

LANGUAGES OF CHANGE: SOURCES OF BLACK IDEOLOGY DURING THE CIVIL WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION

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The abolition of slavery in the United States produced far-reaching changes in the structure of southern society, and in the lives of all Americans. Rather than being passive victims of the actions of others, or simply a « problem » confronting white society, blacks were active agents in the destruction of slavery during the Civil War, and in the national debate over the meaning of freedom that followed. This paper examines the social and political ideology blacks articulated after emancipation, focusing especially on three roots of blacks' conception of themselves and of American society: the experience of slavery, a distinctive black Christianity, and the nation's republican political culture, on which former slaves seized as a weapon for attacking the nation's racial caste system. At the core of this outlook lay the former slaves' quest for individual and community autonomy, and equal rights as citizens in the American republic. Blacks' militancy in pursuing these goals did much to establish the political and economic agenda of the Reconstruction era that followed the Civil War.

« The Negroes are to be pitied... », wrote a South Carolina educator and minister. « They do not understand the liberty which has been conferred upon them ». In fact, blacks carried out of bondage an understanding of their new condition shaped both by their experience as slaves and by observation of the free society around them. What one planter called their « wild notions of right and freedom » encompassed first of all an end to the myriad injustices associated with slavery. Others, like Georgia black leader Rev. Henry M. Turner, stressed that freedom meant the enjoyment of « our rights in common with other men ». « If I cannot do like a white man I am not free », former slave Henry Adams told his former master in 1865. « I see how the poor white people do. I ought to do so too, or else I am a slave »¹.

* The themes in this paper are discussed at greater length in my book, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, New York, 1988, a general history of the post-Civil War years in the United States.

¹ John H. Moore, ed., *The Juhl Letters to the « Charleston Courier »*, Athens, 1974, 20; Will Martin to Benjamin G. Humphreys, December 5, 1865, Mississippi Governor's Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History; Joseph P. Reidy, « Masters and Slaves,

Long after the end of the Civil War, the experience of bondage remained deeply etched in blacks' collective memory. As one white writer noted years later, blacks could not be shaken from the conviction « that the white race has barbarously oppressed them ». Fundamentally, blacks resented not only the incidents of slavery – the whippings, separations of families, and countless rituals of subordination – but the fact of having been held as slaves at all. During a visit to Richmond, Scottish minister David Macrae was surprised to hear a former slave complain of past mistreatment, while acknowledging that he had never been whipped. « How were you cruelly treated, then? » asked Macrae. « I was cruelly treated », answered the freedman, « because I was kept in slavery »².

In countless ways, blacks in 1865 sought to « throw off the badge of servitude », to overturn the real and symbolic authority whites had exercised over every aspect of their lives. Some took new names that reflected the lofty hopes inspired by emancipation – Deliverance Belin, Hope Mitchell, Change Great. Others relished opportunities to flaunt their liberation from the infinite regulations, significant and trivial, associated with slavery. Freedmen held mass meetings unrestrained by white surveillance, acquired dogs, guns, and liquor (all barred to them under slavery), and refused to yield the sidewalk to whites. They dressed as they pleased, and left plantations when they desired³.

But underpinning blacks' individual aspirations lay a broader theme: their quest for independence from white control, for autonomy both as individuals and as members of a community itself being transformed as a result of emancipation. The end of slavery, for example, allowed blacks to reaffirm and solidify their family connections, and most freedmen seized the opportunity with alacrity. During the Civil War, army officers who believed that slavery had destroyed the sense of family obligation, were astonished by the eagerness with which former slaves legalized their marriage bonds. The same pattern was repeated when the Freedmen's Bureau and state governments made it possible to register and solemnize slave unions. Many families, in addition, adopted the children of deceased friends and relatives, rather than see them apprenticed to white masters or placed in orphanages. By 1870, a large majority of blacks lived in two-parent family households⁴.

Perhaps the most striking illustration of the freedmen's quest for self-

Planters and Freedmen: The Transition from Slavery to Freedom in Central Georgia, 1820-1880 » (Ph. D. diss., Northern Illinois University, 1982), 162; 46th Congress, 2d Session, Senate Report 693, pt. 2, 191.

² Z.T. Filmore to History Company Publishers, March 2, 1867, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; David Macrae, *The Americans at Home* (New York, 1952 [orig. pub. 1870]), 133.

³ Eliza F. Andrews, *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl*, New York, 1908, 347; George C. Rogers, Jr., *The History of Georgetown County, South Carolina*, Columbia, 1970, 439-41; Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York 1979).

improvement was their seemingly unquenchable thirst for education. Before the war, every Southern state except Tennessee had prohibited the instruction of slaves, and while many free blacks had attended school and a number of slaves managed to become literate, over 90 per cent of the South's adult black population was illiterate in 1860. Access to education for themselves and their children was, for blacks, central to the meaning of freedom, and white contemporaries were astonished by their « avidity for learning ». The desire for learning led parents to migrate to towns and cities in search of education for the children, and plantation workers to make the establishment of a school « an absolute condition » of signing labor contracts. Adults as well as children thronged the schools established by northern aid societies, the Freedmen's Bureau, and blacks themselves during and after the Civil War. As one member of a North Carolina education society put it in 1866, « he thought a school-house would be the first proof of their *independence* »⁵.

