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“Fight the Power!” The Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement

By LEON F. LITWACK

THE IMAGES REMAIN FAMILIAR, EVEN TODAY. SOME OF YOU WERE PARTICIPANTS and witnesses; others watched as the scenes came across your television screens; still others learned from books, documentary films, and oral histories and by teaching. Across the South, some half a century ago, men and women, mostly young and black, challenged Jim Crow and the laws and administrators who enforced it, filling the jails and enduring extraordinary violence, intimidation, and harassment. Children made their way through gauntlets of cursing, spitting, screaming white parents. Activists, seeking to change the way things were, found themselves beaten in the train and bus stations, in the streets and parks, in the jails and prisons; churches, homes, schools, and buses were bombed and burned to the ground; in the rural South, “nigger hunts,” murder, terrorism, racial cleansing, and economic coercion and exploitation took their toll in black lives.

Few could forget as well the marches, the oratory, the raised expectations, the defiant songs (some of them rooted in old spirituals)—“We’ll Never Turn Back,” “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around,” “Oh Freedom,” “We Shall Overcome.” It all made for powerful theater, and the drama often became critical to the success of the demonstrators. A new generation of black men and women embraced the promise of a new Reconstruction, more sweeping, more enduring than what had transpired a century earlier.

The roots of the civil rights movement lie deep in the history of this nation. The civil rights movement began with the presence of enslaved blacks in the New World, with the first slave mutiny on the ships bringing them here. The black odyssey includes some of the bleakest examples of repression and terrorism in the history of this or any nation. But it is at the same time a story of extraordinary resiliency, the story (as Nathan Irvin Huggins has written) “of a people who had to endure and

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make choices under conditions and circumstances which are outside our experience to know,” “a people whose courage was in their refusal to be brutes, in their insistence on holding themselves together, on acting, speaking, and singing as men and women.”¹ It is a story of resistance, defined not so much by spectacular feats and insurrections as by day-to-day acts, employing various forms of expression, often subtle and individual.

Through the first three decades of the twentieth century, the mechanisms that circumscribed black lives remained in place. Individual blacks made breakthroughs into the middle class; the New Deal, grassroots protests, and the stirrings in organized labor in the 1930s, culminating in the March on Washington movement in 1941, encouraged a politics of hope and raised the stakes in the struggle for economic justice.

But most black southerners still lived out their lives in a rigidly segregated and repressive world. In 1925 seventeen-year-old Richard Wright left his native Mississippi, fleeing “that most racist of all the American states.” Fifteen years later, in the summer of 1940, he returned to ascertain how much the South had changed. During his brief stay, Wright witnessed no violence and no lynchings, only “the normal routine of daily relations between Negroes and whites.” That was enough to satisfy his curiosity; indeed, the first two hours told him everything he needed to know. “Jim Crow was still Jim Crow and not a single racial practice had altered during my . . . absence,” he wrote. “What I saw there made me wonder why I had wanted to see and feel it all again. I discovered that the only thing that had really changed was I.”²

For most blacks, as for Wright, it remained a familiar South: the narrow boundaries, the limited options, the need to curb ambitions, to contain feelings. Personal security lay in repressing any impulses toward individuality or assertiveness, in learning how to accommodate oneself to daily indignities. In 1940 more than three-quarters of adult blacks had not finished high school; some nine out of ten families lived in poverty; blacks earned some 41 percent of what whites made. Less than 5 percent of eligible blacks in the old Confederacy could exercise the right to vote.

¹ Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Black Odyssey: The Afro-American Ordeal in Slavery* (New York, 1977), xii (first quotation), xiv (second quotation). Portions of this address appeared in the Nathan I. Huggins Lectures delivered at Harvard University, which will be published in 2009 by Harvard University Press as *How Free Is Free? The Long Death of Jim Crow*.

² Richard Wright, *White Man, Listen!* (New York, 1957), 86 (first quotation); Wright, “How Jim Crow Feels,” *Negro Digest*, 5 (January 1947), 44–53 (second quotation on 52; third and fourth quotations on 48).

But for many blacks, World War II was the “turning point” in the relationship of African Americans to American society. “To put it briefly, and somewhat too simply,” James Baldwin wrote, “a certain hope died, a certain respect for white Americans faded.”³ Not only did blacks lose respect for whites, but those who fought in the war also lost another quality that had been instilled in them over several centuries—fear of whites—and that change would have far-reaching implications as the soldiers returned to their homes. “You said they said wait until the war is over,” a black soldier wrote; “you damn right, wait until it’s over over here and [the war] will really be fought down there [the South]. I hear these young fellows talk and I know they mean it. A new person will come back home, embedded with more hate than ever before.”⁴

Novelist Walter Mosley, drawing on the stories he heard from his father, a World War II veteran, has his character Easy Rawlins recall the five years he spent with white men in Africa, Italy, France, and Germany: “I ate with them and slept with them, and I killed enough blue-eyed young men to know that they were just as afraid to die as I was.” Some years later, as he experienced the uprisings of the 1960s, Rawlins feels “a strong wind” at his back—“the angry voice in my heart that urged me to go out and fight after all of the hangings I had seen, after all of the times I had been called nigger and all of the doors that had been slammed in my face.”

I spent my whole early life at the back of buses and in the segregated balconies at theaters. I had been arrested for walking in the wrong part of town and threatened for looking a man in the eye. And when I went to war to fight for freedom, I found myself in a segregated army, treated with less respect than they treated German POWs. I had seen people who looked like me jeered on TV and in the movies. I had had enough and I wasn’t about to turn back⁵

³James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, 1963), 68.

⁴P.F.C. Van G. Stearns, “In France,” to “Dear Truthful,” in *New Orleans Informer and Sentinel*, November 25, 1944. I found the letter and accompanying article in a memo issued by the U.S. Department of War, Army Service Forces Training Center, Post Intelligence Office, Camp Flauche, New Orleans, November 25, 1944 (Confidential), Ron Ridenhour Archives (New Orleans). The military intelligence records housed in the National Archives are filled with evaluations of black morale, allegations of subversive activity in the black community and among black soldiers, and reports of racial clashes, most of them precipitated by black challenges to Jim Crow practices in the South. For his having assembled many of the relevant military intelligence materials, I am indebted to Ron Ridenhour, who until his untimely death was writing a book on race relations in the military during World War II, with a focus on what happened at Camp Van Buren, Mississippi, in 1943. I am deeply grateful to Mary Howell of New Orleans for permitting me to examine Ridenhour’s archives in her possession. In addition, I examined other relevant and supplemental materials at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. Incidents of racial confrontation are also to be found on a regular basis in the black press and in *Crisis*. On the outbreak of racial violence abroad, see also Walter White, *A Rising Wind* (New York, 1945); and Graham Smith, *When Jim Crow Met John Bull: Black American Soldiers in World War II Britain* (London, 1987).

⁵Walter Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (New York, 1990), 9 (first quotation); Mosley, *Little Scarlet* (Boston, 2004), 17–18 (second, third, and fourth quotations).

