

ON MISUNDERSTANDING BLACK MILITANCY

MISS BERRY



I think I may always associate Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech with a certain incident that related to it the day of the March on Washington, August 28, 1963.

Unable to get off from work to attend the March, I watched parts of it via television in Manhattan from the office of *The New Yorker* magazine where I was then employed. At the end of Dr. King's speech, one staff member, a young Jewish woman in her late twenties, obviously moved by the oration, went about the hallway of one of the floors, raving that the speech was the most marvelous she had ever heard in her life. When she said it to me, I added that indeed it was a stirring declaration. Then, in what I recall now as a somber tone, I said: "I wish Du Bois could have been there; this day was his dream. If he could have lived one more day to hear. . . ."

"Du Bois," she spoke up, "who's that?" Taken aback, I answered as briefly as possible who Du Bois was, what he had done; that he had died in Ghana the eve of the March. Roy Wilkins, I told her, had paid him tribute during his speech at the March; likewise an obituary was in that morning's *New York Times*. Looking at me in a manner that

seemed to say if this man Du Bois were important enough she would have heard about him, the subject didn't seem to interest her. She happened to be a book reviewer, a product, I later learned, of Bryn Mawr and Harvard.

It occurred to me then that many well-meaning white people throughout the nation would pass through the day of the March lacking the sense of history to bring to bear on the events; and that Dr. King's speech for all its ringing tones, would actually bring nothing more than a I-have-a-dream sense of empathy and emotion to those who had little or no knowledge of other black leaders who had antedated him or of the issues that made the "March for Jobs and Freedom" necessary.

IN these years since the late Dr. King's speech many of those same people have wondered what happened to interrupt the racial rapport seemingly apparent back in 1963. Why, they wonder are so many black people now so "militant" when so many then appeared so peaceful.

Though calm compared to now, 1963 was no really a placid year. Demonstrations took place in over 800 cities and towns, climaxed by the March on Washington. The demonstrations that year in Birmingham were met by white violence and frequent bombings of black property, including a

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church where four little girls were killed. Medgar Evers was shot to death by an ambusher in Jackson, Mississippi. Furthermore, the year 1964 was not without less pain: the bodies of three COFO workers were found beneath a dam in Philadelphia, Mississippi; the search for them turned up the mutilated torsos of two black male Alcorn A & M students floating in the Mississippi River; the shooting of a black teenager by a white off-duty police lieutenant set off a Harlem civil disorder lasting five days. Then in 1965 came the death of Malcolm X; within weeks a March from Selma-to-Montgomery, to secure voter registration, was disrupted before its end by Alabama state troopers using tear gas, cattle prods, dogs and whips. The year 1966 brought the Mississippi March Against Fear in which James Meredith was shot, and Stokely Carmichael issued the call for "Black Power."

It was only part of the decade that signaled in a new militancy—South, North, East and West. In comparison to what flared up in ghettos of many cities throughout the nation, the earlier years may have seemed peaceful. But had so much happened so fast that many were trying to forget how many lynchings, how many gunshots, how many bombings, how much discrimination make people stop being "peaceful"?

I have thought upon hearing the question "what happened?" that not only does present racial polarity stem in part from a misunderstanding of black militancy and the issues, but likewise from a lack of knowledge of Afro-American history. It has taken more than the events of the 1960's to make black militancy evident. The fact that it only now seems obvious is perhaps because very often it has been buried in both a myth and a conspiracy—the myth of the docile darky and the conspiracy of those perpetuating it. At the same time, it has also buried itself—partly in fear, partly in patience. And for all such reasons, it has also been buried in history.

Being a black reader more than glad that many long overdue books on Afro-American life and history are now easily available—since for so long seeking and finding them outside a special library collection was like trying to dig for archaeological objects—I am also one who believes that this current black book rush might have done more towards creating racial understanding had one-half the books been in print long before the late 1960s. (To say the least, the recent unrest among black students would have been abated if not avoided.)

But except for a few lone historians and outspoken leaders, this is a nation which has hushed up the story of slave revolts, silenced or ignored black spokesmen considered too radical, and deleted the black experience almost entirely from the context of American history. Additionally, many important early works by Afro-Americans have been allowed to go out of print. It was thus not seen necessary by many publishers that such a mass of material be rushed into print until it could no longer be held back.

In such an atmosphere, when inner city rebellions—better known as "riots"—occurred in the mid-1960s, many were the confused who believed such incidents to be the first insurrectionary acts by blacks in the United States; and when Malcolm X first appeared, he was thought by some of the same people—including some blacks—to be the first such "militant" to express racial beliefs in quite the same rhetoric. Rarely if ever had they heard the names Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, Robert Alexander Young, David Walker or Henry Highland Garnet—to cite only a few. And never, until perhaps recently, were lines such as part of the following poem by Claude McKay suggested reading in an American literature course:

Think you I am not fiend
and savage too?