In no realm of southern life did blacks' effort to define the meaning of freedom, or to assert independence from white control, have implications as explosive for the entire society as in the economy. Blacks brought out of slavery a conception of themselves as a « Working Class of People », in the words of a group of Georgia freedmen, who had been unjustly deprived of the fruits of their labor. Reprimanded by a planter for laziness — « You lazy nigger, I am losing a whole day's labor by you » — a freedman responded, « Massa, how many day's labor have I lost by you? ». In January 1865, General William T. Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton met with a group of black leaders in Savannah, recently occupied by the Union army. Asked what he understood by slavery, Baptist minister Garrison Frazier responded that it meant one man's « receiving... the work of another man, and not by his consent ». Freedom he defined as « placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor ». Yet more than simply receiving wages, blacks demanded the right to control the conditions under which they worked, free themselves from subordination to white authority, and carve out the greatest possible measure of economic autonomy⁶.

For blacks, the abolition of slavery meant not an escape from all labor, but an end to unrequited toil. To white predictions that they would not

⁴ John Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen*, New York, 1907, 34, 211; Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*, New York, 1976, 61-62, 141-42, 225-28, 417-20.

⁵ William P. Vaughan, *Schools for All: The Blacks and Public Education in the South, 1865-1877*, Lexington, Ky., 1974, 1; Joseph Crosfield to Unknown, October 5, 1865 (typed copy), Society of Friends Library, Friends House, London; Whitelaw Reid, *After the War: A Southern Tour*, Cincinnati, 1866, 511; Hartford Courant, March 1, 1867; Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, New York, 1984, 298-99; *National Freedman*, March 1866.

⁶ Edward Magdol, *A Right to the Land: Essays on the Freedmen's Community*, Westport, 1977, 273; Joseph H. Mahaffey, ed., « Carl Schurz's Letters From the South », *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 35 (September 1951), 241; « Colloquy With Colored Ministers », *Journal of Negro History*, 16 (January 1931), 88-94.

work, blacks responded that if any class could be characterized as « lazy », it was the planters, who had « lived in idleness all their lives on stolen labor ». Blacks deeply resented incessant allegations of indolence and incapacity. As for predictions that they would be unable to care for themselves in freedom, one ex-slave responded: « We used to support ourselves and our masters too when we were slaves and I reckon we can take care of ourselves now »⁷.

The desire to escape from white supervision and establish a modicum of economic independence profoundly shaped blacks' economic choices during Reconstruction, leading them to resist continuing to work in gangs under overseers, to prefer leasing land for a fixed rent to working for wages, and, above all, inspiring their quest for land of their own. Without land, there could be no economic autonomy, blacks believed, for their labor would continue to be subject to exploitation by their former owners. « Gib us our own land and we take care ourselves », a Charleston freedman told northern correspondent Whitelaw Reid, « but widout land, de ole massas can hire or starve us, as dey please »⁸.

A. Warren Kelsey, a Northerner sent South by textile manufacturers in 1865 to investigate the prospects for a resumption of cotton production, shrewdly described the former slaves' belief that ownership of land would enable them to take advantage of the opportunities both self-sufficiency and farming for the market offered, while avoiding a complete dependance upon either:

The sole ambition of the freedman at the present time appears to be to become the owner of a little piece of land, there to erect a humble home, and to dwell in peace and security at his own free will and pleasure. If he wishes, to cultivate the ground in cotton on his own account, to be able to do so without anyone to dictate to him hours or system of labor, if he wishes instead to plant corn or sweet potatoes – to be able to do *that* free from any outside control... That is their idea, their desire, and their hope⁹.

To those familiar with the experience of other postemancipation societies, blacks' « mania for owning a small piece of land » should not appear unusual. Throughout the Western Hemisphere, the end of slavery was followed by a prolonged struggle over the control of labor and access to land. Freedmen in Haiti, the British and Spanish Caribbean, and Brazil all saw ownership

⁷ Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*, New York, 1982 – Ser. 2, 582-83; *Proceedings of the Convention of the Colored People of Va., Held in the City of Alexandria, Alexandria, 1865*, 3; F.J. Massey to Orlando Brown, May 1, 1866, Monthly Reports, Ser. 4350, Yorktown Asst. Subasst. Comr., Record Group 105, National Archives.

⁸ Charles Colcock Jones, Jr. to Eva Jones, November 7, 1865, Charles Colcock Jones, Jr. Collection, University of Georgia, *Southern Cultivator*, March 1867, 69; Whitelaw Reid, *After the War: A Southern Tour*, Cincinnati, 1866, 59.

⁹ A. Warren Kelsey to Edward Atkinson, September 8, 1865, Edward Atkinson Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

of land as crucial to establishing their economic independence, and their efforts to avoid returning to plantation labor were strenuously resisted by the planter elite and local political authorities¹⁰.

