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## and the Rise of Black Nationalism

# Marcus Garvey

BY ELWOOD D. WATSON

**M**ARCUS MOSIAH GARVEY'S campaign to promote the virtues of self-pride, self-motivation, self-sufficiency, and other progressive attributes to his brethren of African descent and the fiercely independent segregationist legacy he promoted are still being felt by a largely integrationist U.S. During the 1990s, there was a remarkable reawakening of Garvey's philosophy. Young black men and women began to become increasingly acquainted with the literature of their ancestors and contemporary black writers are enjoying a renewed interest of nationalism among an eager contemporary public (including a small niche of suburban white youth) that had not been seen since the 1960s. Various entertainers and intellectuals have made a valiant effort to analyze and reexamine the legacy of Garvey, in addition to other early- and mid-20th-century black nationalists.

The years following World War I were filled with disillusionment for American blacks. U.S. involvement in that war encouraged a new wave of African-American migration out of the South. As northern industries supplied the needs of the Allies and with European immigration closed off, the nation had a demand for both skilled and un-

skilled labor. Black hopes raised by these opportunities were dashed as relations between the races worsened in the 1920s. After the Supreme Court declared municipal segregation ordinances unconstitutional in 1917, restricted residential covenants were drawn up by many white real estate agents. These discriminatory practices carried over into the labor force, where African-American workers were given the more menial, lower-paid, or arduous jobs.

In 1917, Garvey had opened the New York Division of the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which he had founded in his native Jamaica three years earlier in order to establish a "Universal Fraternity among the race," promote "the spirit of race pride and love," create "Agencies in the principal countries of the world for the protection of all Negroes irrespective of nationality," and conduct "a world-wide commercial and industrial intercourse." By the mid 1920s, the UNIA had more than 700 branches in 38 states in every section of the country (including the Deep South) and another 200 branches in the West Indies and Central and South America. In 1918, Garvey established his newspaper, the *Negro World*, which, by the early 1920s, had a weekly circulation of more than 50,000.

In 1919, Garvey purchased an auditorium on 138th Street in Harlem, New York's largest black neighborhood, renamed it Liberty Hall, and held nightly meetings where his great eloquence transformed listeners into followers. Within a few years, he could address his fellow blacks in Liberty Halls in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit, Cincinnati, Chicago, and Los Angeles. It was also during 1919 that he organized the Black Star Line of Ships, financed by the donations of his followers. Within a year, the line raised \$610,000, owned three ships, and began to carry out its ultimately unsuccessful scheme of transporting passengers and cargo between the U.S., the West Indies, and Africa.

### THE RISE OF GARVEYISM

Garveyism and the UNIA combined the various elements of black nationalism—religious, cultural, economic, and territorial—into a distinctive blend of philosophy and agenda. Fundamental to this viewpoint was the emotive power of blackness. Garvey was a zealot who advocated self-economic determination

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groups as the blue-clad African Legion, the Black Cross Nurses, marching bands, choristers, and other uniformed, military-style auxiliaries brought him enormous ridicule in some quarters as a "clown" and a "charlatan" who led big parades of ignorant people down a misguided path of failure.

Garvey's racial ideology was conservative in its message. His deep suspicion of the white working class made it difficult for him to cooperate with labor unions or the political left. The underlying message to African-Americans was simple: Open your own churches, schools, stores, banks, hospitals, hotels, cab companies, and universities—in short, "do things for yourself." Garvey-ism provided an economic antidote to blacks frustrated with second-class status and citizenship, especially the urban poor, working class, and angriest African-Americans.

The most important element of Garveyism, though, was its emphasis on a return to Africa, the expulsion of all European powers from the African continent, and the belief that, once a strong independent African nation was established, African-Americans would gain power and prestige. Although Garvey was practical enough to realize that it wasn't feasible for all people of African descent to return to Africa, at least in the physical sense, he viewed himself and his organization as representing the struggle for African liberation: "The thoughtful and industrious of our race want to go back to Africa, because we realize it will be our only hope of permanent existence. We do not want all the Negroes in Africa. Some are no good here and naturally will be no good there. The no-good Negro will naturally die in fifty years. The Negro who is wrangling about and fighting for social equality will naturally pass away in fifty years, and yield his place to the progressive Negro who wants a society and country of his own."