With the end of World War II, the conviction grew that the way it used to be did not have to be, and African Americans, many of them veterans, gave voice to that feeling in ways white America could no longer ignore. In August Wilson's powerful play *King Hedley II*, the title character, a black veteran of World War II, wants everyone to know how he feels: "I want everybody to know that King Hedley II is here. And I want everybody to know, just like my daddy, that you can't fuck with me. I want you to get the picture. Each and every one of you! And I want you to hold me to it. When you see me coming, that's who you better see. Now they done had World War I . . . and World War II . . . the next motherfucker that fucks with me it's gonna be World War III."⁶

Long before Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks took center stage, black men and women, acting mostly as individuals but numbering in the thousands, waged guerrilla warfare on the infrastructure of Jim Crow. During World War II they violated law and custom, sitting where they pleased in buses, trains, stations, restaurants, and movie houses, waiting to be dragged off by conductors, drivers, owners, and police officers. "Every colored person seems to be conscious of a stepping up of bad feeling between white and colored," a Charleston, South Carolina, public school teacher observed in 1943. "Many of us walk long distances every day rather than get on a bus."⁷ The amount of time and print spent by intelligence agencies on so-called subversive activity in black America validated the conclusion reached by an army officer based on the letters and reports reaching his desk: "The threats to the nation were 'first Negroes, second Japs, third Nazis'—in just that order!"⁸

Capitalizing on the gains made earlier, in the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s, the civil rights movement revolutionized black consciousness and mobilized the black community in ways that captured the imagination of much of the world. Extraordinary changes—some of them symbolic, some of them substantive—transformed the South. The civil rights movement struck down the legal barriers of segregation and

⁶ August Wilson, *King Hedley II* (New York, 2005), 58. The ellipses are in the original.

⁷ Charles S. Johnson and Associates, *To Stem This Tide: A Survey of Racial Tension Areas in the United States* (Boston, 1943), 112.

⁸ Quoted in Lawrence D. Reddick, "The Color of War," manuscript, n.d. [circa 1947], in the Lawrence D. Reddick Papers (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York). The letter Reddick quotes was sent by the unit intelligence officer, Clifford R. Moore, 931st Field Artillery Battalion, Camp Gordon, Georgia, to George Schuyler at the Pittsburgh *Courier* on February 25, 1944. This letter is also in the Reddick Papers.

disenfranchisement, dismantling a racial caste system that had been evolving, sometimes fitfully, over some four centuries. The achievements were impressive and far-reaching, with striking gains in educational achievement, in clerical and professional positions, in skilled labor, in political representation, and in the entertainment and sports industries. Affirmative action opened positions hitherto reserved for whites, significantly expanding the black middle class. Politically, from 1960 to 1980 the number of black registered voters in the South more than tripled.

But there were limits, significant limits. Although the civil rights movement left its mark on the South, the changes were slow to develop, often taking on a dramatic importance that was misleading. In much of the rural South, an unwritten code perpetuated what was once enshrined in law and Jim Crow signs. The signs all but disappeared, relics to display in the new civil rights museums, but the attitudes that had sustained Jim Crow were not so easily altered. Whites found it difficult, in some places impossible, to learn new ways, to shake off the old protocol, to give up that easily the grim determination to command black lives and labor. Charles Sherrod arrived in southwest Georgia in 1961 as part of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and was later elected to the city council of Albany. In 1985 he looked back over the past two decades to assess the changes. “Those people who shot at us and blew up churches and all that 20 years ago,” he declared, “they haven’t gone anywhere. The attitudes are still there. Their behavior has changed because we have got a little power. They won’t do anything they can’t get away with.”⁹

In much of the South, progress remained slow, conforming to day-to-day realities. For economic sustenance, many blacks remained dependent on whites. Abandoning accommodation for confrontation could prove to be a costly decision. Teachers lost their jobs, families were denied credit, mortgages were foreclosed, and challenges to white supremacy, whatever form they took, individual or collective, faced a violent response. Power still lay with the whites, and every black family had to weigh carefully any decision to challenge the racial protocol. “The name of the game is survival,” one black activist explained. “Their whole livelihood depends on the white system. Civil rights, drinking water from a public fountain, eating in restaurants, going to bathrooms—all that is secondary to survival.”¹⁰

⁹ E. R. Shipp, “Across the Rural South, Segregation as Usual,” *New York Times*, April 27, 1985, pp. 1, 41 (quotation).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

For many blacks, their optimism about redeeming America was frustrated and disappointed. “The practical cost of change for the nation up to this point has been cheap,” Martin Luther King Jr. conceded. “The limited reforms have been obtained at bargain rates. There are no expenses, and no taxes are required, for Negroes to share lunch counters, libraries, parks, hotels and other facilities with whites. . . . Even the more significant changes involved in voter registration required neither large monetary nor psychological sacrifice. Spectacular and turbulent events that dramatized the demand created an erroneous impression that a heavy burden was involved.”¹¹

What the civil rights movement left undone threatened to make the changes more symbolic than real. But to advance into areas hitherto untouched by the movement entailed costs and demanded far-reaching economic changes. That would not be easy to achieve. Many Americans, as a matter of high principle, rejected racism; they were repelled by the scenes of violence in the South over integrating a public bus, a toilet, a drinking fountain, or a lunch counter. None of these changes, though, carried the emotional weight of new taxes, the sanctity of the neighborhood school, the racial composition of the neighborhood, or a competitive job that paid decent wages.

Even as the civil rights movement struck down legal barriers and transformed the face of southern politics, it failed to diminish economic inequalities. When it came to changing black lives, black mayors and their machines all too often resembled those they replaced, much like Amiri Baraka’s fictional but easily recognizable black mayor: “And what we got here in this town? Niggers in high places, black faces in high places, but the same rats and roaches, the same slums and garbage, the same police whippin’ your heads, the same unemployment and junkies in the hallways muggin’ your old lady.”¹²

Even as the Supreme Court ended school segregation by law, the justices failed to end segregation by income and residence. And this was no longer a southern phenomenon: in places like Boston, screaming white parents and lawless white mobs repeated scenes acted out earlier in the South. The struggle to achieve an equal education, regardless of race or class, threatened to undermine the very idea of public schools. By the 1970s, the white exodus into the suburbs, in the North and the

¹¹ Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York, 1967), 5.

¹² Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Tales of the Out and the Gone* (New York, 2007), 31–32.

South, had made a mockery of racial integration; whites, it seemed, preferred to abandon the public schools and the cities rather than share power and community with nonwhites.

White flight took its toll. By the year 2000, more than 70 percent of African American students were attending schools in which they and other nonwhites were in the majority, and more than a third attended schools where the enrollment was 90 to 100 percent African American, Hispanic, and Native American. In many parts of the country, as in the Northeast, more than half of all black students attended such schools. Whites, on average, attended schools where more than 80 percent of students were white. Los Angeles and Chicago, not Birmingham and Montgomery, acquired the reputation of being the two most segregated cities in the United States. Although the South remained more integrated than it had been before 1954, it was moving backward at an accelerating rate. The cover of *Time* magazine on April 29, 1996, said it all: "Back to Segregation: After four decades of struggle, America has now given up on school integration."¹³

Long before the courts got around to undermining the *Brown* decision, Martin Luther King Jr.'s nonviolent appeals to the white conscience had begun to place an unacceptable psychological burden on blacks. It became increasingly difficult to wage the kind of campaign King preached. "It is not possible," declared Malcolm X, "to love a man whose chief purpose in life is to humiliate you and still be considered a normal human being."¹⁴ Growing numbers of blacks kept asking the same question: Why should they have to shed blood and risk their lives to be granted what white Americans enjoyed from birth—equal rights under the law? What did civil rights mean to black men and women living in hovels with empty stomachs, no jobs, and no prospect for employment in the near future? "I'm not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and call myself a diner," Malcolm X exclaimed. "Sitting at the table doesn't make you a diner, unless you eat some of what's on that plate." With absolute clarity,

¹³ Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (rev. ed.; New York, 2004), 772; James S. Kunen, "The End of Integration," *Time*, April 29, 1996, pp. 39–40; Orlando Patterson, "What to Do When Busing Becomes Irrelevant," *New York Times*, July 18, 1999, p. 17; Jonathan Kozol, "Overcoming Apartheid," *Nation*, December 19, 2005, pp. 26–30.