Think you I could not arm me with a gun
And shoot down ten of you for every one
of my black brothers murdered, burnt by you?

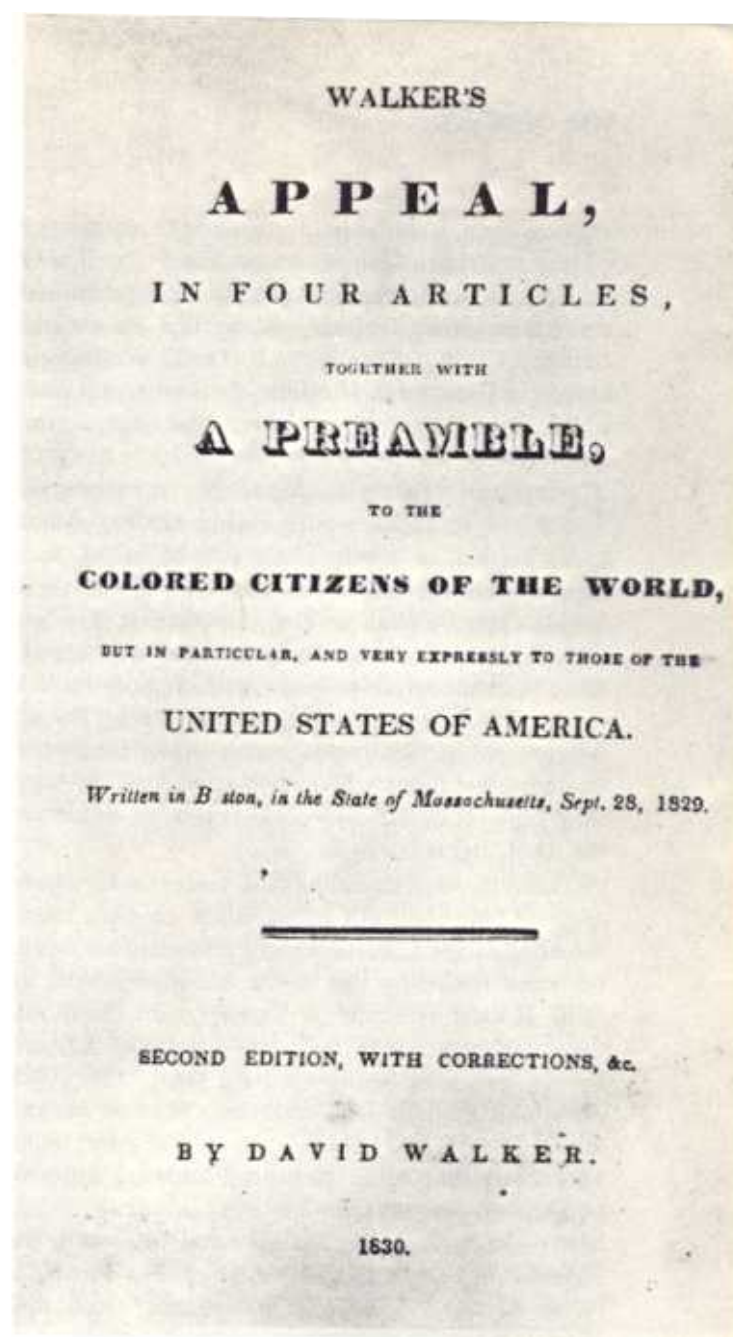
AS I soon learned, unfamiliarity with Afro-American thought and history has also included people from Harvard unfamiliar with the writing and work of W. E. B. Du Bois—a Harvard Ph.D., and without a doubt one of the most militant black men who ever lived. During his lifetime spanning nearly a century, as any *Crisis* reader surely knows, hardly an issue pertaining to civil rights, civil liberties, or the life of black people, was left untouched by his voice or pen. Whether it was about the black family, the black man and unions, rural life, city life, the Negro in the North, the Negro in the South, disenfranchisement, education, employment, the Negro church, black people and the arts, black pride, Afro-American history, a search for the African past, Pan-Africanism, socialism, the issue of world peace, or his long association with the NAACP and *The Crisis* he was always writing, lecturing and organizing; and hardly a problem exists today that he did not challenge or

foresee. That he died at 95 and throughout his life was not sufficiently understood by the power structure because he was considered too militant is testimony to why many younger black Americans might now appear even more revolutionary than he did while he lived.

But as black militancy—however one cares to define it—is not new, neither are so-called “riots” new. Though some interpreters deludingly prefer to think of these recent events not as acts of black defiance against the system, but rather as violent black-white street confrontations—similar to racial clashes of earlier years—they are much less racial feuds than they are acts of black revolt. When slaves set fires to plantations (and they did) they acted not only out of enmity towards a white slave master, but against the inequities of the slave system. Accordingly, when urban blacks set fires it was against oppression and exploitation in the ghetto.