Garvey had no tolerance or respect for those blacks he felt were tools of whites or content to remain second-class citizens mixed in the injustices of racism, segregation, discrimination, lynchings, and other atrocities. He was well-aware that men and women who revealed in self-

pline, and, perhaps most important, a love for oneself.

Garveyism gained wide acceptance among many African-Americans because it stood for economic independence and self-sufficiency, yet avoided endorsing either capitalism or socialism. Two of Garvey's business enterprises—the Black Star Line of Ships and the Negro Factories Corporation—were more cooperative than corporate forms of white business enterprise. Both existed for the purpose of mitigating the plight of Africans as well as those spread around the globe by the black diaspora. Garvey felt that, by attempting to do this, the circumstances of the black man all over the world would improve dramatically.

This ability to understand the needs and desires of his fellow blacks was the primary reason for his rapid accession to a position of power and influence. When Garvey assured his followers that man "is master of his own destiny, and architect of his own fate" and enjoined them to "take yourselves out of the mire and hitch your hopes to the stars; yes, rise as high as the very stars themselves," he was preaching a traditional doctrine deeply rooted in 19th-century American ideology and carefully inculcated in the freedmen during the years of Reconstruction and after. When Garvey shouted his slogan, "Up, you mighty race," he was enunciating a credo which, however radical a racial doctrine, was appealingly familiar. He transformed black educator Booker T. Washington's philosophy of individual mobility into a mechanism designed to increase worldwide consciousness, unity, and the power of the race.

Garvey was similarly astute in understanding the importance of religion in black culture and incorporating many of its elements in his movement. He regularly employed a religious vocabulary and frequently cast himself in the role of Jesus. Most importantly, Garvey incorporated elaborate religious liturgy and zeal into his sermons. Hymns were sung, prayers recited, and offerings received, just as in church. However, his penchant for pomp and ceremony, wearing gaudy uniforms and robes; bestowing such titles as Knight Commander of the Nile upon his lieutenants; and creating such

and African redemption. Garveyism proclaimed and promoted the coming realization of people of color around the world and exalted the power of the black race.

The UNIA spread rapidly throughout many urban American cities, particularly New York and Chicago. Its Pan-African elements, earthy aura, gut-wrenching rhetoric, and relentless message of self-love enraptured many Americans of African descent. The message of Garvey-ism its followers espoused was simple and direct: Although slavery, past and current racial discrimination, and other forms of injustice had contributed to the desolate conditions of many African-Americans, no one but blacks acting on their own behalf and out of conviction of their intrinsic worth could ameliorate those misfortunes. The movement argued that it was an insult to God for any person to view himself or herself as inferior.

Garveyism could not have come along at a more pivotal time. Colonialism was solidifying throughout Africa. In the U.S., the continuation of black codes, race riots, Jim Crow laws, lynchings, abject poverty, and other social indignities continued to plague a sizable portion of the African-American population. Since race relations varied from place to place, this limited the contact that people of different cultures had with one another and rigidly defined the level at which Garveyism could succeed. Nonetheless, the politics of race was the cornerstone of the movement.

Garveyism advocated racial separation, rejecting the goals of assimilation and integration. The movement was driven by spellbinding oratory and rhetoric designed to awaken the fires of black nationalism. The ideology attracted attention because it managed to put into language the powerful phrases and secret thoughts of the African-American world. By the 1920s, the UNIA and followers of Garvey began to emerge in many northern, urban African-American communities, appealing in particular to the working class. The movement possessed a strong resemblance to Islam, which also advocated economic empowerment, self-sufficiency, strict dietary laws, self-discipline, and exalted the power of the black

pty and self-contempt were useless to themselves, as well as their children, families, community, and race. Perhaps out of frustration at being unable to garner the support of many of the African-American bourgeoisie, he began to relentlessly echo the message of Africa today! Africa now! Africa forever! to the black underclass.

