 11.

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52. "FLOOD MENACE LOOMS AS 2,000 FIGHT TORRENT." *The Washington Post.* June 4, 1929.

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56. Barry 384.

57. Moton quoted in Barry 385.

58. Ibid., 380.

59. Ibid., 330.

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61. Robert Moton, *Robert Moton's First Report*. Web. PBS. June 13, 1927.

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67. Wells, "SOUTH BACKS DOWN AFTER PROBE LOOMS." *Defender.* June 25, 1927.

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