In such a mood, many American blacks—both young and not so young—have come to express dismay not only with the methods and ideas espoused by the NAACP and the Urban League, but also advocate all-black organizations. This concept actually is not so new either. As only one example, at the turn of the century, Monroe Trotter—fiery editor of the Boston-based *Guardian*, and one of twenty-nine organizers of the 1905 Niagara Movement—objected to integrated conferences forming the NAACP. “I don’t trust white folk,” he said. Although he was an active, though highly critical member of the NAACP until 1913, he preferred to continue the spirit of the Niagara Movement through the National Equal Rights League, an exclusively black organization he formed shortly after the original Niagara Movement conference.

Similarly, little that is currently being said about black liberation or resistance to oppression has not been said by other black people in this country in previous times. But few have made history for it, and not often has it been told. David Walker, an escaped slave who went to Boston and there became agent for the black abolitionist publication *FREEDOM’S JOURNAL*, wrote in 1829 *Walker’s Appeal in Four Articles: Together With a Preamble to the Coloured Citizens of the World, But in Particular and Very Especially, to those of the United States of America*. It was later published as a pamphlet. “If you commence,” he wrote, “make sure work—do not trifle, for they will not trifle with you—they want us for their slaves, and think



nothing of murdering us in order to subject us to that wretched condition—therefore, if there is an attempt made by us, kill, or be killed. . . .”

In 1843, at the Negro Convention held in Buffalo, Henry Highland Garnet, a black abolitionist minister, told his listeners in a message called *An Address to the Slaves of The United States*: “You should . . . use the same manner of resistance as would have been just in our ancestors when the bloody foot-prints of the first remorseless soul thief was placed upon the shores of our fatherland. . . . Let your motto be resistance! *resistance*, Resistance! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance.”

If for making such statements in 20th Century America Rap Brown is arrested for “inciting to riot” (and later listed as one of the FBI’s “most wanted men”) and other black men have fled into

exile or been assassinated, it takes little imagination to guess what 19th Century black "militants" making such speeches or writing slave narratives went through in their day. Many fled the country or were killed. (When in 1830 David Walker was caught in Richmond, Virginia, distributing his pamphlet, he was arrested and never seen alive again.)

But history repeats itself in such a way that some black spokesmen once considered too radical to be heeded, or too incendiary to be heard, soon turn up looking like moderates. The list of those in this category is as long as this page. It does not include Booker T. Washington who was always more than moderate to begin with. It does include many of those some of us now call "Uncle Toms," because while disagreeing with their ideas and strategy, we fail to take into consideration what they have endured and contributed on behalf of the civil rights struggle.

There are also those militant voices so far ahead of their time that, not many, black or white, have the ability to hear them. Finally, they can no longer be heard for being lost in the multitude. When in 1962 Robert Williams in *Negroes with Guns* was using the term Afro-American—a term at the time few people were using—writing that "The Afro-American militant is a 'militant' because he defends himself, his family and his dignity"; and advocating that "as a tactic, we use and approve non-violent resistance" few appeared to listen. Many—including almost all his constituents in the NAACP—thought he was way out. His advocacy of answering "violence with violence" met with official NAACP disapproval. (An NAACP pamphlet published in 1959, *The Single Issue in the Robert Williams Case*, sums up the Association position.) But hardly a day now goes by when we don't hear some of the same pronouncements Williams made in his book less than a decade ago. The Black Panther Party did not rise in an Oakland ghetto and spread to cities throughout the country because Williams wrote a book. Now back in the U. S. after nine years in exile, he is only among many voices.

The belief that if revolutionaries are silenced or eliminated the ideas they exhort will die, is one of the fallacies of human history—especially of Afro-American history. In spite of all those who sought to deny him while he lived, no greater hero, dead or alive, now exists for the majority of young blacks than Malcolm X. Many however, preferring not to stress that his attitude toward whites under-

went a profound change after his trip to Mecca, remember him as representing the symbol first of a man who dared—who told us not to challenge the white man's conscience, but to put his life on the line.

Although many whites cringed when he spoke and many blacks insisted he represented only a small minority, his now-famous 1964 "Ballot or the Bullet" speech stressed three concepts which now seem more than acceptable to many who would not have thought of listening six years ago: black political power, community control, and black business enterprise. "The black man," he said, "should control the politics and politicians in his own community. . . . We should own and operate and control the economy of our own community. . . . Our people not only have to be re-educated to the importance of supporting black business but the black man himself has to be made aware of the importance of going into business." This was revolutionary advocacy until ghettos began to burn down. Now such thoughts would even bring agreement from Richard Nixon.