Garvey viewed the UNIA as the epitome of the black liberation struggle. In a speech delivered at a convention in 1920, he made evident his determination to develop an African empire free of European habitation and domination. He spoke at length of the great increase of the power and numbers of people of African heritage and of the grand attempt to cleanse the motherland from European domination.

At the height of Garveyism's membership, Garvey had formed branches of the UNIA all over the world. These branches held themselves in readiness for a convention on a grand scale that would unite people of African races around the globe. Plans for the convention included the drafting of grievances and a declaration of rights, the election of international officers, and the discussion of special reports on political and economic aspects of the African problem.

The convention took place during the entire month of August, 1920, at New York's Madison Square Garden. The spectacle was a Pan-Africanist's haven. More than 25,000 delegates from various regions of Africa, Brazil, Colombia, Haiti, Panama, and the West Indies—as well as Canada, England, and France—attended. Garvey captivated the audience by announcing that the Negro would no longer suffer the indignities that had been thrust upon him. In his speeches, he would frequently refer movingly to African-American soldiers who, upon returning home after World War I, were beaten or lynched in their uniform in the South.

Garvey argued that other ethnic groups did not hesitate to claim a homeland; consequently, displaced Africans should not relent from claiming one. If Europe was for the Europeans, Africa should belong to Africans and their 400,000,000 descendants. At succeeding

## THE MOVEMENT'S DOWNFALL

As a consequence, many whites in Africa began to demand that their governments investigate Garvey. The already less than admirable feelings they harbored toward him were further strained by this direct ultimatum. Threats of expulsion from Africa hurled at white imperialists by the UNIA naturally alarmed the Western world, despite the fact that such a threat was chimerical. French and British colonial authorities in Africa successfully suppressed the *Negro World*. To possess any Garveyite publication became a serious offense that could result in imprisonment. Liberia, which the UNIA had planned to use as the center for the upcoming Negro National State, suddenly withdrew support for the Garvey movement because of pressure from the U.S.

Garvey paid a heavy price for underestimating the formidable power of his foes—black as well as white. Many of his opponents were leading black intellectuals, who resented his global audacity and popularity. They and a number of journalists began to demand an investigation of his ventures, including an audit of UNIA businesses. Garvey ignored them. Instead, he concentrated his energy on demonstrating the moral and philosophical views of his movement.

George W. Harris, editor of the *Harlem News*; William Pickens and Robert W. Bagnal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); and Robert S. Abbott, editor and publisher of the *Chicago Defender*, were just a few of the influential blacks who called for his arrest. Charles Johnson, a prominent African-American leader and member of the National Urban League, described Garvey as a "dynamic, blundering, temerarious visionary and a trickster." Johnson further denounced Garvey's ideals as unrealistic, his financial exploits as unsound, and his great plan for the eventual redemption of Af-

rica as unreasonably visionary. The National Urban League essentially saw Garveyism as a therapeutic, spiritual, "touchy-feely" movement that offered disenfranchised, fringe individuals a superficial, psychological, delusional empowerment that would eventually prove more harm than good.

One of Garvey's most formidable opponents and chief rival, W.E.B. Du Bois, made a serious effort to undermine both him and the UNIA. Du Bois, arguably the most influential African-American leader of his era, founded the NAACP and served as editor of the *Crisis*, the organization's newspaper. Initially, the two men enjoyed cordial relations. From 1920 on, however, Du Bois started to aim editorials in the *Crisis* directly at Garvey and the UNIA.

By 1922, an erstwhile staunch supporter and UNIA insider, E. Eterald Brown, began to levy suspicion about Garvey: "I next turn my attention to the Universal Negro Improvement Association. This has grown from the simple improvement association to a full fledged 'Back to Africa' movement. As it is such now, known as Garveyism.... Garveyism aims to free Africa from European domination and to hand it over to Negroes for the establishment of a Negro republic. Let me only say this in reference to the aim that it can only be accomplished by force of arms, and to this purpose by even beginning to make the most elementary preparations for this invasion of Africa." The article, laced with ambiguity, both complimented and condemned Garvey's efforts as founder of the UNIA. Intentionally or not, Brown started wheels turning against Garvey. Opponents of Garveyism wasted no time in denouncing, discrediting, and destroying the black nationalist leader.