¹⁴ Quoted in Juan Williams and Quinton Dixie, *This Far by Faith: Stories from the African American Religious Experience* (New York, 2003), 228.

James Forman made a similar point about powerlessness: “If we can’t sit at the table, let’s knock the fucking legs off!”¹⁵

Suddenly, white Americans were listening to black radicals articulating a message that brought none of the comfort and reassurance of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech. Racism, some blacks concluded, had become so pervasive in the American body that it could be exorcised only by shock treatment. The heightening of white resistance and black consciousness radicalized the civil rights movement. New voices—Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, the Black Panthers—suggested new moods in black America. “We gotta make this our Mississippi,” declared Hartman Turnbow of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party; “Jes’ as water seek the low places, Power seek the weak places.”¹⁶ At the same time, Nina Simone punctuated that demand with her defiant “Mississippi Goddam.”

Oh, this whole country is full of lies,
 You all gonna die and die like flies
 I don’t trust you anymore,
 You keep on saying “Go slow!” “Go slow!”
 But that’s just the trouble

.....
 Do things gradually, “do it slow,”
 And bring more tragedy.¹⁷

Rather than talk about love and Christianity, this new breed of activists proposed to talk about power. The appeal was less to white America’s moral conscience than to its fear of social upheaval. When King’s followers sang “We Shall Overcome,” the new militants responded with “We Shall Overrun” and with Gil Scott-Heron’s admonition, “We are tired of praying and marching and thinking and learning / Brothers want to start cutting and shooting and stealing and burning.”¹⁸ One black activist proclaimed:

Now it is over. The days of singing Freedom songs and the days of combating bullets and billy clubs with Love. We Shall Overcome . . . sounds old, outdated.

¹⁵ Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” in George Breitman, ed., *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York, 1965), 26; James Forman, in “Bridge to Freedom (1965),” episode 6 of *Eyes on the Prize* (1st ser., Blackside, 1986; videocassette), transcript available online at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/about/pt_106.html.

¹⁶ Quoted in Stokely Carmichael with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York, 2003), 501.

¹⁷ “Mississippi Goddam,” on *Four Women: The Nina Simone Philips Recordings* (4 discs; Verve, 2003). The song was recorded in 1963.

¹⁸ King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 26; Gil Scott-Heron, “Evolution (and Flashback),” on the album *Evolution (and Flashback): The Very Best of Gil Scott-Heron* [recorded 1970–1972] (RCA Victor, 1999).

And as for Love? That's always been better done in bed than on the picket line and marches. Love is fragile and gentle and seeks a like response. We used to sing "I Love Everybody" as we ducked bricks and bottles. Now we sing

Too much love,
Too much love,
Nothing kills a nigger like
Too much love.¹⁹

Even before the March on Washington in 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. had come to realize that his dream was in trouble. None of the marches or demonstrations, none of the sit-ins or mobilizations altered significantly the deteriorating schools, the hostile police departments, the discriminatory trade unions, or the greed of the slumlords and their political associates. Black politics did not provide jobs for the jobless, adequate housing and health care for the poor, or quality integrated education. Nor did black politics alleviate the plight of black agricultural workers, still toiling in the fields of the South for less than subsistence wages. This is the issue John Lewis of SNCC sought to address at the March on Washington. While King preached to the assembled throng about having a dream, Lewis insisted on drawing attention to the betrayal of that dream. Facing the massive crowd of more than 230,000, the largest mass rally in the history of the city, Lewis chose to note who was not there, the most conspicuous absences: "We march today for jobs and freedom, but we have nothing to be proud of, for hundreds and thousands of our brothers are not here. For they are receiving starvation wages or no wages at all. While we stand here, there are sharecroppers in the Delta of Mississippi who are out in the fields working for less than three dollars a day, for twelve hours a day."²⁰

The more black Americans found themselves excluded from the mainstream, the greater were the possibilities for violent confrontation with the more visible symbols of white society. Equality, a black youth maintained, "is like Whitey holds you by the belt at the starting line until everyone else is halfway around the track, then gives you a big slap on the rump and says, 'Go, baby, you're equal!' Takes an unusual man to win a race like that. It's easier to shoot the starter."²¹ Five days after President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965

¹⁹ Julius Lester, *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama!* (New York, 1968), 107. See also Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 237.

²⁰ "Excerpts from the March on Washington, Part 3," audio clip from August 28, 1963, Civil Rights Digital Library, <http://crdl.usg.edu/voci/go/crdl/publicSearch/viewVBO/8333/0>.

²¹ Quoted in Russell Sackett, "Plotting a War on 'Whitey,'" *Life*, June 10, 1966, p. 106.

into law, the most destructive racial uprising in more than two decades broke out in Watts, the largest black ghetto in Los Angeles. Between 1965 and 1968 nearly three hundred racial uprisings and disturbances shattered the peace of urban America. Almost all of them were unorganized, unplanned, unscheduled; indeed, it was precisely their spontaneous quality that shocked so many and revealed the depths of black frustration and despair. President Johnson told blacks that nothing of value could be won through violent means (a proposition he did not apply to Vietnam). The FBI, never known for its analytic powers, called the uprisings “a senseless attack on all constituted authority without purpose or objective.”²²

But they had purpose and objective: to expose what the civil rights movement failed to touch, the desperation, the physical and social isolation of the ghettos, and the complicity of white shop owners, businessmen, slumlords, and police in perpetuating those conditions. The uprisings struck at the most visible symbols of white society: the police (viewed as an occupying army) and the white businesses. The majority of stores damaged and looted were those that blacks felt to have the most exploitative business practices: stores that sold liquor, clothing, food, and furniture. Not only were black businesses generally left untouched, but so too were libraries, schools, hospitals, clinics, and some government agencies—that is, the institutions that served the community.²³

Even as violence enveloped urban America, disproportionate numbers of blacks were waging a war of destruction ten thousand miles away in Vietnam, a war that pitted a wealthy white country against a poor colored nation. Paradoxically, “the most integrated war in U.S. history,” as it came to be called, revealed deep racial and class rifts in American society. The burden of fighting the war was borne by the inner city and rural poor—“a rainbow coalition of black, brown, and redneck,” few of whom had the resources, the counseling, or the connections available to better-educated and more privileged whites. Those men who successfully evaded the draft swelled the ranks of protest marches, but all too many of the marchers were insensitive to the moral dilemmas of those who replaced them in the draft call-ups.²⁴

²² Untitled report, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, September 18, 1964, quoted in Harry S. Ashmore, *Civil Rights and Wrongs: A Memoir of Race and Politics, 1944–1996* (rev. ed.; Columbia, S.C., 1997), 191.

²³ Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–68* (New York, 2006), 630–34; Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954–1980* (New York, 1981), 200–208.

²⁴ Wallace Terry II, “Bringing the War Home,” *Black Scholar*, 2 (November 1970), 6–18 (first quotation on 6); John Gregory Dunne, “The War that Won’t Go Away,” *New York Review of Books*, September 25, 1986, pp. 25–29 (second quotation on 25).

