

APRIL, 1984

ESSAY ARTICLE

by John Alan

Black opposition to U.S. imperialism at the end of the 19th Century

President Reagan's invasion of Grenada on October 25, 1983, which was primarily aimed at controlling the Grenadian masses, was so well synchronized with his brazen assault on the Civil Rights Commission that once again it has shown how closely connected are imperialism and racism. That link to racism is clear from imperialism's birth at the end of the 19th century. What is less widely known is its absolute opposite — the revolutionary opposition by Black America in the 1890s.

In 1898, Black Americans, more than any other group of people, caught the twin relationship between their own existence as a pariah race within the United States and the drive toward conquest and domination in the Caribbean and in the Pacific by the then young forces of U.S. imperialism. Blacks reacted to this sudden appearance of the United States in the arena of world imperialism and mounted a significant anti-imperialist campaign that was inseparable from the fight against lynching, disenfranchisement and Jim Crow.

These moments in Black American history are not widely known and very few historians, Black or white, have ever considered it a serious subject for research — and, in those rare instances when the Black Anti-Imperialist Movement of the turn of the century is mentioned, it appears only in the footnotes of some larger study of the "white" Anti-Imperialist League, founded by such prominent New Englanders as Edward Atkinson, Charles Elliot Norton and William James.

RACISM AT MONOPOLY'S BIRTH

By the last decade of the 19th century, U.S. monopoly capitalism was at the pinnacle of its power. With the help of the government, which it controlled openly and unabashedly, big business had achieved dominance over the American market. Black Americans were experiencing the full impact and the ultimate meaning of the 1877 Hayes-Tilden compromise that was negotiated by the railroad monopoly to end the sectional differences between the Northern and the Southern capitalists.

Benjamin Brawley, wrote in his *Social History of the Negro* that "... the pendulum has swung far backward, the years from 1890 to 1895 were in some ways the darkest that the Race has experienced since emancipation." Rayford W. Logan in *The Betrayal of the Negro* quoted John Hope Franklin as calling that period "The long dark night, that didn't end until 1923." Logan simply characterized it as "the Nadir." The stark reality was: Black Americans — 80% living in the South — were under the yoke of a "new slavery", a voiceless and landless people, terrorized by lynchings who were claiming an average of over 150 victims each year.

Every state in the "Old South" had written into law, often into its Constitution, provisions for the disfranchisement of its Black citizens, and their segregation in public schools, conveyances and other facilities. The legal, nationwide approval of this purely American form of apartheid came in 1896, when the U.S. Supreme Court, in its "Plessy vs Ferguson" decision, established the doctrine of "separate but equal."

REVOLUTIONARY NATURE OF BLACK OPPOSITION

However, to concentrate only upon the regressive nature of U.S. capitalism at the turn of the century, when it was still in the bloom of its youth, is to give only a partial picture of "history and its process", because it ignores the dialectical opposite of that retrogression, i.e., the subjective human force, within that society, that opposes it.

Among all the diverse social elements that were anti-expansionist in 1898, only Black Americans fit into that category. They were the only social group who were able to ground their anti-imperialism in a concrete movement for freedom within the United States.

In 1895, when the Cubans renewed their revolutionary war for independence, Black Americans immediately gave them full support, and called on the United States Government to give the insurgents belligerent status and military aid. Frederick Douglass had urged President Grant to do the same at the time of the 1868 revolution, when the issue of Cuba's independence was entwined with the emancipation of Black slavery on that island. Both times the U.S. Administration refused such recognition.

The Cuban insurrection was seen as a "Black Man's War." An identity was made with most of the rebel leaders as "men of color", especially with Antonio Maceo and Quintin Bandera, who was known as "The Black Thunderbolt." The military activities of these men were widely known and well covered in the Black press, and at least one editor said

that Maceo was the type of leader "around whom aspiring young Negroes may twine their brightest hope of the future." Dr. L.A. Hind, a Black surgeon, went to Cuba and served on Maceo's staff, sending eyewitness reports of the Cuban Revolution to Black newspapers. (See *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden* (1898-1903), by Willard B. Gatewood, Jr.)

Two different worlds resided in these United States. Black American support for the Cuban Revolution, and the ideas of freedom that the revolution invigorated, were so totally the opposite of the "yellow journals" that had seized upon the Spanish General Valeriano Weyler's barbarism as a pretext to establish some form of U.S. hegemony in Cuba. The possibility of U.S. intervention raised widespread doubt in the Black press: would it help or hinder Cuban independence? And how would it affect Black civil rights inside the U.S.?

BLACK PRESS AS VOICE OF BLACK AMERICA

The Black press was the hub and the measure of the extent of Black anti-imperialist thought between 1898 and the end of the Philippine insurgency in the spring of 1902. Of the 150 weekly Black newspapers published at that time, the overwhelming majority were anti-expansionist. Along with the news, and the editorial opinions, these papers published letters and the views of their readers. In a real sense, they were the voices of Black America at the turn of the century.

