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# WHITE VIOLENCE AND BLACK RESPONSE

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From Reconstruction to Montgomery

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HERBERT SHAPIRO

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## TWO

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### Lynching and Black Perspectives

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**T**HE POLITICAL violence of the Reconstruction era and that of the Populist years were connected by the willingness of the white rulers of the south to employ whatever means were necessary to destroy the unity of blacks and whites. Blacks in many areas continued to vote and even to hold office, but where political activity by blacks threatened to bring to life a majority coalition that would curb the property interests of the southern elite the answer was terror.

Violent acts were not confined to the sphere of political activity, however. Although the phenomenon of lynching antedated the Civil War, in the post-Reconstruction period the killing of blacks by white mobs, either individually or in groups, became an occurrence of increasing frequency. This violence, cresting in the early 1890s, was generated, as Edward L. Ayers suggests, by a general social crisis, in which the steep economic depression of the period was a key element.<sup>1</sup>

The specifics of each lynching might vary, but the general pattern of this racial barbarism was clear. Whites would be roused to hysteria by accounts of some purported black offense. The hysteria could be evoked by charges that a crime had been committed, but frenzy could also be incited by simply alleging that a black man had been "uppity," had argued with a white employer, or had neglected to move out of the path of a white person. The cry of rape, appealing to the most extreme fears and hatreds, drawing upon racist myths concerning black male sexuality and a hypocritical view of white womanhood, became a summons to the mob and also was used to justify the lynching to national public opinion. The mob would then begin the search for the black or blacks reported to have offended, and if the black person identified could not be found the mob would turn its wrath upon someone else, a wife perhaps or other relative of the accused, and indeed sometimes anyone who was black would do. The point was that for the supposed crime or insult the black community as a whole was accountable, and one black victim for the lynch mob would serve as well as another. The victims of the lynch mob

included grown men but also teenagers, elderly women, and pregnant mothers.

The lynchers, characteristically, were not content merely to kill the victim; the act of lynching was often transformed into a public spectacle, and sometimes hundreds or thousands of whites from the surrounding countryside would come to town to observe the event. The mob inflicted death, death that was the result of extraordinary, sadistic cruelty. Before death came the victim was tortured, tormented by having limbs or sexual organs amputated, by being slowly roasted over a fire. Before or after death the body might be riddled with bullets and dragged along the ground. After death pieces of the charred remains would often be distributed as souvenirs to the mob whose members desired a keepsake as a remembrance of the notable happening. In short, the phenomenon of lynching exhibited American society in its most ferocious and inhuman manifestation.

In the face of inhumanity, public authority either was indifferent or in numerous cases cooperated with the mob. Not only did sheriffs and jailers often willingly turn black victims over to the lynchers, but officers of the law frequently joined the mob. White society refused to take any effective action to stop lynching; the members of the white community were, strangely, most often unable to identify those who participated in the violence even when photographs of the mob were available; grand juries were often unwilling to indict even when they did have the names of those responsible, and trial juries seldom brought in guilty verdicts for the crime of lynching.<sup>2</sup> Executing a white person for lynching was virtually out of the question. Governors only rarely were willing to use their powers to protect public order and send troops to assure the safety of a black threatened by lynching. Polite southern society was likely to pronounce lynching distasteful and to see lynching as the work of poor whites, but the leaders of society did nothing to put a stop to the practice and in actuality tended to see lynching as most regrettable but justifiable.<sup>3</sup> The litany of rationalization revolved around the assertion that lynching was fundamentally caused by "negro criminality." Northern opinion, in the years after Reconstruction, generally lamented lynching and found it proof of southern backwardness but largely accepted the racist argument that southern white men were motivated by the desire to protect white women against black rape.

Generally reliable statistics on lynching are available for the years following 1882. As reported to the annual *Negro Year Book*, published at Tuskegee Institute, between 1882 and 1901 the largest number lynched in any one year was 255 and the smallest 107. The total number of

persons lynched in this interval was 3,130, and 1,914 of these were blacks.<sup>4</sup> For the period 1882-1903 the statistics show that sixty-three women were lynched, twenty-three of the victims white and forty black.<sup>5</sup> Lynching had become a regular, periodic occurrence in the South; word of several lynchings taking place in one week was routine news during this period. Translated from statistical abstraction, that signifies a reality that many thousands of blacks, perhaps most of the southern black population, had witnessed lynching in their own communities or knew people who had, knew the terror that struck the community when the mob was whipped to frenzy. All blacks lived with the reality that no black individual was completely safe from lynching.

Analysis of statistics concerning lynching gives the flavor of the underlying social realities. The muckraker Ray Stannard Baker reported the reasons given for lynchings in 1907 involving forty-nine black men and three black women. The figures indicate that eight of the victims allegedly were guilty of rape or attempted rape, but one black man was lynched for being the father of a boy who jostled white women, another was killed for having beaten a white in a fight, a woman was put to death as the wife of a rapist and a youth was lynched for being a rapist's son, one person was lynched for protecting a fugitive from a posse, someone was lynched for talking to white girls on the telephone, and three persons died for having expressed sympathy for the mob's victim. Among the lynch victims that year were also three persons charged with store burglary, and one individual was killed for supposedly stealing seventy-five cents.<sup>6</sup>

In the decades following Reconstruction white terror was with increasing frequency directed against Afro-Americans, a terror given free reign by the refusal of the federal government to enforce the guarantees of the Constitution. In this deteriorating situation Afro-Americans persisted in asserting their rights, resorted to the human right of self-defense, and sought to formulate an effective strategy that could lead to redeeming the promises of Reconstruction. The foremost leader of black America, Frederick Douglass, attempted to combine adherence to his Republican loyalties with militant calls to the American democratic conscience and uncompromisingly insisted on the full rights for which blacks had fought and sacrificed. Douglass would not agree with those he saw as proposing to abandon the southern struggle and encourage emigration to other regions. He remained the principled advocate of an effective coalition of white and black that could build a truly democratic America. Douglass's militancy and eloquence ran up against the reality that no major white force in America was now prepared to commit its strength to the cause

of black rights. His posture lacked short-run effectiveness, but he held up with all that was in him the goal of full democratic rights. Not for Douglass were the tactics of expediency urged by others who would compromise with white supremacy. Douglass, until his death in 1895, stands as a link between the radicalism of the abolitionist movement and Radical Reconstruction and the twentieth-century civil rights movement.

Douglass was forthrightly critical of the policy of exodus from the South. In an 1879 speech he delivered before the American Social Science Association Douglass asked: "Is the total removal of the whole five millions of colored people from the South contemplated? Or is it proposed to remove only a part? And if only a part, why a part and not the whole? A vindication of the rights of the many cannot be less important than the same to the few." He based his position on the argument that mass migration would undermine the struggle for democracy in the South. He granted that for the moment violence denied black people their rights, but he confidently asserted that "those rights will revive, survive and flourish again." He believed that the white supremacists were confronted with the choice of allowing blacks to vote or having the South's representation in Congress reduced and that "the chosen horn of this dilemma will finally be to let the Negro vote and vote unmolested." Douglass's optimism in 1879 was grounded in his confidence that the country's Republican leadership would move toward enforcement of constitutional guarantees, and he observed that President Hayes "has bravely, firmly and ably asserted the constitutional authority, to maintain the public peace in every State in the Union, and upon every day in the year; and he has maintained this ground against all the powers of House and Senate." Douglass argued that to organize "a general stampede" of blacks from the South was to further the abandonment of the principle that citizens in every state were entitled to protection of life and property. He also offered the practical objections that exodus would diffuse black political strength in the South, sending blacks into states in which they could exert little influence, and also that black labor, the backbone of the economy, was most likely to secure its greatest return in the South.