Unlike freedmen in other countries, however, American blacks emerged from slavery convinced both that they had a «right» to a portion of their former owners' land, and that the national government had committed itself to land distribution. In part, this belief stemmed from actions of the federal government – the Freedmen's Bureau Act of early 1865, which held out the prospect of the division of confiscated and abandoned land among blacks and white refugees, and General William T. Sherman's Field Order 15, setting aside a portion of the South Carolina and Georgia lowcountry for the exclusive settlement of blacks. In addition, blacks insisted it was only fair that «the land ought to belong to the man who (alone) could work it», as one former slave told rice planter Edward B. Heyward. Most often, however, blacks insisted their past labor entitled them to a portion of their owner's estates. «They have an idea that they have a certain right to the property of their former masters, that they have earned it», reported a North Carolina Freedmen's Bureau. In its most sophisticated form, the claim to land rested on an appreciation of the role black labor had played in the evolution of the nation's economy. When the army evicted blacks it had earlier settled on land near Yorktown, Virginia, freedman Bayley Wyat gave an impromptu speech of protest:

We has a right to the land where we are located. For why? I tell you. Our wives, our children, our husbands, has been sold over and over again to purchase the lands we now located upon; for that reason we have a divine right to the land... And den didn't we cleare the land, and raise de crops ob corn, ob cotton, ob tobacco, ob rice, ob sugar, ob everything. And den didn't dem large cities in de North grow up on de cotton and de sugars and de rice dat we made? ... I say dey has grown rich, and my people is poor¹¹.

Not all blacks favored a program of land distribution. Among the black political leadership that emerged after the Civil War were freeborn men from both North and South who had imbibed the «free labor ideology» of the Republican party, which taught that the interests of capital and labor were identical and the freedmen entitled only to an «honest chance in the race of life». Former slaves should work for wages, patiently save money and, eventually, purchase land for themselves. But low wages, crop failures, and outright fraud rendered this an unrealistic prospect in the postwar South. Most freedmen looked to national action to redistribute the South's land,

¹⁰ Arney R. Childs, ed., *The Private Journal of Henry William Ravenel 1859-1887*, Columbia, S.C., 1947, 272; Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy*, Baton Rouge, 1983, 8-38.

¹¹ Reid, *After the War*, 335; 39th Congress, 1st Session, Senate Executive Document 27, 84; Edward B. Heyward to Katherine Heyward, May 5, 1867, Heyward Family Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina; *A Freedman's Speech*, Philadelphia, 1867.

and were deeply disappointed when such a policy was not forthcoming. Long after the end of slavery, the sense of disillusionment and betrayal lingered. « De slaves », a Mississippi black would recall, « spected a heap from freedom dey didn't git... They promised us a mule an' forty acres o' lan' ». « Yes sir », agreed a Tennessee freedman, « they should have given us part of Maser's land as us poor old slaves we made what our Masers had »¹².

Thus, a definition of the meaning of freedom inherited from slavery helped to shape blacks' postemancipation attitudes and aspirations. A second source of black ideology lay in religious convictions that profoundly affected the way blacks understood the momentous events around them, the very language in which they expressed the desire for justice and autonomy. Blacks brought out of slavery a distinctive version of Christian faith, in which Jesus appeared as a personal redeemer offering solace in the face of misfortune, while the Old Testament suggested that they were a chosen people, analogous to the Jews in Egypt, whom God, in the fullness of time, would deliver from bondage. « There is no part of the Bible with which they are so familiar as the story of the deliverance of the Children of Israel », a white army chaplain reported from Alabama in 1866.

Emancipation and the defeat of the Confederacy strongly reinforced this messianic vision of history. Blacks endowed these experiences with spiritual import, comprehending them in the language of Christian faith. « These are the days foretold by the Prophets, "when a nation shall be born in a day" », declared the call for a black political gathering in 1865. A Tennessee newspaper commented in 1869 that freedmen habitually referred to slavery as Paul's Time, and Reconstruction as Isaiah's Time (referring perhaps to Paul's message of obedience and humility, and Isaiah's prophecy of cataclysmic change brought about by violence). God, who had « scourged America with wrong for her injustice to the black man », had allowed his agent Lincoln, like Moses, to glimpse the promised land of « universal freedom » and then mysteriously removed him before he « reached its blessed fruitings »¹⁴.

Under some circumstances, such faith can produce quiescence, a belief that the contrivances of man are inadequate to bring about divine purposes. But during Reconstruction, black Christianity inspired not inaction but

¹² *Christian Recorder*, January 7, August 5, September 9, 16, 1865; *Congressional Record*, 43d Congress, 2d Session, 982; George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (39 vols.: Westport, Conn., 1972-79), 7, pt. 2:147, Supplement 2, 3:877.

¹³ Clarence G. Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church during the Civil War and Reconstruction*, Baton Rouge, 1982, 125; 43d Congress, 2d Session, House Report 262, 779; W.G. Kephart to Lewis Tappan, May 9, 1866, American Missionary Association Archives, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University.

¹⁴ W. McKee Evans, *Ballots and Fence Rails: Reconstruction on the Lower Cape Fear*, Chapel Hill, 1967, 87; Steven V. Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860-1870: War and Peace in the Upper South*, Baton Rouge, 1987, 209; Walker, *Rock in a Weary Land*, 30-31; *Savannah Republican in Raleigh Journal of Freedom*, October 28, 1865; *Christian Recorder*, May 13, 1865, January 20, 1866.

political commitment. Throughout Reconstruction, black republicanism was grounded in « the great Christian principle of the brotherhood of man ». Even nonclerics used secular and religious vocabulary interchangeably, as in one 1867 speech recorded by a North Carolina justice of the peace:

He said it was not now like it used to be, that ... the negro was about to get his equal rights. ... That the negroes owed their freedom to the courage of the negro soldiers and to God. ... He made frequent references to the II and IV chapters of Joshua for a full accomplishment of the principles and destiny of the race. It was concluded that the race have a destiny in view similar to the Children of Israel¹⁵.