Thus, after the U.S. declared war on Spain, and a committee of leading Afro-American political appointees headed by P.B.S. Pinchback, the former Black Lt. Governor of Louisiana, went to see President McKinley to pledge the loyalty of nine million American Blacks, they were severely criticized by the anti-war Black press as "a little coterie of politicians", without a constituency, who presumed to speak for all Black America.

A month before the Pinchback Committee "pledge", The Indianapolis Freeman wrote that the approaching war crisis brought to the surface the opinions of many of the Negro Journals: "The consensus of opinions of these Journals is not arrayed on the side of patriotism, and if they in any manner reflect the sentiment of their readers, there are about seven million people that are indifferent patriots", and, "that this indifference was caused by the status of the Negroes as citizens of the United States." (These quotations and others to follow from the Black press are taken from the Black Press Views American Imperialism (1898-1902), by George P. Marks III.)

The anomaly that existed between the professed war aims of the United States — the ending of Spanish brutality in Cuba — and the "incomprehensible silence" on the part of President McKinley about the brutal lynchings each year became the prime target of the Anti-Imperialist Black Press. Julius Taylor, editor of the Broad Ax, which was published first in Salt Lake City and later in Chicago, insisted that the main enemy was Southern lynchers, that the Afro-American's "chief kick is not the Spaniard, but those fellows who shoot and burn and hang, and otherwise kill our fellows in the South." (April 30, 1898).

The Iowa State Bystander edition of May 6, 1898, charged that "... the white man's rule in the United States ... has relegated the Negro to the rear, deprived him of his rights, cut off opportunities of existence, outraged colored women, burned down his home over his wife and children ... and now they "have the audacity to talk about the cruelty of Spain towards the Cubans. There is no half-civilized nation on earth that needs a good hard war more than the United States ..."

The above quotes are excerpts from editorials written in response to the atrocities committed by a white mob in Lake City, South Carolina, two days after the sinking of The Maine; this mob murdered Frazier B. Baker and his infant son, and wounded his wife and four other children as they were fleeing from their home and post office, which had been set afire. Baker was the Black postmaster of Lake City, an appointment that had been strenuously opposed by local whites and their Congressional supporters, among whom was the infamous "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman, who once said: "We have scratched our heads to find out how we could eliminate the last one of them. We stuffed ballot boxes. We shot them (Negroes). WE ARE NOT ASHAMED OF IT".

The outrageous lynching of the Bakers caused national waves of protest in the Black communities. At a Chicago mass protest meeting, a delegation headed by Ida B. Wells was elected to deliver a message of protest to President McKinley, urging him to see that those responsible were apprehended and punished, and that Baker's family be indemnified by the government.

IDA B. WELLS AGAINST WHITE BARBARISM

Ida B. Wells was, more than others, able to combine anti-imperialism with anti-lynching. She was a prominent member of the Afro-American Council; she sharply disagreed with Booker T. Washington, by maintaining that Black liberation was not merely economic advancement, and that Black America "must educate the white people out of their 250 year history of slavery".

As a young woman she founded in Memphis, Tenn. a militant newspaper, Free Speech. Because of her stand against lynching, a white mob burned her press and forced her to leave that city. From that moment on, she organized a crusade against lynching both in the United States and in Europe. As an original suffragette, she never stopped criticizing the women's movement for failing to take a stand on lynching.

At the meeting with McKinley she told him: "For nearly twenty years lynching crimes, which stand side by side with Armenian and Cuban outrages, have been permitted by this Christian nation, nowhere in the civilized world, save in the United States of America, do men possessing all civil and political power go in bands of 50 to 5,000 to hunt down, shoot, hang or burn to death a single individual, unarmed and absolutely powerless." (Cleveland Gazette, April 9, 1898.)

President McKinley and Congress decided to intervene into the Cuban revolution, and it was soon obvious that the war was going to be conducted along the same Jim Crow line that prevailed in American civil society. At first most of the states and the Federal Government refused to accept Black volunteers. When a great deal of Black political pressure overcame this policy it was decided that Blacks could volunteer and serve, but only in segregated regiments commanded by all white officers. Black response was to insist that if they were to be segregated the entire regiment must be Black.

MASS REJECTION OF WHITE-LED JIM CROW ARMY

"NO OFFICERS, NO FIGHT" the slogan coined by John Mitchell of The Richmond Planet, expressed the ideas that Black Americans had about the segregated army that was being organized to fight a war for "Democracy". The Washington Bee printed a letter from Ed Barnes in New Orleans, on June 9, 1898, who reported that a mass meeting of 5,000 Blacks had organized their own regiment and selected their own Negro officers, because: "In the personnel of the regular army officers there lurks the rankest and most deep-seated prejudice to the colored soldiers' promotion ..." and, "The War Department lends support to such a policy".