The Vietnam War fragmented the civil rights movement. When black leaders or organizations (like SNCC) took strong antiwar positions, most Americans still supported the war and labeled criticism of it as unpatriotic. Americans loved to hear King preach nonviolence, as long as the message was aimed at black folk. But the apostle of nonviolence could not avoid Vietnam, particularly after what he had encountered on the civil rights battlefields. How, he asked, could he protest the violence in Mississippi without confronting “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government.”²⁵ Two days after King preached this antiwar sermon at Riverside Church in New York City, the *Washington Post* tried to explain the immense injury King had done to his “natural allies” and to himself: “Many who have listened to him with respect will never again accord him the same confidence.”²⁶

Of far greater urgency to King was the fact that “the bombs in Vietnam explode at home—they destroy the hopes and possibilities for a decent America.”²⁷ He repeated his concern that the amount of money spent to kill each enemy soldier far exceeded the sum that was spent to assist each American who lived below the poverty line.²⁸ This statistic brought the war home in critical ways, as did the escalating casualty figures. It soon became apparent that the United States could not fight two wars, and it seemed bent on losing both of them.

The paradoxes produced by the Vietnam War haunted black America. The military, now the most integrated institution in American society, afforded blacks rare opportunities to make something of themselves. In Vietnam, at least, “Uncle Sam was an Equal Opportunity Employer.”²⁹

²⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., “A Time to Break Silence” [sermon delivered at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned, Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967], in James Melvin Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco, 1986), 231–44 (quotation on 233).

²⁶ “A Tragedy,” *Washington Post*, April 6, 1967, p. A20.

²⁷ “Statement of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. . . .” in *Federal Role in Urban Affairs: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Executive Reorganization of the Committee on Government Operations, United States Senate, Eighty-ninth Congress, Second Sessions, December 14, and 15, 1966, Part 14* (Washington, D.C., 1967), 2970 (quotation); Adam Fairclough, “Martin Luther King, Jr., and the War in Vietnam,” *Phylon*, 45 (No. 1, 1984), 28; Sitkoff, *Struggle for Black Equality*, 219.

²⁸ King wrote, “It is estimated that we spend \$338,000 for each enemy we kill, while we spend in the so-called war on poverty in America only about \$53 for each person classified as ‘poor.’ And much of that \$53 goes for salaries of people who are not poor. We have escalated the war in Vietnam and de-escalated the skirmish against poverty.” Martin Luther King Jr., *Speeches, Sermons, Statements, Articles*, Box 12, Martin Luther King Jr. Papers (Martin Luther King Jr. Center, Atlanta, Georgia). I am grateful to Daniel Lucks for bringing this item to my attention.

²⁹ Joseph L. Galloway et al., “Debt of Honor,” *U.S. News and World Report*, May 6, 1996, pp. 28–41 (quotation on 41).

No one examining the draft or casualty lists coming out of Vietnam raised visible concerns about racial quotas. Nikki Giovanni, a young black poet, articulated her anger in her poetry: “We kill in Viet Nam / for them / We kill for UN & NATO & SEATO & US / And everywhere for all alphabet but / BLACK.”³⁰

Upon returning to the United States, many black soldiers understood what they still faced. “I had left one war and came back and got into another one,” PFC Reginald “Malik” Edwards recalled. He enlisted again, this time in the Black Panther Party in Washington, D.C., as did many of his Vietnam buddies:

I felt the party was the only organization that was fighting the system. . . . Most of the Panthers then were veterans. We figured if we had been over in Vietnam fighting for our country, which at that point wasn’t serving us properly, it was only proper that we had to go out and fight for our own cause. We had already fought for the white man in Vietnam. It was clearly his war. If it wasn’t, you wouldn’t have seen as many Confederate flags as you saw. And the Confederate flags was an insult to any person that’s of color on this planet.³¹

J. T. Watkins remembered spending most of his time after coming home hanging around street corners and “jiving” with friends: “Y’know, if I was back in Vietnam, I’d shoot every white guy I could find. They didn’t tell me that I was going to be just another nigger when I got back here.”³²

With the urban uprisings, the war, and the heightened rhetoric and new directions of the civil rights movement, the battles over racial change became too much for many whites to absorb. As Martin Luther King Jr. knew from his experience in Chicago, segregation was only part of an elaborate network of racial inequality in housing, jobs, income, and education. When the crisis moved, as it did in the late twentieth century, from the South to the nation, from the political arena to the economic arena, blacks confronted not only unrepentant white supremacists but also even more intractable barriers to economic justice, faceless men who wielded considerable power over blacks’ chances for jobs, a livable income, and a meaningful education. How to effect much-needed changes in the very infrastructure of the nation proved baffling. How does one reach into the very centers of privilege and power?³³

³⁰ Nikki Giovanni, “The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro,” in *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni, 1968–1998* (New York, 2003), 19–20.

³¹ Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York, 1984), 13–14 (quotations on 14).

³² “Thinking Black,” *Newsweek*, November 20, 1967, p. 41.

³³ Marshall Frady, “Prophet with Honor,” *New York Review of Books*, October 27, 1983, pp. 79–83, esp. 83.

What compounded the problem was the conviction shared by many white Americans that, in general, blacks had made it. Laws had been passed; Jim Crow had been eliminated. Blacks had been elected to public office. Opportunities were available for blacks if they only seized the initiative. If the failures of blacks persisted, the fault had to lie with the victims, not in deeply rooted economic and social inequalities, not in their economic marginalization. The failure of blacks to succeed reflected inferior intelligence, the unfitness, incapacity, and moral, even genetic and cultural, shortcomings of a race; failure lay in their refusal to put their own house in order, to lessen their dependency on government programs and handouts. With politicians vying during and after Ronald Reagan's administration over who could deliver less government, "blame the victim" had much appeal—"If it's *their* fault, . . . then we don't have to do anything."³⁴

The same argument had been made a century earlier. After emancipation, the United States refused to face up to the legacy of slavery. White Americans could not be persuaded to accept the idea that if the former slaves were to be given an equal chance to succeed, the government would need to intervene on a massive scale and provide continuing assistance and protection. But most Americans and both parties rejected such intervention, indeed any preferential treatment for black people, as it violated American values. The Supreme Court validated this judgment in 1883 when it ruled unconstitutional the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which had outlawed discrimination in public accommodations. The Negro was no longer to be "the special favorite of the laws," the Court explained; that is, the Negro's rights as a citizen were now "to be protected in the ordinary modes by which other men's rights are protected."³⁵ Presumably the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments had leveled the playing field.

The same argument was revived in the 1890s, as if to justify northern indifference to the savage repression of black freedom underway in the South. In *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the Supreme Court firmly rejected the idea "that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority." Justice Henry B. Brown observed, "If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely

³⁴ David L. Kirp, "Following the Color Line," *Nation*, April 24, 1995, pp. 567–72 (quotations on 572).

³⁵ *Civil Rights Cases*, 109 U.S. 3 (1883), document no. 292, in Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Documents of American History* (6th ed., 2 vols. in 1; New York, 1958), II, 86–88 (quotations on 88).

because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it." In any event, legislation could not "eradicate racial instincts."³⁶

The same argument, dressed in a more sophisticated methodology and vocabulary, would find resonance a century later, in the 1990s, in the literature and rhetoric of the white racial backlash. This time it would be articulated by social scientists armed with charts, tables, and graphs that gave new life to old pieties about how to achieve success. Some of the authors reminded readers of how they had once marched for civil rights with Martin Luther King Jr. That moved one observer to ask, "Is there an opponent of affirmative action over the age of 40 who doesn't claim to have personally offered Rosa Parks his seat on that Montgomery bus?"³⁷

The idea that the fault must lie with the victim proved comforting to many whites, and it was hardly a new experience for blacks. Since Reconstruction, black southerners had been warned about agitating for civil rights in a society bent on maintaining the racial status quo. In responding to the deaths of civil rights workers, even to the bomb planted in the Birmingham church that took the lives of four black girls, whites had often insisted that blacks had brought this grief on themselves. A white housewife in a Birmingham supermarket told a reporter that the death of the four girls was "terrible," but "that's what they get for trying to force their way where they're not wanted."³⁸

The civil rights arena had been altered. The most troubled voices now being heard, or so it seemed, were those who in the past had tolerated or supported civil rights, as long as the agitation was confined to a renegade South and to integrating buses, toilets, and lunch counters. But when it came down to discrimination in housing, jobs, and schools, in both the North and the South, when it came down to whites' sending their children to public schools with substantial numbers of minority children, those were different matters altogether, involving difficult choices that white Americans were not prepared to make. When the talk came down to racially mixed neighborhoods, to laws that barred discrimination in renting and selling homes, whites rebelled. Nothing brought him more hate mail, Republican congressman George H. W. Bush conceded, than his decision to break party ranks and vote for an

³⁶ *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), at 551.