But Douglass would not bar black migration to the northern states. The right of every individual, black or white, to move freely about the country was to be protected. "If it is attempted," he declared, "by force or fraud to compel the colored people to stay, then they should by all means go; go quickly, and die, if need be, in the attempt." Black migration from the South had served a purpose; it represented "an emphatic and stinging protest against high-handed, greedy and shameless injustice to the weak and defenseless." Although he rejected exodus as a policy Doug-

lass pointed to the phenomenon of black migration to the North and West as evidence of prevailing injustice in the South. He characterized as "superficial, insufficient and ridiculous" the explanation of the exodus offered by racists. Blacks did not make the arduous move to Kansas because of the machinations of Republican politicians, or because of the urgings of greedy land speculators, or because of the agitational efforts of defeated southern Republicans. The actual reasons for blacks leaving their homes could be found in public testimony by blacks who told of their own experiences. Economic conditions were a major factor in the migration. Blacks were cheated by white merchants and storekeepers, and landowners conspired to prevent landowning by blacks. And added to economic oppression was violence. Douglass noted that blacks were "not only the victims of fraud and cunning, but of violence and intimidation; that from their very poverty the temples of justice were not open to them; that the jury box is virtually closed; that the murder of a black man by a white man is followed by no conviction or punishment." He told his audience that if the complaints of southern blacks were only half true they served amply to explain why some blacks had chosen to move.<sup>7</sup>

In 1879 Douglass was acutely aware of the oppressive conditions under which blacks of the South lived, but he also expressed the hope that the violence he pointed to signified only a passing phase in the movement from enslavement to freedom. By 1886, however, Douglass spoke more harshly, outraged by barbarous treatment of blacks in the South and the abject failure of national authorities to protect black rights. In a speech to a largely black audience Douglass gave full vent to his anger against the terrorists of the South and also to his intensely critical view of a government that did nothing while black citizens were being brutally assaulted and murdered:

I now undertake to say that neither the Constitution of 1789, nor the Constitution as amended since the war, is the law of the land. That Constitution has been slain in the house of its friends. So far as the colored people of the country are concerned, the Constitution is but a stupendous sham, a rope of sand, a Dead Sea apple, fair without and foul within, keeping the promise to the eye and breaking it to the heart. The Federal Government, so far as we are concerned, has abdicated its functions and abandoned the objects for which the Constitution was framed and adopted, and for this I arraign it at the bar of public opinion, both of our country and that of the civilized world. I am here to tell the truth, and to tell it without fear or favor, and the truth is that neither the Republican Party nor the Democratic

Party has yet complied with the solemn oath, taken by their respective representatives, to support the Constitution, and execute the laws enacted under its provisions. They have promised us law, and abandoned us to anarchy; they have promised protection, and given us violence; they have promised us fish, and given us a serpent.

Douglass was now less hopeful about the performance of Republican presidents, and he asked: "Has any one of our Republican Presidents since Grant, earnestly endeavored to establish justice in the South?" In the absence of such endeavor, blacks in the South were denied the rule of law and were now subject to the lynching mob. "This mob," Douglass declared, "takes the place of 'due process of law,' of judge, jury, witness, and counsel. It does not come to ascertain the guilt or innocence of the accused, but to hang, shoot, stab, burn or whip him to death. Neither courts, jails, nor marshals are allowed to protect him. Every day brings us tidings of these outrages. I will not stop to detail individual instances. Their name is legion." Douglass referred to recent events at Carrollton courthouse, Mississippi, in which armed whites, without provocation, opened fire on a group of unarmed blacks, killing eleven instantly and mortally wounding nine others. What particularly appalled him was that most Americans had by now become quite indifferent to racial violence in the South. "It is the old story verified," Douglass declared:

Vice is a monster of such frightful mien  
That, to be hated, needs but to be seen;  
But seen too oft, familiar with its face,  
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

In this speech Douglass addressed himself to the charge that the basic source of southern violence was black criminality. He reminded his audience that he had earlier observed that in some cases white criminals had disguised themselves as Negroes and that innocent blacks had been imprisoned and murdered for these crimes. But he also insisted on the vital relevance of social conditions to explaining criminal behavior by individual blacks. There was a lesson the American people had to learn: "That where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob, and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe." Douglass flatly denied the allegation that "nature" had made blacks criminals. It was slavery that had produced the "physically and mentally maimed and mutilated men" who appeared

in the police courts. It was slavery that took the Negro slave and "twisted his limbs, deformed his body, flattened his feet, and distorted his features, and made him, though black, no longer comely." Douglass did not equivocate in the choice between an explanation of crime in terms of innate characteristics and an environmentalist view. History, the oppression and cruelty of slavery, had crippled some blacks, but Douglass took his stand with those who believed in the perfectibility of men. "Time, education and training," he declared, would restore the crippled slave "to his natural proportions, for, though bruised and blasted, he is yet a man."

In the situation that black Americans then found themselves, what was to be done? To begin with, Douglass took issue with those who argued that blacks should take up arms in order to secure the vote. He had no illusions that those who disfranchised blacks represented simply "a few midnight assassins"; blacks, he asserted, would encounter "trained armies, skilled generals of the Confederate army, and in the last resort we should have to meet the Federal army." In Douglass's view black insurrection, in such circumstances, represented only madness.

As he had done earlier Douglass rejected once again the policy of mass exodus from the South. But he now added the qualification that he favored assistance to those who desired to emigrate to other parts of the country. The policy of diffusion, a policy of encouraging the distribution of blacks throughout America, was endorsed as a constructive response to the oppression directed against blacks in the South.

Beyond urging that both blacks and whites assist those wanting to migrate, Douglass at that point could not formulate policy offering short-range hope that the position blacks found themselves in could be changed. It was useful to use appropriate public occasions as a means of keeping the grievances of blacks before the country. Blacks could not relinquish the weapon of truth. And Douglass still clung to the Republican party, believing that "if any good is to come to us politically it will be through that party," although he had no apology to make for having hoped that the Democratic administration of Grover Cleveland would curb racist brutality. Basically, what he offered was the refusal to despair of the ultimate triumph of democracy. If blacks would cultivate the work ethic, "toil and trust, throw away whiskey and tobacco, improve the opportunities that we have, put away all extravagance, learn to live within our means," they would be able to call forth effective white allies who would support the black struggle for an equal chance.<sup>8</sup> As was true in the years before the Civil War, Douglass was committed to an alliance of blacks and whites, but in this new period he could articulate this strategy but could not design means of bringing it to life.

In the last year of his life Douglass returned to the theme of lynching. Some of his last strength was spent in exposing the "perfect epidemic of mob law and persecution" that he saw prevailing in the South, in analyzing the pretexts employed to justify lynching, and in considering the response of the southern white elite to the situation. He demonstrated that the basic aim of the lynchers was to render blacks powerless through disfranchisement. Douglass did not argue that blacks were never guilty of criminal acts, but he rejected the charge of criminality leveled against blacks as a group. In answer to the charge that blacks collectively constituted a criminal class Douglass pleaded "not guilty." He attacked the reliability of those who argued that the white South was menaced by black rapists. First of all, the main witness against the black man was the lynch mob, and this mob, frenzied by its own fury and setting itself up as judge, jury, and executioner, was hardly a competent witness. Douglass, however, impeached the testimony of others in the South, not usually found in the lynch mobs, who justified lynching. Those who refused to obey the Constitution, who violated oaths to carry out the laws, and justified denying blacks their right to vote did not inspire belief. Douglass further answered the charge by asserting that it strained belief to hold that blacks had suddenly become a class of rapists when this was contrary to the history of blacks in America. During the Civil War, while most white southern men served with the Confederate army, the charge had never been made. It was simply impossible to believe that blacks had in a few years been transformed into a criminal people.

Basic to Douglass's argument was his analysis of the changing nature of the rationalization the racists offered. Turning back to the Reconstruction era, Douglass recalled that although the enemies of Radical Reconstruction sought every means to win sympathy for their cause they did not then raise the cry of rape. They justified violence against blacks initially on the grounds that blacks planned insurrection and that they intended to murder all white people. The propaganda of the period conjured up visions of race war, but it did not charge blacks with sexual assault upon white women. When facts showed that the black conspiracies did not exist, white supremacists shifted to the argument that violence was justified to prevent the supremacy of the Negro over the white race. Why now, then, did the white South turn to the charge of rape? Douglass's answer was that the old tales of black insurrection and black supremacy were no longer serviceable. In the 1880s and 1890s whites were no longer so likely to believe that blacks plotted insurrection against all the tremendous might of local, state, and national authority, and clearly blacks were not about to dominate politically the affairs of the

South. A new rationalization for violence was necessary, and it was found in the rape charge. The new justification not only served to excuse the barbarism of the lynch mob but also supported the campaign to deny black Americans legislatively and judicially all protection under the Constitution.

