

Open Letter to President McKinley by Colored People Of Massachusetts

I. D. Barnett et al. (October 3, 1899)

*The expansion of the U.S. empire fueled significant opposition among African Americans, who opposed the racism and the violence of these ventures. In 1903, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the writer and agitator W. E. B. Du Bois wrote of Black revulsion to "the recent course of the United States toward weaker and darker peoples in the West Indies, Hawaii, and the Philippines." Here is one¹ account of antiwar sentiment among blacks at the time.*

From *Voices of A People's History*, edited by Zinn and Arnove

Sir:—We, colored people of Massachusetts in mass meeting assembled to consider our oppressions and the state of the country relative to the same, have resolved to address ourselves to you in an open letter, notwithstanding your extraordinary, your incomprehensible silence on the subject of our wrongs in your annual and other messages to Congress, as in your public utterances to the country at large. We address ourselves to you, sir, not as suppliants, but as of right, as American citizens, whose servant you are, and to whom you are bound to listen, and for whom you are equally bound to speak, and upon occasion to act, as for any other body of your fellow-countrymen in like circumstances. We ask nothing for ourselves at your hands, as chief magistrate of the republic, to which all American citizens are not entitled. We ask for the enjoyment of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness equally with other men. We ask for the free and full exercise of all the rights of American freemen, guaranteed to us by the Constitution and laws of the Union, which you were solemnly sworn to obey and execute. We ask you for what belongs to us by the high sanction of Constitution and law, and the Democratic genius of our institutions and civilization. These rights are everywhere throughout the South denied to us, violently wrested from us by mobs, by lawless legislatures, and nullifying conventions, combinations, and conspiracies, openly, defiantly, under your eyes, in your constructive and actual presence. And we demand, which is a part of our rights, protection, security in our life, our liberty, and in the pursuit of our individual and social happiness under a government, which we are bound to defend in war, and which is equally bound to furnish us in peace protection, at home and abroad.

We have suffered, sir,—God knows how much we have suffered!—since your accession to office, at the hands of a country professing to be Christian, but which is

not Christian, from the hate and violence of a people claiming to be civilized, but who are not civilized, and you have seen our sufferings, witnessed from your high place our awful wrongs and miseries, and yet you have at no time and on no occasion opened your lips in our behalf. Why? we ask. Is it because we are black and weak and despised? Are you silent because without any fault of our own we were enslaved and held for more than two centuries in cruel bondage by your forefathers? Is it because we bear the marks of those sad generations of Anglo-Saxon brutality and wickedness, that you do not speak? Is it our fault that our involuntary servitude produced in us widespread ignorance poverty and degradation? Are we to be damned and destroyed by the whites because we have only grown the seeds which they planted? Are we to be damned by bitter laws and destroyed by the mad violence of mobs because we are what white men made us? And is there no help in the federal arm for us, or even one word of audible pity, protest and remonstrance in your own breast, Mr. President, or in that of a single member of your Cabinet? Black indeed we are, sir, but we are also men and American citizens.

From the year 1619 the Anglo-Saxon race in America began to sow in the mind of the negro race in America seeds of ignorance, poverty and social degradation, and continued to do so until the year 1863, when chattel slavery was abolished to save the union of these states. Then northern white men began, in order to form a more perfect union, to sow this self-same mind of the negro with quite different seeds,—seeds of knowledge and freedom; seeds garnered in the Declaration of Independence for the feeding of the nations of the earth, such as the natural equality of all men before the law, their inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and the derivation of the power of all just governments from the consent of the governed. These seeds of your own planting took root in the mind and heart of the negro, and the crop of quickening intelligence, desire for wealth, to rise in the social scale, to be as other men, to be equal with them in opportunities and the free play of his powers in the rivalry of life, was the direct and legitimate result.