³⁷ Katha Pollitt, "History as You Like It," *Nation*, May 12, 1997, p. 10.

³⁸ Robert E. Baker, "Grief and Fear Shared in Birmingham," *Washington Post*, September 19, 1963, pp. A1 (quotation), A8.

open housing bill—more mail “than on Vietnam and taxes and sex all put together.” Some letters included death threats.³⁹

And finally, when the talk came down to compensatory justice for the victims of racism, to reparations for centuries of unpaid labor, to affirmative action that threatened inherited privileges and preferences long associated with whiteness, those were different matters, too, and many who had once sympathized with or learned to tolerate the civil right movement defected. The defections were especially conspicuous in the North, among “the morally stylish.”

By the early twenty-first century, the controversy over school integration seemed all but over, dooming a large percentage of African American students to racial isolation—a separate and inferior education. In 2007 the Supreme Court set back integration more than half a century by denying two major public-school districts, in Seattle and Louisville, the right to choose race-sensitive methods to ensure a modicum of integration. The Court of Chief Justice John Roberts shamelessly appropriated the language and spirit of the civil rights movement—ideas like color blindness and a level playing field—to reject efforts to limit the historical privilege of whites and to create racially diverse schools.⁴⁰ The message imparted by the Court could not have been clearer, and it aroused little or no dissent in white America: after all, some were quick to note, racial isolation is not the same as exclusion. For much of the history of this nation, debates about the content and objectives of public education had been based on the idea that public schools played an indispensable role in a democratic society. But in the twenty-first century, with the continuing white abandonment of public schools, they are being undermined by a system based largely on class and race.

For more than two centuries, historian Nathan Huggins argues, freedom in America meant not being a slave, and according to one way of looking at it, freedom meant not being black. “For African-Americans,” Huggins has written, “as for all Americans, the condition of freedom depended on the existence of slavery. With slavery abolished, what could freedom mean for everybody since ‘black’ and ‘unfreedom’ were nearly synonymous?” No wonder that in 1865, when a group of slaves in Tennessee were told by a visitor that all slaves were now free,

³⁹ Philip A. Klinkner with Rogers M. Smith, *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America* (Chicago, 1999), 284–85 (quotation on 284).

⁴⁰ Nancy MacLean, “The Scary Origins of Chief Justice Roberts’s Decision Opposing the Use of Race to Promote Integration,” August 6, 2007, online at History News Network, <http://hnn.us/articles/41501.html>; “Roberts Rules,” *New Republic*, July 23, 2007, pp. 1, 4; Patricia J. Williams, “Mourning in America,” *Nation*, July 30–August 6, 2007, p. 10.

they asked, “Free how?” And he replied, “Free to work and live for demselves.”⁴¹

How free is free? This question persists. Enslaved labor was abolished more than a century ago, but only after 250 years of uncompensated labor. Jim Crow blocked black access to economic and political power for another century. But even with the dismantling of segregation some four decades ago, the images will not go away. Though expressed with more subtlety today, racism remains pervasive; its terrors and tensions are still with us, and it knows no regional boundaries.

Individual examples of conspicuous black success, as depicted in the popular media or in the political arena, mask a larger reality. Even as the black middle class expanded significantly, a larger number of black Americans were left to endure lives of quiet despair and hopelessness, trapped in a mire of poverty, failing schools, bad housing, inadequate health care, hostile policing, and discrimination. Four decades after the Kerner Commission report, the United States remains two Americas in critical ways—in how much income most black men and women can enjoy, in what jobs are available to them, in the quality of the schools their children can attend, in the level of medical care they can expect, in the neighborhoods where they can obtain affordable housing, and in the futures to which they can aspire—separate and unequal, “a large shadow population of interior exiles.”⁴²

How the United States chose to confront the problems of poverty and race is instructive: it expanded its prison industry, thus finding another way to isolate the centers of power from the devastation they had caused. A new culture of control emerged in the 1970s to manage the growing problem of racially imbalanced imprisonment and racially

⁴¹ Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Revelations: American History, American Myths* (New York, 1995), 280 (first and second quotations); Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979), 220 (third and fourth quotations).

⁴² [Kerner Commission], *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington, D.C., 1968); Frady, “Prophet with Honor,” 79; Orlando Patterson, “Black Americans,” in Peter H. Schuck and James Q. Wilson, eds., *Understanding America: The Anatomy of an Exceptional Nation* (New York, 2008), 375–410; Eric Alterman, “We’ve Become More Unequal and That Matters,” *Altercation* (blog), July 30, 2007, online at History News Network, <http://hnn.us/roundup/entries/41414.html>; “Under George Bush, Blacks Are Giving Back the Economic Gains Achieved during the Clinton Years” [sidebar in article titled “George W. Bush, the NAACP, and the Persistent Damage to Black Higher Education”], *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 52 (Summer 2006), 80; Harrison Rainie et al., “Black and White in America,” *U.S. News and World Report*, July 22, 1991, pp. 18–21; Constance L. Hays, “Study Says Prejudice in Suburbs Is Aimed Mostly at Blacks,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1988, p. A16; Tom Wicker, “And Still Two Nations,” *ibid.*, January 23, 1984, p. A21; Leon F. Litwack, “The Making of a Historian,” in Paul A. Cimbala and Robert F. Himmelberg, eds., *Historians and Race: Autobiography and the Writing of History* (Bloomington, 1996), 29 (quotation).

biased policing. In 2004 nearly 50 percent of the nation's prisoners were black, as were 42 percent of prisoners under sentence of death. Blacks were being incarcerated at an extraordinary rate: about eight times that of the white race. In 2003 approximately 12 percent of African American males between the ages of twenty and thirty-four were behind bars (the highest figure ever recorded by the Department of Justice), compared with 1.6 percent of white men of comparable ages. Some 28 percent of black men will be sent to jail in their lifetimes. (In California and New York, a black male resident is more likely to go to a state prison than to attend a state college.)⁴³

In 1968, when Martin Luther King Jr. went to Memphis to support a strike of sanitation workers, he had already come to appreciate that even the surface changes made by the civil rights movement were in jeopardy, that the violence of poverty brutalized black families and neighborhoods. "Why," he asked, "are there forty million poor people" in a nation overflowing with such unbelievable affluence? Shortly before his death King confided to a reporter, "For years I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of the society, a little change here, a little change there. Now I feel quite differently. I think you've got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values." To open up the so-called American Dream to everyone, to eliminate massive injustices, King came to recognize, would require far more substantial structural changes than most Americans were willing to concede, nothing less than "a radical redistribution of economic and political power," a thorough restructuring of "the architecture of American society." The position of African Americans was inseparable from the iniquities of capitalism. "Call it democracy, or call it democratic socialism," King declared, "but there must be a better distribution of wealth within this country for all God's children." In that spirit, King announced plans for a poor people's march on Washington, D.C., designed to cause "major