What was the perspective for black America? Douglass did not encourage excessive optimism. The immediate future appeared to him "dark and troubled," with Republicans and Democrats generating proposals for disfranchisement. Douglass, however, continued to oppose the colonization of black Americans in Africa or elsewhere. In his view the colonization movement undermined the struggle for democracy at home without offering realistic prospects of freedom and opportunity in the lands to which blacks would migrate. The race question could be solved not if it was seen as the "Negro problem" but only if it was understood as a national problem that challenged all Americans to produce a solution consistent with democratic and Christian principles. At the end Douglass appealed to white Americans to be true to the democratic heritage, to give up their racial prejudice, and to "let the organic law of the land be honestly sustained and obeyed." Douglass, after all, did not ask so very much. Whites were "only required to undo the evil they have done, in order to solve this problem." Douglass offered a powerful indictment. If blacks were treated according to fundamental standards of justice and decency America would be impregnable. "Your Republic will stand and flourish forever," he assured his fellow Americans, if they would but banish the idea of one class ruling over another and would recognize that the rights of the humblest deserved protection as well as the rights of the mighty.<sup>9</sup>

T. Thomas Fortune, the editor of the *New York Age* and the *New York Negro World*, was a post-Reconstruction black leader whose response to white violence differed somewhat from that of Douglass. Born a slave in 1856, as a boy in Marianna, Florida, Fortune had been lastingly affected by the Ku Klux Klan terror that prevailed during the late 1860s.<sup>10</sup> Writing in the 1880s, Fortune had as his starting point the recognition of the terrible violence inflicted on blacks in the South. It was Fortune's view that southern whites had been educated to regard themselves as the holders of power and to view blacks merely as subjects. That training had led to "that exhibition of barbarity on the part of the South and impotence on the part of the government which makes us go to Roumania and the Byzantine court for fit parallel." Fortune flung out the accusation of treason against the racists who engaged in violence: "If we may not call the violence, the assassinations, which have disgraced the South,

*treason*, by what fitter name, pray shall we call it? If the nullification of the letters and spirit of the amendments of the Federal Constitution by the conquered South was not renewed *treason*, what was it? What is it?" Fortune further observed that the whites of the South had shown their superiority "in the superlative excellencies of murder, usurpation and robbery" and that blacks knew very well that they were disfranchised by violent means. How to react to this violence? The situation would be remedied either by violence or by recourse to reason, and Fortune declared that "no man who loves his country would sanction violence in the adjudication of rights save as a last resort." If violence was not the preferred remedy, neither was emigration to Africa. Fortune asserted:

The colored man is in the South to stay there. He will not leave it voluntarily and he cannot be driven out. He had no voice in being carried into the South, but he will have a very loud voice in any attempt to put him out. The expatriation of 5,000,000 to 6,000,000 people to an alien country needs only to be suggested to create mirth and ridicule. The white men of the South had better make up their minds that the black man will remain in the South just as long as corn will tassel and cotton will bloom into whiteness. The talk about the black people being brought to this country to prepare themselves to evangelize Africa is so much religious nonsense boiled down to a very sycophantic platitude. . . . The black people of this country are Americans, not Africans; and any wholesale expatriation of them is altogether out of the question.

Fortune argued that self-interest required the white South to alter its racial policies. Mob violence discouraged immigrants from coming to the South and led businessmen who might otherwise invest in the area to take their money elsewhere. No Dixie politician, Fortune believed, could gain national support for high office, given the South's prevailing disorderly condition. "Thoughtful, sober people," he observed, "will not entrust power to men who sanction mob law, and who rise to high honor by conniving at or participating in assassination and murder."

The strategy Fortune urged upon blacks centered around political independence as the means by which blacks would no longer be confronted by a politically monolithic white majority. The point was that racial "clannishness" must be avoided and that Afro-Americans, like other ethnic groups, needed to embrace an "assimilation of sentiment" in which ethnic loyalty did not require adherence to one party. For blacks a monolithic political stance had the consequence of evoking a monolithic white

response. Fortune was convinced that "the massing of black means the massing of white by contrast." Assimilation meant independence, an independence that would lead to Americanization. In the situation of the 1880s, where blacks could no longer expect federal protection, it was necessary that blacks maneuver between the political parties, making clear that their support was not to be taken for granted. Fortune urged that "the colored vote must be made as uncertain a quantity as the German and Irish vote." He also argued that blacks should pay more attention to their local interests and recognize that "the citizen of a State is far more sovereign than the citizen of the United States." The state was "a real, tangible reality" whereas the United States was merely an abstraction.

Though Fortune argued for political independence, it was in effect mainly an argument against commitment to the Republican party. He outlined a telling indictment of Republican betrayal. He began by noting that blacks had voted for Rutherford B. Hayes and yet Hayes and "his adversaries turned the colored voters of the South over to the bloodthirsty minority of that section." But according to Fortune, Hayes represented merely an instance of Republican infidelity:

The Republican party has degenerated into an ignoble scramble for place and power. It has forgotten the principles for which Sumner contended, and for which Lincoln died. It betrayed the cause for which Douglass, Garrison and others labored, in the blind policy it pursued in reconstructing the rebellious states. It made slaves freemen and freemen slaves in the same breath by conferring the franchise and withholding the guarantees to insure its exercise; it betrayed its trust in permitting thousands of innocent men to be slaughtered without declaring the South in rebellion, and in pardoning murderers, whom tardy justice had consigned to a felon's dungeon. It is even now powerless to insure an honest expression of the vote of the colored citizen.

Fortune quickly added that Bourbon democracy was "a curse to our land" because it placed itself in opposition to human freedom and universal brotherhood. It was "a fundamental impossibility" for a black person to be a Bourbon, white-supremacist Democrat, but a black individual could very well become a "progressive Democrat." What Fortune was advocating was not so much that blacks form an independent bloc in politics but that black voters be found on both sides of local political contests. Blacks were obligated fully to integrate politically with

the southern white population. Until this was done, he believed, "their path will lie in darkness and perhaps in blood."

Given the position he took in the 1880s, it is not strange that Fortune later allied himself with Booker T. Washington. This alliance may partly have had its roots in Washington's financial support of the newspapers Fortune edited, but it was also grounded in Fortune's view of the situation facing Afro-Americans. Already in the 1880s Fortune, though not rejecting higher academic education for black youth, maintained that "elementary and industrial" education was most needed.<sup>11</sup> But support for Washington also had deeper sources. Fortune favored black participation in politics and would not relinquish the claim to constitutional rights. But he proposed to operate within the constraint that racial matters were no longer viewed as a national question. Blacks had to find the ways effectively to come to terms with their white neighbors in the South. Political independence appeared a useful strategy so long as the door to political action was not completely shut. Assuming as Fortune did that there was little point in pressuring the federal government to act once the door of political action was shut, the Washington strategy of "accommodation" appeared to make sense. Blacks were to continue along the line of industrial education and to seek independence not through politics but rather through economic self-development. Fortune's thinking represented a policy in the process of transition from the militancy of Douglass to the "realism" of Washington.

Fortune proceeded from advocacy of black political independence to alignment with the leadership of Booker T. Washington. In his last years he edited the *Garveyite Negro World*. The evolution of journalist John Edward Bruce, who proceeded from championing black rights to supporting the nationalism of Marcus Garvey, was somewhat similar. But Bruce was perhaps most noteworthy in his upholding of retaliatory violence against the violence of racism. In 1889 he was especially forceful in an address he made to a Washington, D.C., audience. "The Man who will not fight for the protection of his wife and children," he declared, "is a *coward* and deserves to be ill treated. The man who takes his life in his hand and stands up for what he knows to be right will always command the respect of his enemy." Self-defense, as Bruce saw it, was proof of the falsity of racism. He stated that in the existing state of affairs "the only hope, the only salvation for the Negro, is to be found in a resort to force under wise and discreet leaders. He must sooner or later come to this in order to set at rest for all time to come the charge that he is a moral coward." Bruce explained that he hated "nambypambyism or anything that looks like temporizing" and believed that blacks should



not be "rash or indiscreet," but he carefully stated what needed to be done:

Under the Mosaic dispensation, it was the custom to require "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Under a no less Barbarous civilization than that which existed at that period of the world's history, let the Negro require at the hands of every white murderer in the South or elsewhere a life for a life. If they burn your houses, burn theirs. If they kill your wives and children, kill theirs. Pursue them relentlessly. Meet force with force, everywhere it is offered. If they demand blood, exchange with them until they are satiated. By a vigorous adherence to this course, the shedding of human blood by white men will soon become a thing of the past. Wherever and whenever the Negro shows himself to be a man he can always command the respect even of a cutthroat.

Bruce did not merely counsel individual action but rather stressed collective action, declaring: "Organized resistance to organized resistance is the best remedy for the solution of the vexed problem of the century which to me seems practicable and feasible."

Bruce passionately indicted the system of lynching. In a piece condemning the refusal of white American Christianity to speak out against racial wrongs, Bruce wrote:

Since the close of the late war of rebellion there has been going on in the South a systematic slaughter of innocent Negro men, women and children by white men, who control and direct the social and political affairs of that section of this country. It has been estimated that more than fifty thousand of such murders have been committed in the South within the past twenty-six years, and the cases are rare indeed where the guilty and bloody assassins have been apprehended when known, or punished for their crimes if apprehended.

In a speech he gave in 1890 to the Afro-American League he traced the features of the "modern barbarian, who is dignified by the title 'White Citizen.'" He placed this in historic perspective:

They now roast objectionable Negroes alive in certain portions of that Christian section of our God-blessed (?) country. I have read of the deeds of cruelty committed by one religious faction against another, of how thirty thousand were burned at the stake in one

day. How men, women, and children were thrown from high eminences upon wagons filled with sharp pointed spikes which lacerated their bodies and destroyed their lives; how men were hung with their heads downward until life was extinct; of Nero the tyrant and bigot who fiddled while the seven hilled city burned. But this modern barbarism practiced upon the Negro in Christian America by white men who boast of high civilization makes *me* "tremble for this country when I remember that God is just."

