

Exclusive Interview—

A NEGRO BUSINESSMAN SPEAKS HIS MIND



Will racial demonstrations, now spreading across the nation, solve the Negro's problems? Is the Negro actually a "second-class citizen"? If so, who is to blame—the white man? You get unexpected answers to these and other questions from a leading Negro businessman. He is S. B. Fuller, interviewed in Chicago by a member of the staff of "U. S. News & World Report." His conclusions: A Negro, like anybody else, can get ahead only by hard work and enterprise.

AT CHICAGO

Q Mr. Fuller, are the doors of opportunity closed to the Negro in America today?

A No, I don't think so. The Negro has the same rights that other people have in America—

Q In what way do you mean?

A He has a right to vote, he has a right to start a business for himself, and he has a right to find a job, providing there's anybody that he can sell his service to. But he has to learn to use those rights.

Q Did you find it possible to get ahead?

A Yes, indeed. I left Louisiana at the age of 15 years with a sixth-grade education. My people moved to Memphis, Tenn., and we lived there for eight years. Then I hitchhiked my way to Chicago. I got a job here and found out that I could not get ahead working for somebody else.

In 1935 I had \$25, and I took the \$25 and bought some soap and started selling soap from door to door. And from that \$25, it developed into this business today.

Q Did you find racial barriers difficult?

A No, because I sold my own people my own product.

Q What is the value of your sales annually, would you say?

A This year, it will run about 10 million dollars.

Q Do you have markets in the South, too?

A We have markets in the South for the colored only. We don't have any markets in the South where we sell to the whites. But we have white customers in the North.

Q Has that market grown much in recent years?

A Yes, it has a constant growth. We continue to buy out other companies—If we find a white company having financial problems, we buy it out. Then we keep the white employees and add to the colored payroll.

Q How many employees do you have altogether?

A We have on our total payroll about 600 employees.

Q How many of these are white?

A About 20 percent of them are white. And in our door-to-door selling, we have about 3,000 people selling and about 500 of those are white.

Q Is there any friction? Do white persons seem to resent working for you?

A No, the white people here are talking integration more than the colored people.

Q What do you mean by that?

A Here, in our organization, the white people are very sensitive about being treated as inferior in our organization. They are more concerned about discrimination than the Negroes are.

One thing that I find in my organization is this: If I don't watch very closely, the Negro bosses here will discriminate and hire all Negroes and no whites. I'm constantly watching them to see that they hire people on their merit and not on the color of their skin.

Q Would you say, then, that racial discrimination is found among all races?

A It is a universal human trait—and people use it if they can do so, at a profit. When it becomes unprofitable, they forget it.

Here in our organization, it pays the white people not to discriminate against the Negro, and they don't. But the Negroes will discriminate against the white people because they are trying to get the white people out of some of these well-paying jobs and put some Negroes in them.

Q In what way do they try this?

A If a white man applies for a job, and if nobody else knows it, the Negro supervisor will not hire him. He'll hire another Negro.

Q In general, what do you think is the answer to the race problem in this country?

A Well, the problem is one the Negro has to work out himself. Negroes are not discriminated against because of the color of their skin. They are discriminated against because they have not anything to offer that people want to buy.

The minute that they can develop themselves so they excel in whatever they do—then they are going to find that they don't have any real problems.

An example is baseball. There was discrimination in the big leagues. But when the owners of the big leagues found out that Negroes could play just as well as whites, discrimination in the big leagues ended as far as Negro players are concerned.



—Ernest Delahoussaye Photos

Mr. Fuller inspects operations at his cosmetics plant in Chicago

S. B. Fuller, at 58, has reached a level of business success attained by few men—white or Negro. In addition to the Fuller Products Company, which produces a nationally known line of cosmetics and allied products, he controls eight other corporations. Among them is a department store in Chicago, a real estate trust in New York, and the "Courier" chain of newspapers serving Negro readers in Chicago, New York, Detroit and Pittsburgh.

Born of poor parents in Louisiana, Mr. Fuller went to school only as far as the sixth grade. Moving to Chicago as a young man, he started the Fuller Products Company in 1935 on a capital of \$25. Today its gross sales come to more than 10 million dollars a year. While he opposes the views and tactics being used by "militant" Negroes, Mr. Fuller describes himself as an "integrationist"—pointing out that many of his employes are white.

Q Is there any justification, then, for Negro complaints about their lot in life?

A They have some legitimate complaints, but not very many. They will find that you cannot sue a man and make him want to live next door to you. You've got to sell him the idea that you are just as good as he is, by performance. You must perform well in your job. You must train your youngsters. You must keep your community as clean as the white man's community. You must keep up the home as well as he does.