Among the irrevocable results of emancipation in the United States was the withdrawal of blacks from biracial prewar religious congregations and the establishment of a vast network of independent black churches. « The first social institution fully controlled by black men in America », the church housed schools, social events, and political gatherings. Indeed, preachers came to play a central role in black politics during Reconstruction. Many agreed with African Methodist Episcopal minister Charles H. Pearce, who held several elective offices in Florida, that it was « impossible » to separate religion and politics: « A man in this State cannot do his whole duty as a minister except he looks out for the political interests of his people ». Over 100 black ministers, hailing from North and South, from free and slave backgrounds, and from every black denomination, were elected to legislative seats during Reconstruction. And among the lay majority of black politicians, many built a political base in the church. Alabama legislator Holland Thompson, for example, had played a leading role in Montgomery's Baptist affairs since his days as a slave¹⁶.

If the goal of autonomy inspired blacks to withdraw from religious and other institutions controlled by whites, and to attempt to work out their economic destinies for themselves, in the polity freedom implied inclusion rather than separation. Indeed, recognition of their equal rights as citizens quickly emerged as the animating impulse of Reconstruction black politics. Achieving a measure of political power seemed indispensable to attaining the other goals of the black community, including access to the South's economic resources, equal treatment in the courts, and protection against violence. But apart from its specific uses, the ballot in America was itself an emblem of citizenship. In a professedly democratic political culture, the suffrage did more than identify who could vote – it defined a collective public

¹⁵ Charleston *Daily Republican*, August 25, 1870, Supplement; Eric Foner, « Reconstruction and the Black Political Tradition », in Richard L. McCormick, ed., *Political Parties and the Modern State*, New Brunswick, 1984, 62.

¹⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois, « Reconstruction and Its Benefits », *American Historical Review*, 15 (July 1910), 782; 42nd Congress, 2d Session, House Report 22, Florida, 171; Walker, *Rock in a Weary Land*, 116-27; Howard N. Rabinowitz, « Holland Thompson and Black political Participation », in Rabinowitz, ed., *Southern Black Leaders of the Reconstruction Era*, Urbana, Ill., 1982, 52.

life, as women's suffrage advocates so tirelessly point out. Democrats were repelled by the very idea of including blacks within the realm of common public life defined by the suffrage. « Without reference to the question of equality », declared Indiana Senator Thomas Hendricks, « I say we are not of the same race; we are so different that we ought not to compose one political community ». The United States, Frederick Douglass reminded the nation, differed profoundly from societies accustomed to fixed social classes and historically-defined gradations of civil and political rights:

If I were in a monarchical government, ... where the few bore rule and the many were subject, there would be no special stigma resting upon me, because I did not exercise the elective franchise. ... But here, where universal suffrage is the fundamental idea of the Government, to rule us out is to make us an exception, to brand us with the stigma of inferiority¹⁷.

Before the Civil War, the small Northern black political leadership of ministers, professionals, and members of abolitionist societies had searched for a means of striking a blow against slavery. Most embraced what one historian calls the Great Tradition of black protest – an affirmation of Americanism that insisted that blacks formed an integral part of the nation and were entitled to the same rights and opportunities white citizens enjoyed. In the 1850's, however, many Northern blacks had despaired of ever finding a secure and equal place within American life, and a growing number of black leaders had come to espouse emigration to the Caribbean or Africa, reflecting both an incipient racial nationalism and pessimism about black prospects in this country. Rejecting entirely the « Great Tradition », H. Ford Douglass pointedly reminded one black convention that far from being a « foreign element », an aberration in American life, slavery had received the sanction of the founding fathers and was « completely interwoven into the passions and prejudices of the American people »¹⁸.

The Civil War produced an abrupt shift from the pessimism of the 1850's to a renewed spirit of patriotism, restoring northern blacks' faith in the larger society. Even before the Emancipation Proclamation, a California black foresaw the dawning of a new day for his people:

Everything among us indicates a change in our condition, and [we must] prepare to act in a different sphere from that in which we have heretofore acted. ... Our relation to this government is changing daily. ... Old things are passing away, and eventually old prejudices must follow. The revolution has begun, and time alone must decide where it is to end.

Emancipation further transformed the black response to American nationality. Symbolic, perhaps, was the fact that Martin R. Delany, the « father

¹⁷ *Congressional Globe*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, 860; Philip S. Foner, ed., *The life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 4 vols.: New York, 1950-55, III, 293.

¹⁸ Vincent Harding *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*, New York, 1981, 117-39, 172-94.

of black nationalism » and an advocate during the 1850's of emigration, now recruited blacks for the Union army and then joined himself. « I am proud to be an American citizen », declared black abolitionist Robert Purvis in 1863, recalling how, when the federal government was « a slaveholding oligarchy », he had denounced the country as « the basest despotism » on earth. Frederick Douglass, throughout his life the most insistent advocate of the now reinvigorated Great Tradition, emerged as black America's premier spokesman, welcomed at the White House, his speeches widely reprinted in the northern press, his own life, he believed, exemplifying how America might move beyond racism to a society founded upon universal human rights. Throughout the war, Douglass insisted that the logical and essential corollaries of emancipation were the end of all color discrimination, complete equality before the law, and the enfranchisement of the black population – the « full and complete adoption » of blacks « into the great national family of America »¹⁹.