In 1901 in an article entitled "The Blood Red Record" Bruce reviewed the modern history of lynching. He itemized the twelve recorded instances of burning at the stake, involving fourteen individuals. He outlined the record for the year 1900, listing the names of individual victims, which indicated that of 117 persons lynched only eighteen were even charged with rape. He quoted an interview with the Chinese minister to the United States, Mr. Wu Ting-fang, in which the diplomat referred to lynching as "strictly an American institution," an institution in which peculiarly the law officers protected the mob rather than the prisoner. And Bruce was forthright about the role of northern indifference in perpetuating lynching:

The difference in the estimate of the white men of the South and the white men of the North, regarding the Negro, is that the former is frank, outspoken in the conviction that the Negro is fundamentally inferior to the white men, and, therefore, can never be his equal, while the white men of the North, who *almost* believe the same thing, patronize him, and in a half-hearted manner call him *brother*. Yet when this black *brother* is burned at the stake by his white Southern brother, his white Northern brother does not take on nearly so much, nor express himself with half the vigor, earnestness and bitterness that he does when Christian missionaries are massacred in China or when the serfs of Russia are brutally whipped with the knout in the salt mines of Siberia, or when the Armenian brethren are murdered by the hundred for *Christ's sake* by the unspeakable Turk.

Bruce asked why this was so, and his answer was that the Republican party for reasons "largely commercial" had suspended the work that had called it into being. "It is no longer the party of human rights." He asked if expansion, ship subsidies, the building of a great navy or a standing army were more important than protecting the rights of American citi-

zens. At least implicitly Bruce saw that the priorities of imperialism had displaced constitutional rights.

Self-defense and retaliatory violence, as Bruce saw it, were components of a broader strategy of racial unity. He explained: "The Negro must preserve his race identity, must unite his energies, talent and money, and make common cause. . . . Unity and harmony of sentiment and feeling, of act and deed, are the levers that must of necessity overturn American caste-prejudice." Blacks would approach a solution to racial injustice through means, he said, of cooperation, organization, and agitation. Bruce also struck a note that foreshadowed later developments in a call for internationalizing the American racial issue. He urged black leaders to "go abroad and recite the story of our wrongs at the hands of a race which murmured and fought because the heel of oppression was upon their necks." Their purpose should be to "make the name 'American' a bye word and a reproach among the Christian nations of the old world." There was in John Edward Bruce an echo of David Walker, the militant black abolitionist, who saw slavery as a fundamental feature of the American system. Bruce was plainspoken in declaring that "for more than a century *America* has lived a *lie*," and he saw abstract good intentions in the post-Civil War amendments, but he believed firmly they did not reflect any actual intent to extend the rights of citizenship to blacks.<sup>12</sup>

The growing white terror of the post-Reconstruction period also evoked a response that looked to long-term identification with Africa as the appropriate position of black Americans. Identification with Africa was not simply a reaction to violence. Many blacks, emerging out of the era of slavery, quite naturally viewed Africa as their ancestral homeland, the land of their origins from whence they had been kidnapped and brought to America. A special feeling for Africa was an expression of an embryonic sense of national identity and consciousness. But the interest in Africa was also shaped by the circumstances facing blacks following the crushing of Radical Reconstruction. Blacks, having been granted the forms of citizenship rights but largely denied the substance, might see Africa as a sanctuary from a violent America in which they would never truly be free. Africa could be seen as presenting an opportunity to build a new free black nation, and it was logical to believe that black nationhood in Africa would strengthen the position of those blacks remaining in the United States. In the late years of the nineteenth century, with its flowering of nationalism, blacks were among those who joined in believing that national identity and purpose were the path to power. The nationalist movement had produced a unified Germany and Italy and

called forth from European Jews the Zionist striving for return to Palestine as the only possible escape from anti-Semitism. From Afro-Americans it called forth articulation of black nationalism, and that nationalism was most often in these years focused upon Africa. At the very least, a movement of identification with Africa would underscore blacks' discontent with conditions of terror in America and might lead sober white people to realize that brutal treatment of blacks could lead to loss of that work force upon which white society depended. The call to identify with Africa represented the emergence of national consciousness, offered hope to those who believed it futile to struggle against racism in the United States, but also served as a means of protest and pressure and was thus a part of the struggle for the full freedom of black Americans.

In this era the foremost articulator of African identification was Bishop Henry McNeal Turner of Georgia. During the war Turner had served as chaplain of the First Regiment, United States Colored Troops, coming to this post from his position as pastor of the Israel Bethel Church in Washington, D.C. He was strongly committed to a sense of racial pride, writing of blacks in August 1865: "I claim for them superior ability." He recognized the ability and at the same time was aware of the force of circumstances in denying expression to ability. Early in 1865 he wrote: "Oh, how the foul curse of slavery has blighted the natural greatness of my race. It has not only depressed and horror-streaked the should-be glowing countenance of thousands, but it has almost transformed many into inhuman appearance." A few years later Bishop Turner had experienced firsthand the agony of the racist counterrevolution against Reconstruction and was himself expelled from his seat in the Georgia legislature to which he had been lawfully elected. At one point Turner encountered a young black minister, Robert Alexander, who had been repeatedly beaten and stabbed by whites in Opelika, Alabama. Turner wrote that Alexander resembled "a *lump of curdled blood*" and added: "O God! where is our civilization? Is this Christendom, or is it hell? Pray for us."<sup>13</sup>

As radical rule was destroyed in Georgia, with the federal government refusing to intervene, Henry Turner looked to other paths along which Afro-Americans might advance, and increasingly his perspective for the future centered around Africa. At the time of his ouster from the legislature in 1868 Turner gave vent to his bitter resentment of white Georgia society. Cooperation of white and black no longer seemed a likely prospect in that state, and Turner urged a new course for blacks to follow:

The black man cannot protect a country, if the country doesn't protect him; and if, tomorrow, a war should arise, I would not raise a musket to defend a country where my manhood is denied. The fashionable way in Georgia, when hard work is to be done, is, for the white man to sit at his ease, while the black man does the work; but, sir, I will say this much to the colored men of Georgia, as, if I should be killed in this campaign, I may have no opportunity of telling them at any other time: Never lift a finger nor raise a hand in defence of Georgia, unless Georgia acknowledges that you are men, and invests you with the rights pertaining to manhood. Pay your taxes, however, obey all orders from your employers, take good counsel from friends, work faithfully, earn an honest living, and show, by your conduct, that you can be good citizens.

This was plainly not a strategy of direct confrontation. Turner added the further comment that if the black members were indeed expelled from the Georgia legislature he would call a "colored Convention" and urge his friends to "send North for carpet baggers and Yankees and... to Europe and all over the world for immigrants" and that blacks in Georgia would elect the new arrivals to office, "in preference to sending a Georgian there."<sup>14</sup>

Turner never proposed that blacks relinquish their claim to constitutional rights. Even during the last years of Reconstruction he maintained this position. In 1874 he expressed in poetic form his reaction to the white terror:

The Freedman is dying 'mid carnage and gore  
 God of our fathers' hast thou given us o'er  
 In this bloody embrace, to these tigers a prey?  
 Let vengeance be thine! thou wilt repay.  
 Away with the thought!—for this is no dream;  
 They war against civil rights! that is their theme.  
 But soon will they cringe, as we know full well  
 The crisis has come and the tolling bells tell  
 We will not yield, not in fear of the grave,  
 The rights that belong to the free and the brave.<sup>15</sup>

But some months after writing this poem Turner remarked in the journal of the American Colonization Society that once blacks had learned the doctrines of Christianity and were educated to take control of Africa they would hear the voice of "a mysterious Providence," saying to them:

"Return to the land of our fathers."<sup>16</sup> The following year, 1876, Turner accepted an appointment as an honorary vice-president of the Colonization Society. Turner's commitment to Africa is perhaps nowhere more clearly explained than in comments published during 1883 in the *Christian Recorder*. Turner's interest in Africa was related to the extent of racial terror aimed at black citizens in the United States, but that interest also had a broader basis. In reply to views expressed by Benjamin Tanner that colonization was a moot issue because blacks had no desire to leave the United States, Turner took issue with Tanner for covering up the brutalities inflicted upon Afro-Americans. Both the North and the South, Turner charged, connived at obscuring the extent of racial violence. He asserted that "the half has never been told" of what had been inflicted upon blacks. "There is not a night, or a day either, the year round," he declared, "that our people are not most brutally being murdered. The reign of blood and slaughter is but little less than it was ten years ago, if any." Turner was angered by the charge that his interest in Africa was motivated solely by a desire to make the continent "a city of refuge." He denied the charge, but he also asserted the right of a people, any people, to seek refuge from persecution, affirming, "Yes, I would make Africa the place of refuge, because I see no other shelter from the stormy blast, from the red tide of persecution, from the horrors of American prejudice." He searched back into history and found that "self-interest, self-preservation, and self in all its aspects" constituted the "germ thoughts" of almost all colonization and emigration movements. He attempted to put his critics on the defensive by demanding that they confront the alternatives he viewed as the only options open to blacks. Either there would be "war, efforts at extermination, anarchy, horror and a wail to heaven" or else there would be intermarriage that would eliminate racial conflict. He challenged his critics to come up with a plan that would lead to intermarriage. Otherwise, he observed, "there is no peaceable future here for the negro." It is striking that, leaving colonization aside, Turner, as did white supremacists, saw intermarriage as the crucial issue in determining the future of race relations.