In Brooklyn, N. Y., the New England Baptist Convention "excoriated" McKinley's Administration and "denounced" New York Governor Black because of their refusal to give colored volunteers the Constitutional right to select their own officers. At that Convention, Reverend A. Gordon, of Philadelphia, "declared that he hoped and was hoping, that the American Army would not be victorious until justice had been accorded to the Negro soldiers, — there was vociferous applause." (from the N.Y. Herald and reprinted in *The Richmond Planet*, June 25, 1898.)

"NO OFFICERS, NO FIGHT!" became the focus of a national campaign that was to eclipse the war with Spain by making the struggle against racism in the U.S. the paramount issue in the Afro-American community. Black American opinion was that, since "the flag of race prejudice has been raised", and they were to be barred from white regiments, then it would be adding insult to injury if, in their segregated status, they would have to accept white officers.

The refusal to accept these terms was very concrete — Blacks failed to fill the ranks of the so-called four "immune regiments", reserved for Black recruits, forcing Colonel Lee, the white officer who was supposed to lead one of these regiments, to resign and return to the regular army for lack of Black volunteers.

Two white newspapers, *The Washington Post* and *The Richmond, Va., Times*, became alarmed by the lack of Black enthusiasm for this war, and wrote that it was caused by the "childish rant" of Black editors and other Black spokesmen. *The Washington Post* threatened that the war would go on, whether Blacks joined the army or stayed at home. The country, it said, was capable of sending a million troops abroad, while keeping a million at home to keep order, "and attend to any trouble the disgruntled colored leaders may see fit to make." (quoted by *The Richmond Planet*, June 4, 1898.)

Summing up the Black attitude toward American Imperialism, Kelly Miller, Dean of Howard University, said: "I don't think there is a single colored man, out of office and out of the insane asylum, who would favor the so-called expansion policy. Whether or not they will organize under the banner of Mr. Atkinson is another question. I don't think we are yet ready for a departure so radical!"

It is true that only a few Black Americans co-operated with Atkinson's Anti-Imperialist League, as an auxiliary chapter in New England. That Blacks functioned primarily in their own organization, *The National Negro Anti-Expansion, Anti-Imperialist, Anti-Trust and Anti-Lynching League*, which was active in the west, reflects the rejection of the abstract, moral and constitutional premises of the white intellectuals.

The signing of the Treaty of Paris, December 10, 1898, ceded the Philippine Islands to the United States. For the next six years, from 1899 to 1905, U.S. troops were used to brutally suppress a guerrilla uprising. When the war ended with Spain and the conquest of the Philippine Islands began, Black Americans had good reasons to believe that a "warped civilization" was being imposed on the Filipino people. In 1898 the open manifestation of that civilization was the increase in lynchings and the bloody anti-Black riots in New Orleans, Akron and New York that indicated that racism was not an exclusive Southern peculiarity but the national and international characteristic of U.S. imperialism. Today's legacy of that "warped civilization" has continued to exist in the racism that we have in the United States and the denial of freedom to the Filipino masses by the present regime in Manila, a regime that Reagan has no fundamental disagreement with.

At a mass meeting in Boston chaired by Archibald Grimké, called to denounce the brutal lynching of Sam Hose and the slaughter of helpless Black prisoners at Palmetto, Ga., an open letter was drafted and sent to President McKinley. One of the sharpest criticisms that came from the Black community was in this letter, which attacked McKinley's political hypocrisy by pointing out that when he addresses Blacks he speaks of "patience, industry, moderation"; when he talks to Southern whites he preaches, "patriotism, jingoism and imperialism." In order to win the support of the South to his policy of "criminal aggression on the Far East", while closing his eyes and lips "to the criminal aggression" of the South, on the civil rights of Negroes. (see Appendix IV of *The Black Press Views American Imperialism — 1858-1960*.)

Changes in Black attitudes toward American imperialism occurred progressively. At the beginning of the War, "NO OFFICERS, NO FIGHT!" dominated; during the conflict in the Philippines it became: "AFRO-AMERICANS DON'T ENLIST!"

And, seemingly out of nowhere, there appeared in the *AME Church Review*, of October 1899, the dialectical formulation that all of these conquests "involving the existence and the integrity of weaker governments are against the dark races in Africa and Asia, and added to the domestic problems of the American Negro, we are struck with the thought that a startling world movement has begun . . . among the dark skin races, to lead on doubtless, to an adjustment which shall in the cycles change the present relations of oppressor and oppressed . . ."

Black opposition to the imperial debut of the United States, between 1898 and 1905, did not stop the rising tide of U.S. or world imperialism, but it did prepare the ground historically for a new phase of the Black struggle in the United States, and indirectly in Africa, in the Caribbean, and in the Third World.

It was from this movement that new ideas and new personalities arose. Ideas of a new self-identity and Pan-Africanism. Personalities, like DuBois, Monroe Trotter, Ida B. Wells, Archibald Grimké, etc., who would, along with the movement of Black masses from the South to the North, become prominent forces in breaking Booker T. Washington's hammerlock on Black thought, that opened new roads for Black liberation in the 1920s and 1930s.