Q If the Negroes have not done these things, why is that?

A I don't think that the Negroes have been taught enough concerning this. Remember this: The Negroes have been free for 100 years, but during that time, the white man has not told Negroes the truth. He has always taught the Negroes that they were in a disadvantage. He never told Negroes that they should do business for themselves, that they should clean up their own community, and that they should accept community responsibility.

They have never told him this in plain English. Nor has the white man told Negroes what the white people say about the Negro when the Negro is not present. This is what they should start doing—telling Negroes in their presence what they say about them in their absence.

Q Do you mean mention the unfavorable comments about Negroes?

A Yes. If it's bad, then tell them.

Q Are the racial demonstrations doing any good?

A The demonstrations have made the white man know that the Negroes are dissatisfied. But he knew that in the first place. Beyond that, I don't think they have done any good. In fact, they have done harm in the picture they give of Negroes.

Q Will the demonstrations continue, do you think?

A Oh, they will go on as long as they get publicity from it. When they don't get any publicity, they will die out. I don't think the demonstrations will go on as much as 18 months longer.

Q Do Martin Luther King and others of his views speak for the Negro people as a whole?

A No, they speak for certain small groups of people. If

they were speaking for the Negro people as a whole, you'd find more Negroes demonstrating. As it is, those who are demonstrating and "sitting in" are a very small minority of the Negroes.

Q Are the Black Muslims really important in the Negro community?

A No, they are not. The Black Muslims have a very small organization. It is tightly organized and its members are loyal to their cause, but their number is very small.

Q Why is it that we hear so much about the frustrations of the Negro?

A It's because they have been played up so much on the television, on the radio and in the newspapers.

Q Do you ever hear of militant Negroes calling you an "Uncle Tom"?

A No Negro calls me an "Uncle Tom." He can't call me "Uncle Tom" because I employ white people. And "Uncle Tom" never employed any white people.

Q What about the charge of some militant Negroes that Negro moderates are subservient to whites?

A I think that this is very dangerous—it is an attempt to muzzle free speech. I think that every man should have a right to his own opinion. I may disagree with him, but I defend his right to say it.

There are more moderates than we hear of, but some are afraid to give their opinion. They are being muzzled, they are somewhat fearful of speaking out.

Q Do you find any other Negro businessmen getting ahead in the same way that you did?

A I find a few, but I don't think that enough Negroes are doing so, because no one has sat down and told them of the possibilities of doing something for themselves.

Q What about the argument that it is the white man or "society" that is to blame for the Negro's problems?

A The crimes that you find in Harlem, for instance, are caused by the people of Harlem, and it's nobody's fault but that of the people of Harlem. I came from a very poor family and, in those days, there was not the crime that you have today. When I was a boy, they kept us busy doing something. Today it's hard to find a boy in Harlem to sell newspapers.

(continued on next page)

... "Negroes must learn to risk their capital"

come tax on over \$100,000. How else could a sixth-grade scholar have a job in America that paid him over \$100,000 a year unless he was in business for himself?

Q Why are Negroes reluctant to get into business? Are they afraid to assume responsibility, do you think?

A Yes, I do think so. There have been some failures in Negro business; there are failures in all businesses. But Negroes must learn to risk their capital—not put it in other people's banks and draw 3 or 4 per cent on it, when they could use it among themselves and make 10 or 15 per cent.

Q Would you say that today it is still possible for a Negro with a high-school diploma to make good?

A Oh, yes. It's still possible for a Negro with a grammar-school education to make good. I have a young Negro who sells—he's 24 years old. He came from Lexington, Miss., and I've taught him to sell, and he's averaging now from \$10,000 to \$12,000 a year selling from door to door.

"LAWS DO LITTLE GOOD"—

Q Will laws passed in Washington assure the Negroes the things they really want?

A The laws are going to do very little good, because in the North the Negro has every legal right that anyone else has. In the South, there is legal segregation—but in the North we don't have it. So when the white people in the North keep away from the colored people, it is because it's not an economic advantage to get together.

Q What about the Negroes in the South?

A The only way the Negro in the South can solve his problem is to continue to press for the ballot—not for sit-ins and not for eating at the lunch counter and not for the other rights. First there must be the right to vote. Once he starts voting, you will find the racial issue in the South will disappear.

Q Is the racial conflict in this country going to spread? Will it result in bloodshed?

A No. I think the racial conflict in this country is at its height right now. From now on it's going to have a trend downward.