More directly pertinent to the question of the former slaves' rights as free men and women, however, was the massive enrollment of blacks into military service, which began in earnest in 1863. By the war's end some 180,000 blacks had served in the Union army – over one-fifth of the adult male black population of the United States below the age of 45. And the « logical result » of black military service, one senator observed in 1864, was that « the black man is henceforth to assume a new *status* among us ». Although treated with anything but equality within the army, black soldiers played a crucial role not simply in winning the Civil War, but in defining the war's consequences. Their service helped transform the nation's treatment of blacks and blacks' conception of themselves. For the first time in American history, large numbers were treated as equals before the law – if only military law. In army courts blacks could testify against whites (something unheard of throughout the South and in many northern states as well). It was in the army that these former slaves first learned to read and write, either from teachers employed by the military or in classrooms and literary societies established and funded by the soldiers themselves. « A large portion of the regiment have been going to school during the winter months », wrote a black sergeant from Virginia in March 1865. « Surely this is a mighty and progressive age in which we live »²⁰.

¹⁹ Harding, *There is a River*, 233-35; James M. McPherson, ed., *The Negro's Civil War*, New York, 1967, 251-52; Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Voice of Black America*, 2 vols.: New York, 1975 ed., I, 293-94, 318; Foner, ed., *Life and Writings of Douglass*, III, 292, 348-52, 396.

²⁰ Berlin, et al, eds., *Freedom*, ser 2, *passim*; Mary Berry, *Military Necessity and Civil Rights Policy: Black Citizenship and the Constitution, 1861-1868*, Port Washington, 1977, 41-57, 62-74; Herman Belz, *A New Birth of Freedom: The Republican Party and Freedmen's Rights 1861-1866*, Westport, 1976, 24; John Blassingame, « The Union Army as an Educational Institution for Negroes », *Journal of Negro Education*, 34 (Summer 1965), 152-59; Cam Walker, « Corinth: The Story of a Contraband Camp », *Civil War History*, 20 (March 1974), 15; *Christian Recorder*, March 18, 1865.

« No negro who has ever been a soldier », wrote one Northern official in 1865, « can again be imposed upon; they have learnt what it is to be free and they will infuse their feelings into others ». Black troops flaunted their contempt for symbols of slavery, and relished the opportunity to exert authority over southern whites. For men of talent and ambition, the army flung open a door to position and respectability. From the army would come many of the black political leaders of Radical Reconstruction, including at least 41 delegates to state constitutional conventions, 60 legislators, and four Congressmen²¹.

In time, the black contribution to the Union war effort would fade from the nation's collective memory. But it remained a vital part of the black community's sense of its own history. « They say », an Alabama planter reported in 1867, « the Yankees never could have whipped the South without the aid of the negroes ». Here lay a crucial justification for blacks' self-confident claim to equal citizenship during Reconstruction, a claim anticipated in the soldiers' long battle for equal pay during the war. At the Arkansas Constitutional Convention of 1868, former slave William Murphey held his silence for weeks, in deference to more accomplished white delegates (who, he pointed out, had « obtained the means of education by the black man's sweat »). But when some of these delegates questioned blacks' right to the suffrage, Murphey felt compelled to protest: « Has not the man who conquers upon the field of battle, gained any rights? Have we gained none by the sacrifice of our brethren? »²².

The state-wide conventions held throughout the South in 1865 and early 1866 offered evidence of blacks' political aspirations in the immediate aftermath of freedom. Several hundred delegates attended these gatherings, some selected by local meeting specially convened for the purpose, others by churches, fraternal societies, and black army units, still others simply appointed by themselves. Although the delegates « ranged all colors and apparently all conditions », urban free mulattoes took the most prominent roles, while former slaves, although in attendance, were almost entirely absent from leadership roles. Numerous black soldiers, ministers, and artisans also took part, as well as a significant number of recent black arrivals from the North²³.

²¹ George D. Reynolds to Stuart Eldridge, October 5, 1865, Registered Letters Received, ser 2052, Miss. Asst. Comr., Record Group 105, National Archives; Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 96-102.

²² John H. Parrish to Henry Watson, Jr., June 20, 1867, Henry Watson, Jr. Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University; *Debates and Proceedings of the Convention which Assembled at Little Rock, January 7, 1868...*, Little Rock, 1868, 629.

²³ John R. Dennett, *The South As It Is: 1865-1866*, ed. Henry M. Christman, New York, 1965, 148-50; Reid, *After the War*, 81; Nashville *Colored Tennessean*, August 12, 1865; J.W. Blackwell to Andrew Johnson, November 24, 1865, Andrew Johnson Papers, Library of Congress; Peter Kolchin, *First Freedom: The Responses of Alabama's Blacks to Emancipation and Reconstruction*, Westport, Conn., 1972, 152-53.