Turner went on to add the broader basis upon which he would develop colonization. He began with the proposition that no race could be respected until it had demonstrated its capacity to establish a government of its own. Here was the voice of an authentic nineteenth-century nationalist. Ignoring the achievements of the great medieval African kingdoms, Turner asserted that the Negro had not yet demonstrated that capacity and that until he did so "he will be a mere scullion in the eyes of the world." The second proposition was that American slavery was a

providential institution and that God intended slavery as "the primal factor" in the civilizing and Christianizing of Africa. Although he did not use the term, the implication was that slavery had created in blacks a "chosen people" who would do God's work. And, speaking in the language of moral absolutes, Turner declared that whoever opposed the return to Africa of enough blacks to begin the new mission "is fighting the God of the universe face to face."

The third principle advanced by Turner was that in an era when Western society was turning its attention to Africa it was time that the United States, too, "should awake to her share of duty in this great movement," remembering that the country owed blacks some forty billion dollars for services rendered during slavery. Finally, Turner dismissed as absurd the contention that the African climate posed an obstacle to emigration, and he made clear that he did not advocate a wholesale movement of Afro-Americans to Africa. It would be enough that five or ten thousand a year emigrate. Here he returned to the harsh realities of American racism and presented migration as the alternative to violence. It would be enough every year if merely "those who are sent to the penitentiary, hung and lynched for nothing," were taken to Africa. With such individuals alone he could "establish a government, build a country and raise a national symbol that could give character to our people everywhere." To this statement of position Turner added his urging that blacks assemble in convention, "a civil and moral convention" rather than a meeting for political purposes.<sup>17</sup>

In 1893 Turner was the driving force in arranging a national black convention. Meeting in Cincinnati, this assembly gathered at a time when statistics showed a steady increase in the frequency of lynchings, and the cause of citizenship rights had suffered a major setback in the defeat in Congress of the Force Bill, a measure to establish federal machinery for the enforcement of the right to vote. Turner no doubt saw the convention as an opportunity to rally support for African colonization, but clearly the central factor in bringing the delegates together was the mounting terrorization facing Afro-Americans. In the call for the convention Turner had declared: "The revolting, hideous, monstrous, unnatural, brutal and shocking crimes charged upon us daily, on the one hand, and the reign of mobs, lynchers, and fire-fiends, and midnight and mid-day assassins on the other, necessitated a national convention on our part, for the purpose of crystallizing our sentiments and unifying our endeavors for better conditions in this country, or a change of base for existence." This convention was not simply a forum for black nationalism but rather a meeting, in the tradition of black conventions, that sought to focus public

attention upon racial injustice, at the same time offering an opportunity for debate about a viable strategy for the future. In his opening remarks to the delegates Turner spoke at length about lynching and about the charge of rape that was most often given by white supremacists as the justification for lynching. He began by observing that "it is known to all present that not a week, and at times scarcely a day, has passed in the last three or four years but what some colored man has been hung, shot or burned by mobs of lynchers, and justified or excused upon the plea that they had outraged some white married or single woman, or some little girl going to or from school." Turner was not concerned with showing the falsity and hypocrisy of the charge that white women were threatened by black rapists. Asserting that if the charge was true "God has no attribute that will side with us" and that the centuries-long white rape of black women was no justification, Turner proposed that an inquiry be made as to the facts. He also suggested that if the charge proved true it was the responsibility of black leadership to denounce the practice and that if that did not suffice blacks should take charge of severely punishing those guilty of rape. Granting that blacks might be guilty, Turner argued that if blacks were criminals the basic responsibility should be laid at the door of white society and that such criminal behavior was proof that being in America had corrupted blacks. He was turning the justification for lynching into support for his position favoring return to Africa. Turner pointed to Africa and insisted that "the world will have to admit that they are the purest people, outside of polygamy, in their connubial and virgin morals, upon the face of the globe." He told his audience that white women from both America and Britain had assured him that no respectable white woman would be "improperly approached" in Africa. Turner further stated that the crime of rape was also largely alien to the experience of blacks in the West Indies, informing the convention that in the islands only one charge of rape had been made against a black man since 1832.

If rape was committed by some blacks in the United States, this phenomenon was a product of the social environment. "Like begets like," declared Turner; blacks were degraded by the conditions imposed upon them in the United States, degraded at the ballot box, and, by segregation and discrimination in access to public facilities, "degraded in most of the large cities by being compelled to rent houses in alleys and the most disreputable streets." Degradation had consequences, and Turner found it possible "that in many instances we are guilty of doing a series of infamous things that we would not be guilty of, if our environments were different." He believed that change in the moral conduct of blacks re-

quired a change in their surroundings, rejecting the idea that blacks "will ever stand out in the symmetrical majesty of higher manhood, half free and half slave." Turner's analysis led him to his "African preferences," to focusing attention upon the development of a homeland "where we can cultivate the higher properties or virtues of our manhood."

Whatever his view of the allegation that blacks were guilty of sexual crimes against white women, Turner unreservedly condemned lynching as "an act of barbarism." He took his stand with the elementary legal precept that a person was innocent until "tried by an impartial process of law" and convicted. He had only contempt for the justification given for some lynchings that the victim had confessed his crime to the mob. "Confessed it to whom?" Turner asked. "Confessed it to a set of bloody-handed murderers, just as though a set of men who were cruel enough to take the life of another were too moral to tell a lie." Turner found strange the circumstances that the lynchers could never be identified but the newspapers knew every detail of a lynching, "can advance what they are going to do, how and when it was done, how the rope broke, how many balls entered the Negro's body, how loud he prayed, how piteously he begged, what he said, how long he was left hanging, how many composed the mob, the number that were masked, whether they were prominent citizens or not, how the fire was built that burnt the raper, how the Negro was tied, how he was thrown into the fire, and the whole transaction." In Turner's view lynching had two possible objectives, either to prevent blacks from speaking in their own defense or, more fundamentally, to exterminate blacks as a group.

Apart from emigration, Turner's only specific remedy for lynching was the alternative of having the rapist castrated and then turning him loose "to live and remain as a monument of his folly and madness." At least that policy would prevent the taking of lives. Mutilation, according to Turner, was the best that could be hoped for by a black accused of rape in the United States.

Beyond submitting to castration in order to escape death, Turner offered the option of moving to Africa. To remain passively in America was to grant that blacks were unfit to live as a free people. Passivity was degrading, but Turner considered physical resistance to be madness. Only an idiot would contemplate a few million ex-slaves grappling with sixty million whites, of "two hundred and sixty-five millions of dollars battling with one hundred billion of dollars."<sup>18</sup> What was left was colonization. Turner was not simply abandoning those blacks who remained behind in America; he was genuinely convinced that tangible links to Africa would strengthen the position of American blacks.

This 1893 convention has been judged by at least one scholar as a failure, and from the standpoint that this meeting failed to project a unified program for the future, could not resolve the debate between integrationists and emigrationists, that judgment is at least accurate in part.<sup>19</sup> But perhaps the most striking feature of this meeting is that a convention, convened by black America's most prominent emigrationist, served as a forum for protest against injustice and terror and set forth demands directly relevant to the racial struggle in this country. The convention adopted a resolution urging Congress to enact legislation under which federal courts would take jurisdiction of cases of mob violence "in which life is lost or property destroyed, or both, or where parties are whipped, tortured or otherwise maltreated." United States marshals would be empowered to employ detectives for the purpose of identifying the lynch mobs. The gathering also unanimously approved a resolution, offered by a South Carolina clergyman, calling upon every black man, woman, and child in the United States to set aside May 31 as a day of fasting and prayer for an end to oppression. A telegram, sent by a group of St. Louis blacks, was read to the convention, urging support for a constitutional amendment indemnifying losses of life and property to mob violence and proposing that a delegation be sent to Europe to publicize the conditions facing black Americans.<sup>20</sup>