⁴³Fox Butterfield, "Prison Rates Among Blacks Reach a Peak, Report Finds," *New York Times*, April 7, 2003, p. A12; Adam Liptak, "Study Revises Texas' Standing as a Death Penalty Leader," *ibid.*, February 14, 2004, p. A10; Glenn C. Loury, "Why Are So Many Americans in Prison? Race and the Transformation of Criminal Justice," *Boston Review*, July–August 2007, pp. 7–10; Daniel Lazare, "Stars and Bars," *Nation*, August 27–September 3, 2007, pp. 29–36; John Edgar Wideman, "Doing Time, Marking Race," *ibid.*, October 30, 1995, pp. 503–5; Orlando Patterson, "Jena, O.J., and the Jailing of Black America," *New York Times*, September 30, 2007, section 4, p. 13; Jason DeParle, "The American Prison Nightmare," *New York Review of Books*, April 12, 2007, pp. 33–36; "Cornell Study Reveals Surprising Findings on Death Row, Race and the Most Death Penalty-prone States," February 26, 2004, <http://www.news.cornell.edu/releases/Feb04/Death.row.demo.lm.html>; Paul Street, "Color Blind: Prisons and the New American Racism," *Dissent*, Summer 2001, p. 50.

massive dislocations,” a nonviolent, revolutionary army of black and white poor demanding the opportunity to improve their lives and challenging the nation’s economic infrastructure.⁴⁴

No wonder J. Edgar Hoover pursued King so relentlessly, mounting a vendetta that included harassment, surveillance, bugging, and blackmail.⁴⁵ To Hoover, King was the quintessential “uppity nigger,” a dangerous subversive who threatened the very social fabric of American society. Perhaps this time Hoover was right. He saw King for what he was—a revolutionary. The FBI director would hardly recognize the King honored each year on the anniversary of his birthday, when political leaders choose how to define him. The subversive, revolutionary, radically outspoken King is conspicuously absent, even as his reassuring “I have a dream” speech is played again and again. He can be made to be respectable and unthreatening, even comforting. In one anniversary celebration, Julian Bond observed, “We do not honor the critic of capitalism, or the pacifist who declared all wars evil, or the man of God who argued that a nation that chose guns over butter would starve its people and kill itself. . . . We honor an antiseptic hero.”⁴⁶

Thirty years ago, black aspirations found soulful expression not only in the civil rights movement and in the oratory of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X but also in the names black musical groups adopted, which suggested a confident faith in progress, the belief that America held a special promise: the Supremes, the Miracles, the Marvelettes, the Invincibles. The Impressions sang with such certainty, “We’re a Winner” and “Keep on Pushing.” Marvin Gaye set the mood for an entire decade in “What’s Going On,” suggesting alternatives to war and violence. James Brown boasted, “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud,” and Sam Cooke projected the ultimate optimism: “I Know That A Change Is Gonna Come.” The same optimism permitted

⁴⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., “Where Do We Go From Here?” [last SCLC presidential address], in Washington, ed., *Testament of Hope*, 245–52 (first and second quotations on 250); Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York, 1964), 143 (fifth quotation); David Halberstam, “Notes from the Bottom of the Mountain,” *Harper’s Magazine*, June 1968, pp. 40–42; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986), 426–27 (sixth and seventh quotations on 427), 562 (third and fourth quotations); Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia, 2007), 230 (sixth and seventh quotations); Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1982), 450 (eighth quotation).

⁴⁵ David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From “Solo” to Memphis* (New York, 1981); Kenneth O’Reilly, “Racial Matters”: *The FBI’s Secret File on Black America, 1960–1972* (New York, 1989).

⁴⁶ Paul M. Gaston, “Missing Martin,” *Southern Changes*, 25 (2003), 6.

Martin Luther King Jr., in his last sermon, to transcend his own doubts and premonitions of death to assure his people that someday they would prevail: “I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land.”⁴⁷

But by the end of the 1960s the hope and optimism that had once sustained the movement had to survive incessant challenges and grievous losses. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X were murdered. Three decades after the Montgomery boycott, the songs, the beat, the lyrics captured a different mood. So did the names of the performers: Snoop Doggy Dog, N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude), Outkast, Public Enemy, the Coup, Ghost Face Killah, X-Clan, Ice Cube, Ice-T, Black Star, Body Count, Blackalicious, Dead Prez, Lady of Rage, ODB (Ol’ Dirty Bastard). For their music, they drew from a variety of musical forms—gospel, jazz, blues, rhythm and blues, soul, and funk—but they found new ways to use, manipulate, and imagine sound. For their lyrics they drew from the mean streets of urban America and the most ravaged urban neighborhoods of the 1970s, from the bleak ghettos of Brooklyn and the South Bronx to Atlanta, New Orleans, and Houston and out to the West Coast.⁴⁸

Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, among the founding DJs of hip-hop, first surfaced in South Bronx. Their classic song “The Message” resonated with an explosive, terrifying mix of desperation and anger, describing the social and economic battleground they called home:

It’s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under.
It’s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under.
Broken glass everywhere
People pissin’ on the stage, you know they just don’t care
I can’t take the smell, can’t take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat
I tried to get away but I couldn’ get far
’Cuz a man with a tow truck repossessed my car.

⁴⁷ The Impressions, “We’re a Winner,” words and music by Curtis Mayfield (ABC-Paramount, 1967); “Keep On Pushing,” words and music by Curtis Mayfield (Paramount, 1964); Marvin Gaye, “What’s Going On,” words and music by Al Cleveland, Renaldo Benson, and Marvin Gaye (Tamia, 1971); James Brown, “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud,” written by James Brown and Alfred Ellis, on the album *Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud* (King, 1969); Sam Cooke, “A Change Is Gonna Come,” on the album *Ain’t That Good News* (RCA Victor, 1964); Martin Luther King Jr., “I See the Promised Land,” in Washington, ed., *Testament of Hope*, 286.

⁴⁸ The best study of the origins and development of hip-hop culture and rap music is Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York, 2005).

Don't don't push me, cuz I'm close to the edge
 I'm trying not to lose my head.
 Uh hu ha ha ha
 It's like a jungle sometimes
 It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under.⁴⁹

Perhaps with Sam Cooke in mind, WC and the MAAD Circle rapped, “Yeah, it’s 1997 y’all and ain’t a damn thing changed.” Boots Riley of the Coup, an avowed revolutionary, said he had been arrested seven times for inciting a riot—a charge he found outrageous: “I don’t mind inciting a rebellion, but a riot makes it sound like I don’t give a [shit].” Declaring themselves “Rebels Without a Pause,” Public Enemy underscored the obvious: “We’re all public enemies. . . . The Black man is definitely the public enemy. . . . [W]e *still* face a double-standard every minute of our lives.” In albums such as *Fear of a Black Planet*, Public Enemy warned young blacks of media misinformation (“Don’t, Don’t, Don’t Believe the Hype”). Adapting a song written fourteen years earlier by the Isley Brothers, Public Enemy urged blacks to “Fight the Power”:

We got to fight the powers that be

 Elvis was a hero to most
 But he never meant shit to me you see
 Straight up racist that sucker was
 Simple and plain
 Mother fuck him and John Wayne
 ‘Cause I’m black and I’m proud
 I’m ready and hyped plus I’m amped
 Most of my heroes don’t appear on no stamps
 Sample a look back, you look and find
 Nothing but rednecks for 400 years if you check.⁵⁰

Disenchanted with the civil rights movement, rappers embraced their own perspective on the past. When they invoked American history, they recited a litany of horrors seldom mentioned in the textbooks or in the classroom: kidnapping (the slave trade), theft (of their labor and culture), brainwashing (their education), and genocide (murder, lynching,

⁴⁹ Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, “The Message,” written by Sugar Hill session musician Ed “Duke Bootee” Fletcher and Furious Five’s MC, Melle Mel (Sugar Hill, 1982). Lyrics copyright © EMI Music Publishing, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC.

