

“I Believe in This War”

BY J. SAUNDERS REDDING

At the time of the Second World War, American society was a segregated society. Racism was institutionalized in laws and customs that kept African Americans apart from white citizens. What the war meant to African Americans is poignantly and forcefully told here. Its legacy and its connections with the Civil War are detailed. Redding also discusses patriotism and what it meant to him.

War had no heroic traditions for me. Wars were white folks'. All wars in historical memory. The last war, and the Spanish-American War before that, and the Civil War. I had been brought up in a way that admitted of no heroics. I think my parents were right. Life for them was a fierce, bitter, soul-searching war of spiritual and economic attrition;¹ they fought it without heroics, but with stubborn heroism. Their heroism was screwed up to a pitch of idealism so intense that it found a safety

¹ attrition—wearing down.

travel it without snarling traffic. To die in these duties is to die for something. . . .

I believe in this war, finally, because I believe in the ultimate **vindication**⁶ of the wisdom of the brotherhood of man. This is not foggy idealism. I think that the growing manifestations of the interdependence of all men is an argument for the wisdom of brotherhood. I think that the shrunk compass of the world is an argument. I think that the talk of united nations and of planned interdependence is an argument.

More immediately, I believe in this war because I believe in America. I believe in what America professes to stand for. Nor is this, I think, whistling in the dark. There are a great many things wrong here. There are only a few men of good will. I do not lose sight of that. I know the inequalities, the outraged hopes and faith, the inbred hate; and I know that there are people who wish merely to lay these by in the closet of the national mind until the crisis is over. But it would be equally foolish for me to lose sight of the advances that are made, the barriers that are leveled, the privileges that grow. Foolish, too, to remain blind to the distinction that exists between simple race prejudice, already growing **moribund**⁷ under the impact of this war, and theories of racial superiority as a basic **tenet**⁸ of a societal system—theories that at bottom are the avowed justification for suppression, defilement and murder.

I will take this that I have here. I will take the democratic theory. The bit of road of freedom that stretches through America is worth fighting to preserve. The very fact that I, a Negro in America, can fight against the evils in America is worth fighting for. This open fighting against the wrongs one hates is the mark and the hope of democratic freedom. I do not underestimate the

⁶ **vindication**—proof.

⁷ **moribund**—in a dying state.

⁸ **tenet**—belief.

struggle. I know the learning that must take place, the evils that must be broken, the depths that must be climbed. But I am free to help in doing these things. I count. I am free (though only a little as yet) to pound blows at the huge body of my American world until, like a **chastened**⁹ mother, she gives me nurture with the rest.

⁹ **chastened**—having learned one's lesson; humbled.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why do you think war has no heroic traditions for Redding? What war heroes did he hear about growing up?
2. What does Redding not like about this war?
3. What does he mean when he says the interdependence of all men is an argument for the wisdom of the brotherhood of man?
4. What does he mean when he says there is a difference between "simple race prejudice" and "theories of racial superiority as a basic tenet of a societal system"? What societal system is he referring to?
5. Why do you think Redding believes in this war?