At its final session the Cincinnati convention considered and adopted a resolution dealing jointly with the issues of rape and lynching. The resolution condemned assault upon "female virtue, by whomsoever perpetrated and against whomsoever directed," and pledged support for the arrest and conviction of "the foul fiend who sacrifices his manhood to the coercive lust of his passion." But condemned also was the "cowardly resort" of lynch law that had reached so low as to burn victims alive. The convention also heard a report from a special investigating committee assigned to examine the charge of rape against blacks. The committee noted that in some instances the charge was supported by evidence but contended that serious doubt of guilt existed in 20 percent of the cases and that in 10 percent the accused black was innocent. The committee took its basic stand on the concept that the dignity of law must be upheld. The committee also noted what most white Americans preferred to ignore, that in a number of instances black women were assaulted by white men and that no punishment whatever for such crimes was inflicted. A specific incident cited was that of the convicted white rapist, Tom Hill, of Spring Place, Georgia, who was set at liberty by a mob that forcibly broke into the prison where he was confined. The report of this special committee was extremely restrained and judicious and if anything tended

to understatement rather than exaggeration. The tenor of this report made clear that this meeting was dominated not by radicals and agitators but by cautious and quite respectable leaders of the black community.<sup>21</sup>

Before adjourning, the convention also warmly received a communication from the white veteran of Radical Reconstruction, Judge Albion Tourgee. Tourgee centered his attention not so much upon the question of emigration as upon the factors that impelled some Afro-Americans to consider leaving the United States. He outlined a bill of particulars, itemizing the forms of oppression inflicted upon blacks. He bitterly condemned lynching and the failure of public authority to punish the lynchers. Tourgee observed that three alternative courses of action were urged in response to the facts, one alternative that of outright submission, the second that of direct resistance, and the third that of expatriation to Africa. Outright submission was obviously unacceptable to any self-respecting people, and confrontation would "only invite extinction at the hands of the mob, backed by the power of the States, supported ultimately by the Army and Navy of the United States." As for emigration Tourgee's view was that a white, Christian America that would not deal fairly and humanely with citizens within its boundaries was likely to be even more brutal in its treatment of aliens thousands of miles away in Africa. By implication Tourgee also counseled rejection of any notion that an alliance of blacks and poor whites was a solution to the racial issue. He emphasized that white employers and laborers had a common interest in maintaining the subjection of blacks. Tourgee's advice was to insist upon justice. Relying upon the force of public opinion was to be preferred to begging for mercy. He assured the members of the convention that the American people had learned that wrong must be righted and that though they were slow to anger they had in the Civil War, after all, sacrificed "the full measure of blood the lash had shed, in order to purchase liberty for the oppressed and put upon him the robe of citizenship, by which they meant to secure him from injustice and oppression." The delegates applauded a policy statement that largely continued the Douglass policy of demanding that American society be true to its antislavery heritage and fulfill the pledges made during the years of Civil War and Reconstruction. This convention, though offering a platform for advocates of emigration, confirmed the fact that the struggle for full equality in the United States still dominated black perspectives for the future.<sup>22</sup>

The Cincinnati convention did not adjourn, however, before hearing from Bishop Turner a fervent restatement of the case for emigration that stated bluntly some truths about the depths of American racism. The

*Cincinnati Commercial Gazette* summarized some of the points Turner made:

He knew of at least two million of black men and women who were virtually dying to return to Africa. He could fill five hundred steamships in a month of noble-hearted colored men and women who were hungering and thirsting to return to Africa. He said this Nation had brought us here, and worked us for 250 years and turned us loose, and left us in a powerless degradation, and is now entailing upon us a proscription, and is enacting laws that make our existence worse than slavery, for in slavery times white men would protect their negroes from self-interest; now we are the prey of everybody, even foreigners, who would come here from the ends of the earth. He could prove by mathematical calculation that this nation owed the negro \$49,000,000,000 for work performed and services rendered, and would have to disgorge some of that money in process of time in helping us to return to the land of our ancestors or in manufacturing missiles and engines for our extermination, unless it accorded us manhood equality, for the negro would be satisfied with nothing less than full-fledged citizenship.

Turner saw little merit in the argument that blacks should be able to migrate to any portion of the United States. The nation was contaminated by racism for, as Turner explained it,

where he can go in this country I do not know, for the abominable and inhuman decision of the U.S. Supreme Court affects the status of the negro all over it. Men need not talk about the South any more than the North, for the North indorses everything that the South does and the South indorses everything the North does that is degrading to the negro. I live in the South, and there are thousands of good people, and many of them tell me that the first thing the negro can do is to seek more congenial quarters, for it is not their intention to accord to the negro the same as they accord to the white man, civilly or politically.

Turner fused a hatred of racism with a sense that this ideology was irrevocably linked to American society.<sup>23</sup>

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century concern with lynching was a consistent theme running through the public activities of practically every black leader. But to be effective concern had to be transformed

into a vocal movement and public opinion aroused both at home and abroad. A prime factor in building that movement was the work of a dynamic and fearless woman, Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Her activity and leadership served to connect the struggle of the 1890s with the new civil rights movement that emerged after the turn of the century. She entered boldly into the public argument concerning lynching, providing specific evidence as to lynching's barbarous nature and tearing apart the rationalization that lynching protected white womanhood. Ida B. Wells-Barnett countered racist myth with irrefutable fact.

Already in the mid-1880s Ida B. Wells-Barnett eloquently expressed her revulsion at instances of racist violence. At the time of the 1886 Carroll County, Mississippi, lynchings she wrote in her diary: "O God, when will these massacres cease—it was only because they had attempted to assassinate a white man (and for just cause I supposed). Colored men rarely attempt to wreak vengeance on a white one unless he has provoked it unduly." Later that same year she wrote a newspaper article about an incident that occurred in Jackson, Tennessee. "A colored woman accused of poisoning a white man," she reported, "was taken from the county jail and stripped naked and hung up in the courthouse yard and her body riddled with bullets and left exposed to view! O my God! Can such things be and no justice for it?" The evidence against the woman was that rat poison had been found in her house.<sup>24</sup>

Wells, born in Mississippi in 1862, attended the Methodist Freedman's Aid Society's Rust College and became a teacher. Moving to Memphis she became editor of the newspaper *Free Speech*. She first drew national attention following the lynching in Memphis on March 9, 1892, of three black men, "three of the best specimens of young since-the-war Afro-American manhood," whose crime had been to operate a grocery store in competition with a white merchant. The white competitor led a raid upon the black-owned business, accompanied by police officers in civilian clothing. The blacks believed they were under assault, fired upon the whites, and three of the officers were wounded. Although the policemen recovered, the president, manager, and clerk of the store, Tom Moss, Will Stewart, and Calvin McDowell, were taken from the Memphis jail and lynched. This occurrence was one of numberless incidents refuting the contention that black achievement was the effective answer to racism. According to Wells-Barnett, although the Memphis black community seethed with rage concerning this lynching, the city's black ministers, newspaper editors, and other leaders "counselled obedience to the law which did not protect them." *Free Speech*, however, went one step further and advised blacks to leave Memphis, and as a result a number of blacks

did indeed leave the city. As a newspaper that exposed the facts about lynching, the *Free Speech* irritated the city's white racist leadership, and in a few weeks the pretext was found that would result in forcing Miss Wells-Barnett also to leave Memphis. On May 21, 1892, *Free Speech* had carried an editorial noting that since the paper's last issue eight blacks had been lynched, three for killing a white man "and five on the same old racket—the new alarm about raping white women." The editorial went on to observe that nobody in the South believed "the old thread bare lie" that black men raped white women. And then came a line that infuriated the white supremacists: "If Southern men are not careful, they will overreach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women." The racist response to this comment was to threaten violence. The *Memphis Daily Commercial* announced that "the fact that a black scoundrel is allowed to live and utter such loathsome and repulsive calumnies is a volume of evidence as to the wonderful patience of Southern whites. But we have had enough of it." The *Evening Scimitar* declared that patience was not a virtue and then exhibited something of the substance of white-supremacist "civilization": "If the negroes themselves do not apply the remedy without delay it will be the duty of those whom he has attacked to tie the wretch who utters these calumnies to a stake at the intersection of Main and Madison Sts., brand him in the forehead with a hot iron and perform upon him a surgical operation with a pair of tailor's shears." Wells-Barnett later reported that Memphis's leading businessmen met at the Cotton Exchange and threatened the owners of *Free Speech* with lynching. Her partner was forced to flee, and she herself, away on vacation in New York, was advised she could not return. Creditors seized the paper's offices and sold off the equipment.<sup>25</sup>

Driven out of business, Ida B. Wells-Barnett took up a new career as crusader against lynching, taking her message before any audience that would listen. She published her first pamphlet about lynching, *Southern Horrors*, in 1892. Introducing the pamphlet was a letter from Frederick Douglass, expressing both the hope and the despair that marked his last years. Douglass praised Wells-Barnett for having "dealt with the facts with cool painstaking fidelity and left those naked and uncontradicted facts to speak for themselves." He noted that, if American conscience were only half alive, "a scream of horror, shame and indignation would rise to heaven wherever your pamphlet shall be read." But he observed that even crime had the power to reproduce itself and that sometimes it appeared that blacks were deserted "by earth and Heaven." Yet there

was no counsel of retreat. Douglass's conclusion was that "we must still think, speak and work, and trust in the power of a merciful God for final deliverance."<sup>26</sup>

Like Douglass, Ida B. Wells-Barnett sought to arouse the national conscience, but in her case the means to accomplish this was to concentrate upon the assembling and dissemination of information concerning specific instances of brutality against blacks. The muckraking movement has usually been seen as a crusade of white journalists who attempted to focus public opinion upon social problems requiring solution. Ida B. Wells-Barnett was true to the muckraking spirit, not simply denouncing injustices but carefully researching her facts and presenting them for public consideration. In *Southern Horrors* she told the story of what had happened in Memphis, quoting extensively from the white press, and added information about other lynchings that had recently occurred. This factual emphasis was also to be found in other pamphlets she was later to write. Her activity as a journalistic crusader against lynching was supplemented by many platform appearances, including talks she gave during two highly successful visits to England.<sup>27</sup> As earlier chattel slavery had become a matter of international concern, she used her eloquence to make lynching an international question.