⁵⁰ WC and the MAAD Circle, “Ain’t a Damn Thing Changed” (Priority Records, 1991); David Segal, “The Rapper’s Red Glare: Boots Riley Hopes the Coup’s Album Will Rattle the Capitalists, and Make Some Change,” *Washington Post*, May 22, 2002, p. C1 (I am indebted to Molly Hooper for bringing this article to my attention); Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 246–61 (Public Enemy quotation on 247 and 252); “Fight the Power,” by Chuck D., Hank Shocklee, Keith Shocklee, and Eric T. Sadler, © 1990 Songs of Universal, Inc., Reach Global Songs, Terrordome Music Publ. LLC, and Shocklee Music (BMI); used by permission, all rights reserved.

drugs). Equating politics and betrayal, voting and disenfranchisement, these musicians could not envisage (before the appearance of Barack Obama) a political resolution of the problems black people faced. “The black vote mean nothin,” Nas insisted, “who you gonna elect / Satan or Satan? In the hood nothin is changin / We aint got no choices.” Talib Kweli sounded the same disenchantment with politics. “Back in the ’60s, there was a big push for black senators and politicians, and now we have more than we ever had before, but our communities are so much worse,” he said. “A lot of people died for us to vote, I’m aware of that history, but these politicians are not in touch with people at all. Politics is not the truth to me, it’s an illusion.”⁵¹

Hip-hop (the way a person walked, talked, looked) and its distinctive language (rap) raised the stakes and provided a voice for the voiceless—testifying, shouting, boasting, roasting. Documenting and chronicling frustration, rage, and betrayal in the inner cities, the lyrics and tempo (like the blues) dismayed much of the public. It frightened and outraged people (including patrons of black bourgeois culture) because of its unruly, anarchic, even apocalyptic qualities; it defied categorization; it was abrasive and confrontational. “My life is violent,” rapped Ice-T, “but violent is life / Peace is a dream, reality is a knife.”⁵²

Police practices that targeted blacks have commanded particular attention, since they are deeply rooted in the historical experience of black people, North and South. Excessive force and intimidation have long been used to remind blacks at every opportunity of their vulnerability and helplessness. With brutal, unexpurgated communiqués from the trenches of the inner cities, N.W.A. entered the Top-20 charts in 1988 with its album *Straight Out of Compton*, which included the song “Fuck tha Police” and its classic line, “Some police think / They have the authority to kill a minority. The police don’t want peace / They want a nigger deceased.” Ice-T and his band Body Count had a comparable

⁵¹ “American Way,” by Nas, Garry Shider, David Spradley, George Clinton Jr., Kamaal Fareed, and Kelis, © 2004 Universal Music—Z Tunes LLC, Ill Will Music, Inc., Southfield Music, Inc., Betta Like My Music, EMI/April Music, Inc., and Issy and Nemo Tunes (ASCAP), and Bridgeport Music (BMI); all rights for Ill Will Music, Inc. administered by Universal Music—Z Tunes LLC (ASCAP); used by permission, all rights reserved. Title “American Way” written by Nasir Jones/Kamaal Fareed/Kelis Rogers/George Clinton Jr./Garry M. Shider/David L. Spradley, © 2004 by Bridgeport Music, Inc. (BMI)/Southfield Music, Inc., and copublishers according to their instructions; all rights reserved, used by permission; Jeff Chang, “‘Stakes Is High’: Conscious Rap, Neosoul and the Hip-Hop Generation,” *Nation*, January 13–20, 2003, p. 20 (Kweli quotations).

⁵² Ice-T, “Colors,” on the album *Colors: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* (Warner Brothers Records, 1988).

shocker, “Cop Killer,” in which a police officer is gunned down as an act of revenge against trigger-happy cops. Houston’s Geto Boys added, “Police brutality is now a formality / They’re kicking our ass and we’re paying their salary.”⁵³ Addressing the persistent question of institutional power, KRS-One asked: Who will police the police?

You were put here to protect us, but who protects us from you?
 Every time you say, “That’s illegal,” doesn’t mean that’s true?
 You were put here to protect us, but who protects us from you?
 It seems that when you walk the ghetto
 You walk with your own point of view.
 Looking through my history book, I’ve watched you as you grew
 Killing blacks, and calling it the law, and worshipping Jesus, too.⁵⁴

Like the bluesmen, rappers have been called street poets, “prophets of rage,” a distillation of black anger and nihilism. Rap was the way the world was interpreted to a new generation. For Ice-T, it was nothing less than “the scream from the bottom.” But mostly rappers were young African Americans who articulated growing despair at being caged in deteriorating postindustrial cities. Unapologetic, they found alternative ways—combative rhythms, street bravado, and racial pride—to express a rage they felt over daily reminders of their debased status.

Tupac Shakur, whose mother was a Black Panther, described his neighborhood as a jail cell, a world in which he “can barely walk the city streets / Without a cop stopping me, searching me, then asking my identity.” Furious and frustrated, no longer able to contain his rage, he found ways to strike back, feeling no remorse for the consequences: “How can I feel guilty after all the things they did to me? / Sweated me, hunted me, trapped in my own community. One day I’m going to bust, blow up on this society / Why did you lie to me? I can’t find a trace of equality.”⁵⁵

Some thirty years after the civil rights movement, a new generation of black Americans experienced rollback, backlash, and resentment, a breakdown in the commitment to and in the enforcement structure of civil rights—a legacy of the Reagan-Bush era. In black America,

⁵³ N.W.A., “Fuck tha Police,” on the album *Straight out of Compton* (Priority Records, 1988); Ice-T, “Cop Killer,” withdrawn from the album *Body Count* (Sire Records Company, 1992); Geto Boys, “City under Siege,” on the album *The Geto Boys* (Rap-a-Lot Records, 1990).

⁵⁴ “Who Protects Us from You?” by KRS-One, © 1989 Universal Music—Z Tunes LLC; used by permission, all rights reserved.

⁵⁵ “Trapped,” Tupac Shakur, Ramon Gooden, Playa Playa, Dank, and Wiz, © 1991 Universal Music Corp. (ASCAP), Universal Music-Z Songs (BMI), Playa Playa designee, Dank designee, Wiz designee; used by permission, all rights reserved.

nostalgia about previous struggles and black unity only magnified a growing despair. In 1997 a young black man articulated his sense of recent history, saying, “We recognize more than [our elders] know the incredible job they did [in the 1960s]. But you cannot celebrate for 30 years scoring a touchdown. Not when they’re still playing the game.”⁵⁶ It is this tough reality that still resonates, as racially conscious responses to persistent inequalities fade away in every part of the United States. “The bottom line is still here,” insisted Charles Gratton in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1994. “There was a saying that goes, ‘The KKK have pulled off his robe and put on a three-piece suit.’ What I mean by that, instead of having a robe and a cone on coming out to lynch you, he took that off and threw it away. He’s got the three-piece suit on, but he’s sitting as president of the bank, loan officer in the bank, so they’re lynching you that way now, economically and financially. It’s still here.”⁵⁷

If Americans needed any further reminder of the force of race and class, the fragility of the infrastructure, or the unacknowledged inequalities that persist in this nation, Hurricane Katrina provided it on August 29, 2005. Americans watched a city drown, families huddled on rooftops and stranded on highway overpasses, bloated corpses in flooded streets, a city in which 28 percent of the people lived in poverty, 84 percent of whom were black. Katrina in the early twenty-first century ripped the veil off the great divide between the black poor and the rest of the country, the staggering indifference to the inequality of human suffering.