Q Do Negroes still tend to feel inferior?

A Yes. Negro people are just as good as anybody else. This they must know. But they cannot convince others until they convince themselves.

I have found no barriers to me in business. I am a member of the National Association of Manufacturers, of the Chicago Association of Commerce and Industry, of the Illinois State Chamber of Commerce, of the National Association of Direct Selling Companies. I serve on committees, I can be elected to any office that I aspire to in these organizations. There is no discrimination that I find in these organizations.

Q What about the charge that well-to-do Negroes tend to ignore the rest of the Negro community and its problems? Is there any truth to this?

A No, I don't think so. I am working with the churches and all the civic organizations in Chicago. I am a member of the board of the Chicago Association of Commerce and Industry. I'm a member of the local Chamber of Commerce. I work with the YMCA. I work with the Urban League. I work with all of the civic organizations in the community.

I am trying right now to organize a group to buy a hospital in the Negro community, and I'm also the treasurer of the Midwest Baptist Home for the Aged. I am in civic affairs and I find all the other Negroes here in business are doing the same thing.

Q What would be your advice today to a young Negro coming out of school?

A My advice today is, first, go to school and get a good education. It's not up to the teacher to see that he gets it. It's up to the student. When a Negro child goes to school, he must concentrate on his work.

Then, when he comes out of school, come out with something to offer, a talent that he can sell.

Q But we hear that the schools available to Negroes often are inferior, that they don't offer a good education—

A Well, I think that the schools that the Negroes attend here in Chicago have about the same facilities as other schools. Anyway, it's not so much the facilities of the school that count as the attitude of the student.

Q Will demonstrations encourage Negroes to work harder, become more self-reliant?

A No. I find that the Negro today does not have as much ambition as he had 25 years ago.

Q Why is that?

A I think the trouble is that no one tells the Negro that he's responsible for himself—being unemployed. When I was a boy nobody helped us. You had to help yourself, and you had to learn to "do." You had to have the know-how plus the do-how.

My mother died when I was 17 years old. She left six besides myself. The relief people came and offered us some relief, but we did not accept it, because it was something of a shame for people to receive relief in those days. We were embarrassed just because the relief woman came to talk to us. We did not want the neighbors to know we couldn't make it for ourselves. So we youngsters made it for ourselves.

Q What kind of work did you do?

A I sold from door to door. I started selling from door to door when I was 9 years old, and have been selling ever since.

Q Do you feel that some races have more of an aptitude for business than others or more of an ability to sell?

A No. It's all in the desire. Any time that you can create a desire in the Negro to sell, he's just as good a salesman as anybody else.

Q Do you have Negro salesmen serving white customers?

A Yes, in some places we do.

WHY OUTLOOK IS BRIGHT—

Q Are you generally optimistic on the future of the Negro race in this country?

A Oh, yes.

Q Is America, do you think, a good place for Negroes?

A America is the best place for the Negro in the world. America is the best place for any man in the world.

Q Is the Negro basically unhappy, do you think?

A I think the Negro is very unhappy, but it's not from segregation. He's unhappy because he is unemployed.

Some of the leaders will tell him he's unemployed because he's a Negro, and that segregation is the cause of his being unemployed. But that is not true. We have unemployment in America, and the Negro is the last hired and the first fired because he doesn't do any of the hiring or the firing.

Q What is the answer, then, to the Negro's future?

A Work. And not only that: He must work and he must save his money and he must pool his money. If he wants integration, he must hire white people just as he wants white people to hire him.

[END]

RICHARD B. RUSSELL
GEORGIA

CHAIRMAN:
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ON THE DEPARTMENT
OF DEFENSE

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, D.C.

August 25, 1965

MEMBER:
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WELFARE, AND RELATED AGENCIES
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PUBLIC WORKS

Mr. Jack J. Rushin
377 Techwood Drive, N. W.
Atlanta 13, Georgia

Dear Friend:

Permit me to acknowledge and thank you for sending me a copy of your letter to the Secretary of State.

I deplore violence under any circumstances and especially so when it is related to the racial situation. One of the inescapable lessons of history shows that it is much easier to generate mob action than it is to control it.

Those in high office have no idea of the untold damage they are doing to our constitutional system by approving these demonstrations. I have attacked this attitude time and again, but unfortunately, the rest of the country has chosen to make the South the whipping boy in all racial matters and through the use of all of the communications media (including bad abuse of the television) have generated feeling against the South amounting almost to a national disease. Unfortunately, the "chickens will come home to roost" with them, for attack on orderly government can only result in anarchy.

With every good wish, I am

Sincerely,