In her writings and speeches Ida B. Wells-Barnett turned the charge of rape back upon the white supremacists, detailing instances of assaults upon black women. In *Southern Horrors* she contrasted two incidents that occurred in Nashville, one in which the state militia was called out to protect a white man charged with raping a black girl and another in which a black man, accused of raping white women, was brutally lynched, with the governor, the militia, and the police doing nothing to stop the violence.<sup>28</sup> Wells-Barnett dealt further with the question of rape against black women in an examination of lynching, *A Red Record*, published in 1895.<sup>29</sup>

While in England Ida B. Wells-Barnett was drawn into controversy with Frances Willard, the leader of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Wells-Barnett drove home the point that in the interest of developing support among white southerners for the temperance crusade Frances Willard was willing to excuse acts of violence against blacks and other infringements of constitutional rights. The British public was informed of Willard's statement, during an 1890 meeting of the WCTU held in Atlanta, to the effect that it was not fair "that a plantation negro who can neither read nor write, whose ideas are bounded by the fence of his own field and the price of his own mule," should be entrusted with the ballot. Willard had further added that the white South deserved all

possible sympathy because "the colored race multiplies like the locusts of Egypt" and because the safety of women and family was so menaced "that the men dare not go beyond the sight of their own roof tree." Ida B. Wells-Barnett charged Frances Willard with condoning "fraud and murder, rapine, shooting, hanging and burning; for all these things are done now by the Southern white people." The British were also informed that Frederick Douglass had denounced the statements made by Willard. When in an interview published in the *Westminster Gazette* Frances Willard attempted to refute the charge of indifference to lynching, Wells-Barnett returned to the attack, pointing to the fact that not a single black woman was admitted to the southern WCTU and that only in the *Gazette* interview was Willard moved to voice some criticism of lynching.

In *A Red Record* Wells-Barnett quoted chapter and verse from the record to document the charge that the leader of the WCTU had been silent about lynching until silence was no longer possible. Prior to the beginning of the public crusade against lynching, the WCTU "had no word, either of pity or protest; its great heart, which concerns itself about humanity the world over, was, towards our cause, pulseless as a stone." Even after public agitation against lynching had begun, she wrote, the WCTU at its 1894 convention in Cleveland had refused to adopt an antilynching resolution, and when later a statement on the issue appeared in the union's journal it was of very little use. The statement expressed the hope that the time would come "when no human being shall be condemned without due process of law" but balanced that against the hope that the time would also come "when the unspeakable outrages which have so often provoked such lawlessness shall be banished from the world, and childhood, maidenhood and womanhood shall no more be the victims of atrocities worse than death." Wells-Barnett correctly appraised this declaration as an apology for lawlessness. As Willard's most recent biographer notes, the WCTU leader "accepted the rallying cry of the lynchers who used the excuse of protecting white womanhood from assault and rape to justify their crimes."<sup>30</sup> In the controversy with Frances Willard, Ida B. Wells-Barnett came to grips with the phenomenon of white reform organizations that would sacrifice the fundamental interests of black people in order to obtain the support of racists.

What could be done to prevent lynching? Ida B. Wells-Barnett offered, along with the statistics and accounts of lynchings, a program for action. She called upon each reader to disseminate facts and to seek to persuade "all Christian and moral forces" to pass resolutions against lynching. Readers were also urged to bring to the attention of southerners the refusal of capital to invest in areas where mob violence ruled. Viewing



the antilynching question as a moral struggle and confident in the power of truth, she urged support for a bill under consideration in Congress that would create a national commission to investigate the facts about assaults by males upon females during the past ten years and also to inquire as to the facts about "organized and unlawful violence to the person."<sup>31</sup> The bill was introduced by the same Senator Blair who had earlier introduced legislation to provide federal assistance to education in the South. As was the case with Blair's earlier bill, the proposal to investigate was not to be adopted. The education of blacks and poor whites in the South was not to be supported by federal funds, and the federal government would not lift a finger to protect the physical safety of blacks. With great courage and skill Ida B. Wells-Barnett used the weapon of truth in the struggle to stop lynching, but that weapon was not enough to put an end to the atrocities against blacks that continued to occur almost every week of the year. Nevertheless, the contribution she made to the movement against lynching was of fundamental importance. The struggle of ideas is inseparable from any movement for social change, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett did much to expose the lie that lynching had its justification in the need to protect outraged white womanhood.<sup>32</sup>

Alexander Crummell, with long experience in the United States and Liberia, was a spokesman whose thought is relevant to more fully understanding the Afro-American response to racial violence. In his later years pastor of Saint Luke's Episcopal Church in Washington and in 1897 convenor of the American Negro Academy that brought together a number of prominent black intellectuals, Crummell vigorously urged the development of black culture. W. E. B. Du Bois admiringly wrote of him: "He never faltered, he seldom complained; he simply worked, inspiring the young, rebuking the old, helping the weak, guiding the strong."<sup>33</sup> Firm in principle, broad in experience, committed to ideals of black progress, Crummell to some considerable extent was an earlier version of Du Bois.

During the decades of mounting violence following the Civil War Crummell was indefatigable in refusing to have the perspective for the black future defined by racism. In a paper he delivered in 1888 Crummell stated his position: "Indeed, the race-problem is a moral one. It is a question entirely of ideas. Its solution will come especially from the domain of principles. Like all the other great battles of humanity, it is to be fought out with the weapons of truth." Leaving aside the question of social relations, Crummell focused upon civic and political liberty as an idea whose time had come. The United States, he explained, "should be agitated and even convulsed till the battle of liberty is won, and every

man in the land is guaranteed fully every civil and political right and prerogative. . . . I wish to show that the probabilities tend toward the complete and entire civil and political equality of all the peoples of this land. . . . it is to be observed in the history of man that, in due time, certain principles get their set in human society, and there is no such thing as successfully resisting them." The present demand of democracy, Crummell stated, was "the equality of man in the State, irrespective of race, condition, or lineage. The answer to this demand is the solution of the race-problem." The fundamental idea of American life was democracy, "and if this nation will not submit herself to the domination of this idea—if she refuses to live in the spirit of this creed—then she is already doomed, and she certainly will be doomed." There were those who desired racial oligarchy to prevail in America, but Crummell averred that "nations are no longer governed by races, but by ideas." He was confident that the spirit of democracy foretold of its own fulfillment and that disasters along the way were trivialities, "its repulses only temporary." This Crummell declared at a time when lynchings mounted in frequency and blacks were about to be almost entirely driven from participation in southern politics.

During this period when racist propaganda cried that lynching was necessary to protect white women from black sexual assault Crummell spoke of the particular oppression inflicted on black women. The voice of passion spoke in his remarks. "The lot of the black *man* on the plantation," he said, "has been sad and desolate enough; but the fate of the black woman has been awful! Her entire existence from the day she first landed, a naked victim of the slave trade, has been degradation in its extremest forms." Crummell recounted the brutal treatment of black women that characterized American slavery, but he also observed that despite the barbaric treatment "so much struggling virtue lingered among the rude cabins . . . so much womanly worth and sweetness abided in their bosoms." He reminded his audience of what took place under slavery to make the point that white men had not forgotten the habits of the slave regime. Thousands of young black women served as schoolteachers, but even these women, Crummell observed, "as well as their more ignorant sisters in rude huts, are followed and tempted and insulted by the ruffianly element of Southern society, who think that black *men* have no rights which white men should regard, and black *women* no virtue which white men should respect!" Crummell spoke of the special qualities he perceived in black women, contending that "in tenderness of feeling, in genuine native modesty, in large disinterestedness, in sweetness of disposition and deep humility, in unselfish devotedness, and in warm, motherly assiduities, the Negro woman is unsurpassed by any other woman on this earth."