The conventions' major preoccupations proved to be equality before the law and the suffrage. In justifying the demand for the vote, the delegates invoked America's republican traditions, and especially the Declaration of Independence, « the broadest, the deepest, the most comprehensive and truthful definition of human freedom that was ever given to the world », as black Freedmen's Bureau official John M. Langston put it. « The colored people », Rev. James Hood would declare in 1868, « had read the Declaration until it had become part of their natures ». The North Carolina convention he chaired in 1865 portrayed the Civil War and emancipation as chapters in the onward march of « progressive civilization », embodiments of « the fundamental truths laid down in the great charter of Republican liberty, the Declaration of Independence ». Such language was not confined to the convention delegates. Eleven Alabama blacks complaining in 1865 of contract frauds, injustice before the courts, and other abuses, concluded their petition with a revealing masterpiece of understatement: « this is not the pursuit of happiness »²⁴.

There was more to this than merely familiar wording. Like northern blacks steeped in the « Great Tradition » of prewar protest, the freedmen and southern free blacks saw emancipation as enabling the nation to live up to the full implications of its republican creed – a goal that could only be achieved by leaving behind the legacy of racial proscription and absorbing blacks fully into the civil and political order. Isham Sweat, a slaveborn barber who wrote the address of North Carolina's convention and went on to sit in the state legislature, told northern journalist John R. Dennett that Congress should « declare that no state had a republican form of government if every free man in it was not equal before he law ». Another 1865 speaker destined for Reconstruction prominence, Louisiana's Oscar J. Dunn, described the absence of « discrimination among men », « privileges founded upon birth-right », and « hereditary distinctions » as the essence of America's political heritage. Continued proscription of blacks, Dunn warned, would jeopardize the republic's very future, opening « the door for the institution of aristocracy, nobility, and even monarchy »²⁵.

Like their northern counterparts during the Civil War, southern blacks now proclaimed their identification with the nation's history, destiny, and political system. The very abundance of letters and petitions addressed by black gatherings and ordinary freedmen to officials of the army, Freedmen's

²⁴ John M. Langston, *Freedom and Citizenship*, Washington, 1883, 99-100, 110; Leonard Bernstein, « The Participation of Negro Delegates in the Constitutional Convention of 1868 in North Carolina », *Journal of Negro History*, 34 (Oct. 1949), 404; *Convention of the Freedmen of North Carolina*, Raleigh, 1865, 6; Prince Murrell and ten others to General Wager Swayne, December 17, 1865, Unregistered Letters Received, ser 9, Alabama Asst. Comr., Record Group 105, National Archives.

²⁵ Peter D. Klingman, *Josiah Walls*, Gainesville, 1976, 72-73; Dennett, *South As It Is*, 176; Sidney Andrews, *The South Since the War* (Boston, 1866), 125; *Proceedings of the Republican Party of Louisiana*, New Orleans, 1865, 4-5.

Bureau, and state and federal authorities, revealed a belief that the political order was at least partially open to black influence. « We are Americans », declared the address of a Norfolk black meeting, « we know no other country, we love the land of our birth ». It went on to remind white Virginians that in 1619, « our fathers as well as yours were toiling in the plantations on James River », and that a black man, Crispus Attucks, shed « the first blood » in the American Revolution. And, of course, blacks had fought and died to save the Union. America, resolved another Virginia meeting, was « now *our* country – made emphatically so by the blood of our brethren » in the Union army²⁶.

In these early black conventions, former slaves played a far less prominent role than those who had been free before the Civil War – a reflection of the fact that political organization had proceeded more swiftly in southern cities than in the rural plantation districts where the mass of the freedmen lived. Far different was the situation in 1867 when, in the aftermath of the Reconstruction Act a wave of political mobilization swept the rural South.

Like emancipation, the advent of black suffrage inspired freedmen with a millennial sense of living at the dawn of a new era. Former slaves now stood on an equal footing with whites, a black speaker told a Savannah mass meeting; before them lay « a field, too vast for contemplation ». Politics now emerged as the principal focus of black aspirations. Itinerant lecturers, black and white, brought the message of equality into the heart of the rural South. In Monroe County, Alabama, where no black political meeting had occurred before, freedmen crowded around the speaker shouting « God bless you, bless God for this ». Richmond's tobacco factories were forced to close on August 1 because so many black laborers quit work to attend the Republican state convention. Black churches, schools, and indeed every other institution of the black community, became highly politicized. Every African Methodist Episcopal minister in Georgia was said to be engaged in Republican organizing, and political materials were read aloud at « churches, societies, leagues, clubs, balls, picnics, and all other gatherings ». One plantation manager summed up the situation: « You never saw a people more excited on the subject of politics than are the negroes of the South. They are perfectly wild »²⁷.

The hothouse atmosphere of political mobilization in 1867 made possible a vast expansion of the black political leadership. Not a few of the blacks

²⁶ *Equal Suffrage: Address from the Colored Citizens of Norfolk, Va., to the People of the United States*, New Bedford, 1865, 1, 8; Joseph R. Johnson to O.O. Howard, August 4, 1865, Unregistered Letters Received, ser 457, District of Columbia Asst. Comr., Record Group 105, National Archives.