Katrina left little to the imagination: the storm revealed “the faces at the bottom of America’s well.” Those with means, white and black, got out. The burden of the disaster fell disproportionately on the black poor, who lived in lower-lying neighborhoods, unable to help themselves, unable to escape the disaster, needing to protect possessions they could not afford to replace. The poor were left to be washed away; they had nowhere to go, no way to get there. Hundreds of black evacuees seeking escape on a bridge across the Mississippi River were confronted and forcibly pushed back into the city. Many survivors straggled into the

⁵⁶ John Leland and Allison Samuels, “The New Generation Gap,” *Newsweek*, March 17, 1997, p. 57.

⁵⁷ Interview with Charles Gratton, Birmingham, Alabama, 1994, audiotape in *Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South* Records (Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina).

Superdome and Convention Center, the refuges of last resort, reminding one observer of the hull of a slave ship.⁵⁸

Ultimately, the waters receded, the devastation was revealed, and the people got on with their lives. But some hard lessons had been driven home, and some tough questions asked, such as the one posed by historian Mark Naison: “Is this what the pioneers of the civil rights movement fought to achieve, a society where many black people are as trapped and isolated by their poverty as they were by legal segregation laws?”⁵⁹ What we were watching in New Orleans, some argued, was a playing out of the deepest, most virulent, most persistent of all American tragedies—racism.

Katrina was a forceful reminder that after the Civil War, this nation walked away from the human devastation it had sustained and protected; the United States rejected any suggestion that it be held accountable for centuries of unpaid labor or that positive government might be required to correct habitual inequality. The nation walked away and left hundreds of thousands landless, stranded, homeless, penniless, vulnerable. One hundred and forty years later, the bottom line was still there.

No wonder the African American experience has given rise to such classic songs as “Trouble in Mind.” Through various renditions of this theme, black men and women have addressed that persistent question since emancipation: How free? How free is free? The song in its many variations has encompassed enslavement, a tortured freedom, a new beginning in the North, the civil rights movement, and Katrina, the triumphs, the retreats, the deferrals. As a slave song, it sounded like this:

⁵⁸ Monica Haynes and Erv Dyer, “Black Faces Are Indelible Image of Katrina,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 4, 2005, p. A1 (quotation); “Through the Eye of Katrina: The Past as Prologue? A Special Issue,” *Journal of American History*, 94 (December 2007); David Dante Troutt, ed., *After the Storm: Black Intellectuals Explore the Meaning of Hurricane Katrina* (New York, 2006); Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York, 2006); Jonathan Alter, “The Other America: An Enduring Shame,” *Newsweek*, September 19, 2005, pp. 42–48; “Katrina” [special issue], *Southern Cultures*, 14 (Summer 2008); “3 Years After” [special issue], *Oxford American*, no. 62 (Summer 2008); “One Year After Katrina: The State of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast” [special report], *Southern Exposure*, 34 (No. 2, 2006); “The Mardi Gras Index: The State of New Orleans by Numbers Six Months After Hurricane Katrina” [special report], *Southern Exposure*, 34 (February–March 2006); Chris Kromm and Sue Sturgis, “Hurricane Katrina and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement: A Global Human Rights Perspective on a National Disaster” [special report], *Southern Exposure*, 36 (Nos. 1–2, 2008).

⁵⁹ Mark Naison, quoted in Jason DeParle, “Broken Levees, Unbroken Barriers,” *New York Times*, September 4, 2005, pp. C1, C4 (quotation); “Mark Naison on Race, Class and the Disaster,” Editor’s Cut (blog), online at www.thenation.com/blogs/edcut/19934.

I am a-trouble in de mind,
 O I am a-trouble in de mind;
 I ask my Lord what shall I do,
 I am a-trouble in de mind.
 I'm a-trouble in de mind,
 What you doubt for?
 I'm a-trouble in de mind.⁶⁰

It reentered folk tradition in the late nineteenth century as country blues, reflecting the restlessness of the first generation born in freedom. McKinley Morganfield (everybody called him Muddy Waters) best exemplifies the song in this generational transition, from the rural South to the urban North.

If I'm feelin' tomorrow
 Like I feel today
 I'm gonna pack my suitcase
 And make my getaway
 'Cause I'm troubled
 I'm all worried in mind
 And I never been satisfied
 And I just can't keep from cryin'.⁶¹

With the Great Migration in the twentieth century, the song moved up North, along with hundreds of thousands of black southerners, and it would be revived in a new setting, in an urban/industrial setting.

Well, trouble, oh, trouble
 Trouble on my worried mind.
 When you see me laughin',
 I'm laughin' just to keep from cryin'.⁶²

Some years later, rapper Chuck D. of Public Enemy added his own refrain, when he welcomed blacks to the Terrordome.

I got so much trouble on my mind
 (On my mind)
 I refuse to lose
 Here's your ticket
 Hear the drummer get wicked.⁶³

⁶⁰ "I'm a-Trouble in de Mind," in William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, comps., *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York, 1867), 30–31.

⁶¹ Muddy Waters, "I Be's Troubled," on the Muddy Waters album *Library of Congress Recordings, 1941–1942; Early Commercial Recordings, 1946–1950* (Document Records, 2001; DOCD-5146). See also Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York, 1981), 3–7 (quotation on 5–6), 12–17.

⁶² "Trouble in Mind Blues," on the album *Richard M. Jones and the Blues Singers, in Chronological Order, 1923–1938* (Document Records, 1995; DOCD-5390); "Trouble in Mind," in Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York, 1997), 29 (quotation).

⁶³ "Welcome to the Terrordome," by Chuck D. and Keith Shocklee, © 1990 Songs of Universal, Inc., Reach Global Songs and Bring The Noize, Inc. (BMI); used by permission, all rights reserved. This song appeared on the album *Fear of a Black Planet* (Def Jam Recordings, 1990).

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, it is a different America, and it is a familiar America. When asked to assess the legacy of the civil rights era, a black activist responded in 1985,

Everything has changed, but nothing has changed. In the 1960s Bull Connor threw us in jail, sicked dogs on us, turned the water hose on us. Today Birmingham has a black mayor. Last year he picked me up at the airport and gave me a key to the city. But in the shadow of City Hall I saw black people still living in slums Downtown I met blacks of the expanding middle class. In the shadows of downtown I observed a growing underclass. . . . [E]verything has changed, but nothing has changed.⁶⁴

On November 4, 2008, the American people will indicate what version of history they choose to embrace. In the history of African Americans and race relations, in the history of this nation, that may lead to a new reconstruction, a restructuring of “the architecture of American society,” or it may revive the prophetic message of James Baldwin nearly half a century ago, when he invoked a biblical passage to warn Americans, “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, / No more water, the fire next time!”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Luix Overbea, “Rosa Parks Took Her Stand for Civil Rights—By Sitting Down,” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 29, 1985, pp. 1, 56 (quotation); William E. Schmidt, “Selma, 20 Years after the Rights March,” *New York Times*, March 1, 1985, pp. A1, A12.

⁶⁵ Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, [4].