Crummell was anxious that an "uplifting civilization" be implanted within the race, and for this he believed the education of black women was of critical importance. Although recognizing the need for training in the fields of higher culture, he called for concentrating upon industrial and domestic education. He was particularly interested in the education of the masses, "for the raising up women meet to be the helpers of poor men the RANK AND FILE of black society."

Crummell advocated the involvement of southern whites in programs of black education, but he firmly insisted that whites from the North must not be excluded from such work. And he most definitely stressed that blacks must give leadership to any effort at uplifting the race. "The true leaders of a race," he said, "are men of that race; and any attempt to carry on missions opposed to this principle is sure to meet disastrous failure!" Black leaders trusted "those universal and unflinching tendencies of TRUTH, JUSTICE, and EQUITY" that marked the history of Afro-Americans.

Crummell would have black youth prepare themselves for all fields of endeavor. He proceeded from the belief that all crafts were honorable and that there was no calling in which whites were engaged for which blacks were not fit. He asked: "Is there anything *they* do, which we can't do?" Crummell celebrated work. Work was a means of climbing the ladder toward higher achievement; it represented law, system, and organization and so was a means of progress. Through work it was possible to "grasp the permanent and abiding forces of nature and society:—and through them press on to power, to majesty, to wealth, and to social and political prerogatives which ere long, will be the common inheritance of both our manhood and our intelligence!"<sup>34</sup>

Through all the travails that Afro-Americans endured Crummell did not relinquish his vision of the future. He believed, heart and soul, that black advancement was in harmony with the scheme of the universe, and his great sense of confidence was a source of strength to a people menaced by assault and disfranchisement. He was of that black leadership group that would not in the slightest degree trim its sails and succumb to terror.

Black leadership responded in various ways to the violence characterizing the post-Reconstruction years, but these responses, of course, were only the most visible part of the responses of Afro-Americans. Both nationally and locally the best-organized segment of the Afro-American community was the black church, and clergymen were impelled to step forward as articulators of protest, yet sometimes restrained by the need to assure the survival of the institutions they represented. The response to violence must also be looked for in the actions at the grass-roots level

of individuals and groups of Afro-Americans who did not publish their views or experiences but who most directly confronted white terror. It is to be found in the actions of a Reconstruction black, Zeke High, who fought with every ounce of his strength against racists who came to drag him out of his cell and lynch him.<sup>35</sup> It is found in the courage of a Mississippian, Charles Caldwell, who would not abandon his commitment to Radical Reconstruction and met with dignity the murderers who assassinated him.<sup>36</sup> It is seen in the quiet resolution of blacks who packed their belongings and began the long trek to Kansas after the crushing of Reconstruction. There was also the southern black who sought to save himself by inserting a note in the newspaper to the effect that he would have nothing further to do with politics, and there is the black clergyman of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in Matagorda County, Texas, who tried to smooth things over in the aftermath of violence by claiming that difficulties had resulted from "bad counsel on both sides."<sup>37</sup> There is the response of the Memphis blacks who did not take up arms after a lynching but who nonetheless protested by abandoning their jobs and leaving the city. Reaction to violence is also found in the memory of blacks living today who recall accounts of how parents or grandparents had been traumatically affected by word of lynchings occurring in their own or adjacent communities.

Resistance to terror is also seen in the acts of blacks who fought violence with violence, most often against overwhelming odds, and who died while fighting back but not before they took one or more of the racists with them. A case in point is the battle of Robert Charles, a New Orleans black man whose story was told by Ida B. Wells-Barnett in a pamphlet, *Mob Rule in New Orleans*.<sup>38</sup> Robert Charles and a black youth, Lenard Pierce, had been sitting on a doorstep on Dryades Street when three policemen approached and attempted to arrest them. One of the officers clubbed Charles, and in self-defense the black man drew a gun, shot and wounded the policeman, and in the exchange was himself wounded. That was the opening incident in what became a running battle between the New Orleans police and the wounded black fugitive.

Several hours after the incident on Dryades Street police came to Charles's home, seeking to arrest him. Charles, however, would not submit, and he shot and killed two of the officers, a patrolman and a captain. Official New Orleans now organized a massive manhunt, and the instructions were to produce Charles's body, dead or alive. Mayor Capdevielle announced that the city would pay a reward of \$250 for the delivery of Charles's body, appointing himself judge and jury by describing Charles as "the Negro murderer." The *New Orleans Picayune* in-

licated in its news reports that Charles, if found, would be shot on sight. Hundreds of policemen patrolled the streets, and civilians were also called upon to join in the hunt. Blacks, especially when gathered in groups, were subject to indiscriminate arrest, and at least one black prisoner, in police custody, was brutally beaten by a white mob.

On the second day following the Dryades Street episode, the white mob gave full vent to its fury. Pawnshops were looted, and at least thirteen blacks were described by the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* as “severely beaten and maltreated.” Inflicting injuries, however, was not enough for this mob, and it soon turned to killing. A black passenger on a streetcar was chased by a mob, kicked and beaten, and finally shot to death. Another black, seventy-five years of age, was shot and killed on his way to work at the French Market. The next day, a black woman was shot by a white mob firing through the shutters and windows of her home. Those responsible for these acts of violence were never located, and no one punished for them.

After four days the police learned of Charles’s whereabouts and laid siege to his place of hiding. But Robert Charles made a notable last stand, fought a mob of 20,000, and before dying killed seven of his would-be captors, seriously wounded eight, and left twelve slightly wounded.<sup>39</sup> Charles was killed when the building in which he hid was set afire and he was forced to flee. The *Times-Democrat* announced that after Charles was pronounced dead his body was “shot, kicked, and beaten almost out of semblance to humanity.”<sup>40</sup> Even while the battle with Charles was in progress another black, apparently for no other reason than that he was black, was chased by a mob in the French Quarter and shot and stabbed to death.

What happened in this episode demonstrated the reality that black individuals who would directly challenge the armed enforcers of racial oppression, who would not submit to police harassment and false arrest, had to pay the price of death. But there were such individuals as Robert Charles, and he and others like him were not lunatics. They were individuals who would rather die than submit to oppression, and if their resistance could be expressed only through individual acts, they would take that course. Such resistance did not win immediate victories—often it provided racists with pretext for further brutality against blacks—but it did serve as a warning that extreme oppression could provoke retaliation and demonstrated to those inclined to believe their own “Sambo” stereotype that blacks could fight valiantly indeed.

Who was Robert Charles? The evidence indicates that he had been interested in the emigration movement to Africa and had served as a local agent of the *Voice of Missions*, the newspaper published in Atlanta

by Bishop Henry McNeal Turner. The *New Orleans Times-Democrat* noted that material found in Charles’s room showed he “was desirous of improving himself intellectually in order that he might conquer the hated white race.” According to several persons who knew him, Charles was a quiet, law-abiding individual. One coworker in the emigration movement wrote Ida B. Wells-Barnett that Charles was “mild but earnest” in his advocacy of emigration and that his work was “apparently prompted from his love of humanity.” Robert Charles made his choice. Committed to the emigration movement and probably convinced that first-class citizenship rights could not be won by blacks, he would live peaceably and work to interest others in emigration to Africa. But he would not yield to racist brutality, and to racists that made him a desperado. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, however, had another view. She was quite certain that “to the people of his own race Robert Charles will always be regarded as the hero of New Orleans.”<sup>41</sup> The oppressed and the oppressor can never agree as to who is a desperado and who is a hero.

Robert Charles had been in contact with the emigrationist activity of Henry McNeal Turner, and there is one common bond with another Georgia resident of that era, Professor W. E. B. Du Bois of Atlanta University. Both Robert Charles and Dr. Du Bois were deeply affected by the lynching near Newnan, Georgia, of Sam Hose. On April 23, 1899, Hose, held on suspicion of rape and murder, had been tortured and burned alive in a public spectacle facilitated by running special trains from Atlanta to witness the event. According to one of his acquaintances, Charles, upon learning of the incident, was “beside himself with fury,” and he was quoted to the effect “that the time had come for every black man to prepare to defend himself.” To Du Bois the Hose lynching came as a “red ray” that cut across his scholarly plans and startled him to his feet. Du Bois narrates his response: “I wrote out a careful and reasoned statement concerning the evident facts and started down to the Atlanta *Constitution*, carrying in my pocket a letter of introduction to Joel Chandler Harris. I did not get there. On the way news met me: Sam Hose had been lynched, and they said his knuckles were on exhibition at a grocery store farther down on Mitchell Street, along which I was walking. I turned back to the University. I began to turn aside from my work. I did not meet Joel Chandler Harris nor the editor of the *Constitution*.” Du Bois drew the conclusion that “one could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered, and starved.”<sup>42</sup> Circumstances, temperament, and opportunity led Charles and Du Bois to differing paths of struggle, but in both men the Hose lynching stiffened a resolve to confront racial oppression directly.