²⁷ *Savannah Daily News and Herald*, March 19, 1867; Samuel S. Gardner to O.D. Kinsman, July 23, 1867, Wager Swayne Papers, Alabama State Department of Archives and History; Magdol, *Right to the Land*, 42; Henry M. Turner to Thomas L. Tullock, July 8, 23, 1867 (copies), Robert C. Schenck Papers, Rutherford B. Hayes Library; John H. Parrish to Henry Watson, Jr., August 6, 1867, Watson Papers.

who plunged into politics had been born in the North. Others were fugitive slaves returning home, or the children of well-to-do Southern free blacks who had been sent north for an education. Most remarkable, however, was the rapid emergence of indigenous leadership in the black belt. Here, local leaders tended to be ex-slaves of modest circumstances, who had never before « had the privilege » of expressing political opinions « in public ». Many were teachers, preachers, or individuals who possessed a skill, such as literacy, of use to the community. In occupation, the largest number of local activists appear to have been artisans, men whose skill and independence set them apart from ordinary laborers, but who remained deeply embedded in the life of the freedmen's community. Many had already established their prominence as slaves, like Emanuel Fortune, whose son later recalled: « It was natural for [him] to take the leadership in any independent movement of the Negroes. During and before the Civil War he had commanded his time as a tanner and expert shoe and bootmaker. In such life as the slaves were allowed, and in church work, he took the leader's part »²⁸.

In Union Leagues, Republican gatherings, and improptu local meetings, ordinary blacks in 1867 and 1868 staked their claim to equal citizenship in the American republic. Like northern blacks schooled in the « Great Tradition » of prewar protest, and the urban freemen who had dominated the state conventions of 1865 and 1866, former slaves now identified themselves with the heritage of the Declaration of Independence, and insisted America live up to its professed ideals. An Alabama black convention affirmed its understanding of equal citizenship:

We claim exactly *the same rights, privileges and immunities as are enjoyed by white men* – we ask nothing more and will be content with nothing else. ... The law no longer knows white nor black, but simply men, and consequently we are entitled to ride in public conveyances, hold office, sit on juries and do everything else which we have in the past been prevented from doing solely on the ground of color.

At their most utopian, blacks now envisioned a society purged of all racial distinctions. This does not mean they lacked a sense of racial identity, for blacks remained proud of the accomplishments of black soldiers, and preferred black teachers for their children and black churches in which to worship. But in the polity, those who had so long been proscribed because of color, defined equality as color-blind. « I heard a white man say », black teacher Rober G. Fitzgerald recorded in his diary, « today is the black man's day; tomorrow will be the white man's. I thought, poor man, those days of distinction between colors is about over, in this (now) free country ». Indeed, black politicians sometimes found black listeners unreceptive to the

²⁸ Charleston *Advocate*, April 20, 1867; Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 163-66, 180; Magdol, *A Right to the Land*, 113-25, 136; Dorothy Sterling, ed., *The Trouble They Seen*, Garden City, N.Y., 1976, 111.

rhetoric of racial self-consciousness. In South Carolina, Martin Delany found it « dangerous to go into the country and speak of color in any manner whatever, without the angry rejoinder, “we don’t want to hear that; we are all one color now” »²⁹.

Nord did blacks during Radical Reconstruction evince much interest in emigration. Over 1000 from Georgia and South Carolina had sailed for Liberia under American Colonization Society auspices in 1866 and 1867, « tired of the unprovoked scorn and prejudice we daily and hourly suffer ». But the optimism kindled in 1867 brought the movement to an abrupt halt. « You could not get one of them to think of going to Liberia now », wrote a white colonizationist. Blacks probably considered themselves more fully American than at any time in the nineteenth century; some even echoed the exuberant nationalism and Manifest Destiny expansionism of what one called « our civilization ». Throughout Reconstruction, blacks took pride in parading on July 4, « the day », a Charleston diarist observed, « the Niggers now celebrate, and the whites stay home ». As late as 1876, a speaker at a black convention aroused « positive signs of disapproval » by mentioning emigration. « Damn Africa », one delegate declared. « If Smith wants to go let him; we’ll stay in America »³⁰.

In a society marked by vast economic disparities and a growing racial separation in social and religious life, the polity became the only area where black and white encountered each other on a basis of equality – sitting alongside one another on juries, in legislatures, and at political conventions, voting together on election day. For individuals, politics offered a rare opportunity for respectable, financially rewarding employment. And although elective position and the vote remained male preserves, black women shared in the political mobilization. They took part in rallies, parades and mass meetings, voting on resolutions, to the consternation of some male participants, and forming their own auxiliaries to aid in electioneering. During the 1868 campaign, Yazoo, Mississippi, whites found their homes invaded by buttons depicting General Grant, defiantly worn on the clothing of black maids and cooks. There were also reports of women ostracizing black Democrats (one threatened to « burn his damned arse off ») and refusing conjugal relations with husbands who abandoned the Republican party³¹.

²⁹ Montgomery *Alabama State Sentinel*, May 21, 1867; Robert G. Fitzgerald Diary, April 22, 1868, Robert G. Fitzgerald Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; *New National Era*, August 37, 1871.

³⁰ Francis B. Simkins, « The Problems of South Carolina Agriculture After the Civil War », *North Carolina Historical Review*, 7 (Jan. 1930), 54-55; Wyatt Moore to William Coppinger, July 5, 1866, E.M. Pendleton to Coppinger, March 18, 1867, American Colonization Society Papers, Library of Congress; P. Sterling Stuckey, « The Spell of Africa: The Development of Black Nationalist Theory, 1829-1945 » (Ph. D. diss., Northwestern University, 1973), 91-92; *Proceedings of the Southern States Convention of Colored Men, Held in Columbia, South Carolina*, Columbia, 1871, 99-100; Jacob Schirmer Diary, July 4, 1867, July 4, 1872, South Carolina Historical Society; *Cincinnati Commercial*, April 10, 1876.