Among liberals, Garvey was quick to earn the enmity of socialists. A. Phillip Randolph and Chandler Owen, joint editors of a leftist magazine titled *Messenger*, were among the more vocal critics of Garveyism. For a considerable time, Garvey and Randolph, despite profound differences in their racial and political attitudes, maintained a cordial relationship. The two men would often attend

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helped set the agenda for future black nationalist.

Garveyism made such a great impact on working-class blacks in the 1920s because it elevated all things African and diminished all things Eurocentric, while retaining the colorless mores of white-dominated society. For every white organization, Garveyism offered an African-American counterpart—from a black shipping fleet to a black Christ. Everything of virtue was linked to blackness. Out of Garveyism came the phrase “Black is beautiful.”

The larger significance of Garveyism lies in the fact that it was able to tap successfully into the ambitions and emotions of the downtrodden, the beaten, the hopeless—people whose lives were held down by class, economics, and racism. It told them that they were the descendants of great kings and queens and to say with boldness, “I am somebody!” and feel good about it.

Even after Garvey's imprisonment and deportation, the movement, no matter how minimal, was able to espouse this message. Du Bois and other rivals commended both Garvey and Garveyism after his death. Black organizations adopted much of their philosophy from Garveyism. Prominent among them were Father Divine's peace movement in the 1930s and the Nation of Islam. His message lives on in a segment of America in the 21st century.

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In 1923, eight leaders of the “Garvey Must Go” campaign, led by Owen as secretary, wrote the U.S. Attorney General, urging the government to speed up its prosecution of Garvey for mail fraud. Signatures on the enclosed petition included those of prominent African-American leaders. After he was convicted and imprisoned, Garvey's foes forcefully advocated the destruction of the UNIA, closing of the *Negro World*, dismantling of the Black Star Line of Ships, and a complete denunciation of Garveyism. The UNIA entered bankruptcy. After serving a two-year prison sentence, Garvey was pardoned by Pres. Calvin Coolidge and deported to Jamaica.

In 1928, he journeyed to England, where he unsuccessfully attempted to start a Garveyite chapter. He died in London in 1940, ironically without ever stepping foot on the African continent. As its enemies had foreseen, with the removal of the founding father of Garveyism from America, the movement suffered a severe setback, one from which it was never able to recover.

Yet, despite his shortcomings, it would be unfair and unwise to say that Marcus Garvey did not accomplish anything. Quite the contrary, in addition to rehabilitating the color black, he rejuvenated the large masses of the African diaspora and instilled in them a consciousness of their African-American heritage. This in itself was a mammoth task in the face of the centuries of humiliation and degradation that people of African descent, particularly in America, had endured. Garveyism proved to be a very important beginning that

conferences to speak on the other's behalf.

As the UNIA expanded, though, relations between Garvey and Randolph became radically strained. Garvey's glorification of African-American capitalism was in direct opposition to the Randolph-Owen belief in democratic socialism. Other aspects of Garveyism earned their disapproval as well. In a series of articles in the *Messenger*, the editors attacked Garvey's African “schemes” as being based on unsound reasoning. They also charged Garvey with irresponsibly promoting white racism against blacks as well as fostering nativism between West Indians and African-Americans. By 1923, the critiques in the *Messenger* had begun to exhibit anti-Caribbean overtones.

This response was the result of Garvey's June, 1922, symbiotic meeting in a closed-door session with Georgia white supremacist and Ku Klux Klan member Edward Young Clarke. After the meeting, Garvey was quoted as saying about the discussion, “I was speaking to a man who was brutally a white man and he was speaking to a man who was brutally Negro.”

After Garvey extended his “olive branch” to the Klan, Randolph and Owen announced that they would launch a campaign that would culminate in his deportation from America. The *Messenger* adopted the slogan “Garvey Must Go.” In 1920, the two socialists formed the Friends of Negro Freedom, a civil rights organization that included a few NAACP officials. Their goal was to get rid of Garvey “by any means necessary!”