

TO: The Society of Physics Students

FROM: Rodger Taylor and Fred Jerome, Authors of *Einstein on Race and Racism*

- Racism is “America’s worst disease.”

(Albert Einstein in a message to the 1946 National Urban League Convention)

Disease..? In most of 1946 America, racial segregation was the rule, with separate and decidedly unequal public and private facilities from housing and schools to buses and beaches in many parts of the country, including Einstein’s adopted hometown, Princeton, New Jersey. Many of us can picture the separate waiting rooms in Southern bus and train stations and separate drinking fountains marked “colored” and “white.” But the “disease” went deeper. Even the blood donated to save lives was given only at racially segregated blood banks, with “white” and “colored” blood kept in separately labeled storage units. Though in 1942, the American Red Cross concluded that there is no difference in the blood of the races, the policy of racially segregating blood continued in some parts of this country for another generation.

In 1946 America Black soldiers – a million or so who had fought in all-black units (led by white officers) to defeat Nazi Germany, returned to America to an epidemic of lynchings in the racist south. At the time, at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, the oldest black college in the Western world, Einstein told an audience that racial segregation was “not a disease of colored people, but a disease of white people,” and he added “I will not remain silent about it.” Einstein’s pledge not to remain silent about racism has an ironic echo today. Virtually all traces of his passionate commitment to civil rights, including his friendship with and support for African American thinkers like Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois, have been erased. The grandfatherly, somewhat crazy, absent-minded genius, too preoccupied with abstract equations to think about the day-to-day cares that consume most mortals is the Einstein most people think they know. Indeed, Einstein’s speech at Lincoln is nowhere to be found or even quoted in the scientist’s archives or in the plethora of his biographies and anthologies. Were it not for its wide coverage by the black press, we would have no inkling of what he said.

We fervently hope that the Einstein illustrated in our book can serve as a model for young scientists. It doesn’t take an Einstein to identify racist inequities in today’s society. Labor Department reports continue to show the jobless rate among black workers is far higher than among whites; the Institute of Medicine has documented the inferior health-care received by African Americans and other minorities; housing and schools in this country remain – without formal restrictions – as segregated as ever. Minority high school dropout and incarceration rates cloud all of our futures. For physicists today concerned about racism, the first step might be simply to join in Einstein’s pledge: “I will not remain silent about it.” One can envision the impact of such a statement signed by a thousand or two thousand physicists – or, just as impact-ful, by physics students – and published in newspapers across the country. (Although one wonders, would a physics society or other scientific association circulate such a pledge today?)

Nonetheless, it is most encouraging that our book has been included in your look at the Future Faces of Physics. We hope that you are inspired as we were by this man who was both a great physicist AND fighter against racism, and that your dialog transforms into action.