³¹ *Richmond Dispatch*, August 2, 1867; A.T. Morgan, *Yazoo: Or, on the Picket Line of*

Throughout Reconstruction, blacks remained « irrepressible democrats ». « Negroes all crazy on politics again », noted a Mississippi plantation manager in the fall of 1873. « Every tenth negro a candidate for office ». And the Republican party – the party of emancipation and black voting rights – became as central an institution of the black community as the church and school. When not deterred by violence, blacks eagerly attended political gatherings, and voted in extraordinary numbers; their turnout in many elections exceeded ninety per cent. Despite the failure of land distribution, the end of Reconstruction would come not because propertyless blacks succumbed to economic coercion, but because a politically tenacious black community fell victim to violence, fraud, and national abandonment. Long after they had been stripped of the franchise, blacks would recall the act of voting as a defiance of inherited norms of white superiority, and regard « the loss of suffrage as being the loss of freedom »³².

The precise uses to which blacks put the measure of political power they achieved during Radical Reconstruction lie beyond the scope of this paper. But it is important to note that blacks enthusiastically embraced that hallmark of the Civil War era, the rise of an activist national state. While often utilizing the suffrage on the state and local levels to affect the terms of their freedom, it was the national government that blacks ultimately viewed as the guarantor of their rights. Before 1860, blacks and their white allies had generally feared federal power, since the government at Washington seemed under the control of the « Slave Power ». In the 1850's, many blacks had urged the Northern states to nullify the federal Fugitive Slave law. But those whose freedom had come through an unprecedented exercise of national power, became increasingly hostile to ideas of state rights and local autonomy. As Reconstruction progressed, the national Constitution – and especially the postwar Amendments guaranteeing blacks equality before the law and the suffrage – took its place alongside the Declaration of Independence as a central reference point in black political discourse.

But the issue that, more than any other, led blacks to identify the federal government as the ultimate guarantor of their rights was violence. Increasingly, it became clear that local and state authorities, even those elected by blacks, were either unwilling or unable to put down the Ku Klux Klan and kindred organizations. « We are more slave today in the hand of the wicked than we were before », read a desperate plea from Alabama freedmen. « We need protection... only a standing army in this place can give us our right and life ». Blacks enthusiastically supported the Enforcement Acts

Freedom in the South, Washington, 1884, 231-33, 293; 42nd Congress, 2d Session, House Report 22, Alabama, 684, Georgia, 1184; Savannah *Colored Tribune*, July 1, 1876.

³² [Belton O'Neal Townsend], « The Political Condition of South Carolina », *Atlantic Monthly*, 39 (Feb. 1877), 192; A.D. Grambling to Stephen Duncan, August 10, 1873, Stephen Duncan Papers, Natchez Trace Collection, Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas; Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, Chapel Hill, 1979, 153-54; 41st Congress, 2d Session, House Miscellaneous Document 154, 181-82.

of 1870 and 1871 that effectively put an end to the Klan, and the Reconstruction expansion of the power of the federal judiciary. Throughout Reconstruction, blacks insisted that « those who freed them shall protect that freedom »³³.

Increasingly, however, as white Northerners retreated from the broad nationalism of the Civil War, the impression spread that in calling for federal protection, blacks were somehow not acting as autonomous citizens capable of defending their own interests. Frederick Douglass himself, in 1865, had concluded that the persistent question « What shall we do with the Negro? » had only one answer: « Do nothing... Give him a chance to stand on his own legs! Let him alone! ». Douglass realized that the other face of benevolence is often paternalism, and that in a society resting, if only rhetorically, on the principle of equality, « special efforts » on the freedmen's behalf might « serve to keep up the very prejudices, which it is so desirable to banish ». Douglass, of course, and most Republicans, believed equal civil rights and the vote were essential to enabling blacks to protect themselves. But by the 1870's, with these rights granted, blacks' demands for protection struck many whites, including reformers, as reflecting a desire to become privileged « wards of the nation »³⁴.

In the end, many of the rights blacks acquired in the aftermath of emancipation proved tragically insecure. Although some of the autonomy blacks had wrested for themselves in the early days of freedom was irreversible (control of their family and religious life, for example), the dream of economic independence had been dashed even before the end of Reconstruction. And by the end of the century, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments had been effectively nullified in the South. Yet within the black community, the basic underpinnings of black ideology – a claim to the fruits of their labor, a millennial Christianity, and the goal of equality as citizens of the republic – survived the many disappointments that followed. Decades after the end of slavery, they would inspire fresh efforts to breath full meaning into the destruction of slavery³⁵.

³³ James Martin and five others to William H. Smith, May 25, 1869, Alabama Governor's Papers, Alabama State Department of Archives and History; *Christian Recorder*, May 26, 1866.

³⁴ Foner, ed., *Life and Writings of Douglass*, III, 189; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, February 5, 1870.

³⁵ See, for example, Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*, New York, 1974; Mark D. Naison, « Black Agrarian Radicalism in the Great Depression: The Threads of a Lost Tradition », *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 1 (Fall, 1973), 53-55.