Because it has taken us so long to come such a short distance, the demands of black people by some standards now seem unreasonable. From many sides we hear repeated the belief that we live in a democratic system with no need for an escalation of black rhetoric and assertiveness. We are reminded of all the "gains" made, all the black officials recently elected. For those who need to be reminded, many of the gains would have not been made without some of the rhetoric and assertiveness many describe as undesirable. The 1965 Voting Rights Act—the most sweeping voting rights bill passed in 90 years, and the first to provide direct Federal action to enable blacks to register and vote—would not have been gained without the March from Selma to Montgomery.

It has been this way longer than some would like to agree. The threat of a march on Washington in June, 1941, by A. Philip Randolph and other black leaders, caused President Franklin D. Roosevelt by Executive Order to establish the Committee on Fair Employment Practices. (Later killed in 1946 through an appropriations bill rider and not until 1964 was made part of a civil rights act.) Roosevelt, however, recommended no civil rights legislation during his Administration and none was enacted by Congress.

Relatedly, it would be false to assume that the 1964 Civil Rights Act—the most all-encompassing civil rights legislation then passed since Reconstruc-

tion—would have come without the far-reaching demonstrations and events of 1963 and 1964.

Keeping the pressure on—"being militant," if that is what it has to be called—is the only way most black people throughout the country have discovered brings any results. Out of disbelief action would result otherwise arose the slogan from many ghetto youths: "To bring America around we gotta burn it down." The apprehension took on credibility more and more in every sector; and the pressure is still on.

For those who would forget we now have a conservative in the White House there are many ways for black people to be constantly reminded. Not only has the present Executive leader exerted most of his efforts toward courting the white South and the "Silent Majority" (besides widening the war in Indochina); he has also tried unsuccessfully to dilute the 1965 Voting Rights Act, substituting it with a new *Nixon version* of proposed amendments. Finally, on June 17, after six months of continuing debate, Congress completed action to extend the Voting Rights Act to 1975, with Richard Nixon agreeing to sign the bill June 22. According to the Metropolitan Applied Research Center and the Southern Regional Council, an estimated 1,500 black elected officials now hold office—52 of them black mayors, 26 of whom are in the South; obviously, too many in number for the present Administration.

But blacks are continually told to "work within the system." For those who also forget that this is what has usually been tried, the records of the NAACP and Legal Defense Fund are ample proof. All those advocates, though, who still believe in the justice of the court system can only be said to have a high degree of idealism—one less shared by many than in previous years, and certainly not so by the Black Panthers. Corresponding to the latter view, Yale University President Kingman Brewster, Jr., on April 23 announced that, "I am appalled and ashamed that things should have come to such a pass in this country that I am skeptical of the ability of black revolutionaries to achieve a fair trial anywhere in the United States."

If the Executive and Judicial branches have not always acted as effectively as possible to protect civil rights of black citizens, so might the same be said of the Legislative Branch. Although nine black members presently occupy seats in the House, and one is in the Senate, almost without exception, all the powerful committees of both

houses of Congress are chaired by southerners. This is the legislative body vested with power by Article I, Section I of the Constitution—a Constitution which, when it was written, provided not one proposal for the civil rights of black people. It is this legislative body which could never succeed in bringing any anti-lynching legislation to the Senate floor, although this same issue in the House has a slightly more favorable record in comparison. (Anti-lynching bills were passed by the House at least twice—the Dyer bill, January 27, 1922, by a vote of 230-119, and the Gavagan bill, April 13, 1937, by a vote of 277-120.) The Senate, however, from 1938—when the first effort was made to vote cloture on a civil rights measure—until 1964, was unable to shut off southern filibusters on any of eleven civil rights measures. The year 1964 thus marked the first time cloture was successfully invoked to close off long debate (usually by southerners) on civil rights legislation. Cloture was likewise necessary and successful for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and Open Housing in 1968, even though the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960 were passed despite filibusters.

Outside the White House, the courts and Congress, black people traditionally have not had much sympathy from the FBI, the director of which since 1924 has been J. Edgar Hoover. In addition to making many hostile and unfair racial remarks over the years, one of his more recent was his public reference to Martin Luther King, Jr., as a "notorious liar." Moreover, although the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders found the underlying causes of urban unrest to be white racism, poverty, inferior housing, unemployment and poor housing, the Hoover contention was "the riots and disturbances have been characterized by spontaneous outbursts of mob violence by young hoodlums. . . ."

If many blacks in the streets of the nation cannot cite the facts as to exactly why the system doesn't work, the results can nevertheless be felt. If we have any feeling at all, we all can feel them. Black "militancy" is thus acting accordingly. It does not only mean wearing an Afro, a dashiki, giving a black power arm salute, or killing a cop. It says in effect, take the pressure off us, and put it where it belongs. It means, finally, bringing a way of life to bear and suffering any consequences necessary—none of which, as we have all discovered, could be any worse than all the struggle that has gone before.

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