The struggle of the negro to rise out of his ignorance, his poverty and his social degradation, in consequence of the growth of these new forces and ideas within him, to the full stature of his American citizenship, has been met everywhere in the South by the active ill-will and determined race-hatred and opposition of the white people of that section. Turn where he will, he encounters this cruel and implacable spirit. He dare not speak openly the thoughts which rise in his breast. He has wrongs such as have never in modern times been inflicted on a people and yet he must be dumb in the midst of a nation which prates loudly of democracy and humanity, boasts itself the champion of oppressed peoples abroad, while it looks on indifferent, apathetic, at appalling enormities and iniquities at home, where the victims are black and the criminals white. The suppression, the terror wrought at the South is so complete, so ever-present, so awful, that no negro's life or property is safe for a day who ventures

to raise his voice to heaven in indignant protest and appeal against the deep damnation and despotism of such a social state. Even teachers and leaders of this poor, oppressed and patient people may not speak, lest their institutions of learning and industry, and their own lives pay for their temerity at the swift hands of savage mobs. But if the peace of Warsaw, the silence of death reign over our people and their leaders at the South, we of Massachusetts are free, and must and shall raise our voice to you and through you to the country, in solemn protest and warning against the fearful sin and peril of such explosive social conditions. We, sir, at this crisis and extremity in the life of our race in the South, and in this crisis and extremity of the republic as well, in the presence of the civilized world, cry to you to pause, if but for an hour, in pursuit of your national policy of "criminal aggression" abroad to consider the "criminal aggression" at home against humanity and American citizenship, which is in the full tide of successful conquest at the South, and the tremendous consequences to our civilization, and the durability of the Union itself, of this universal subversion of the supreme law of the land, of democratic institutions, and of the precious principle of the religion of Jesus in the social and civil life of the Southern people.

With one accord, with an anxiety that wrenched our hearts with cruel hopes and fears, the colored people of the United States turned to you when Wilmington, N.C., was held for two dreadful days and nights in the clutch of a bloody revolution; when negroes, guilty of no crime except the color of their skin and a desire to exercise the rights of their American citizenship, were butchered like dogs in the streets of that ill-fated town; and when government of the people by the people and for the people perished in your very presence by the hands of violent men during those bitter November days, for want of federal aid, which you would not and did not furnish, on the plea that you could not give what was not asked for by a coward and recreant governor. And we well understood at the time, sir, notwithstanding your plea of constitutional inability to cope with the rebellion in Wilmington, that where there is a will with constitutional lawyers and rulers there is always a way, and where there is no will there is no way. We well knew that you lacked the will, and, therefore, the way to meet that emergency.

It was the same thing with that terrible ebullition of the mob spirit at Phoenix, S. C., when black men were hunted and murdered, and white men shot and driven out of that place by a set of white savages, who cared not for the Constitution and the laws of the United States any more than they do for the constitution and the laws of an empire dead and buried a thousand years. We looked in vain for some word or some act from you. Neither word nor act of sympathy for the victims was forthcoming, or of detestation of an outrage so mad and barbarous as to evoke even from such an extreme Southern organ organ as is the *News and Courier*, of Charleston, S.C., hot and stern condemnation. Hoping against hope, we waited for your annual message to Congress in December last, knowing that the Constitution imposed upon you a duty to

give, from time to time, to that body information of the state of the Union. That, at least, we said, the President will surely do; he will communicate officially the facts relative to the tragic, the appalling events, which had just occurred in the Carolinas to the Congress of the United States. But not one word did your message contain on this subject, although it discussed all sorts and conditions of subjects, from the so-called war for humanity against Spain to the celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the national capital in 1900. Nothing escaped your eye, at home or abroad, nothing except the subversion of the Constitution and laws of the Union in the Southern States, and the Flagrant and monstrous crimes perpetrated upon a weak and submissive race in defiance of your authority, or in virtual connivance therewith. Yes, sir, we repeat, or in virtual connivance therewith.

And, when you made your Southern tour a little later, and we saw how cunningly you catered to Southern race prejudice and proscription; how you, the one single public man and magistrate of the country, who, by virtue of your exalted office, ought under no circumstances to recognize caste distinctions and discriminations among your fellow-citizens, received white men at the Capitol in Montgomery, Ala., and black men afterward in a negro church; how you preached patience, industry moderation to your long-suffering black fellow-citizens, and patriotism, jingoism and imperialism to your white ones; when we saw all these things, scales of illusion in respect to your object fell from our eyes. We felt that the President of the United States, in order to win the support of the South to his policy of "criminal aggression" in the far East, was ready and willing to shut his eyes, ears and lips to the "criminal aggression" of that section against the Constitution and the of the land, wherein they guarantee civil rights and citizenship to the negro, whose ultimate reduction to a condition of fixed and subject serfdom is the plain purpose of the Southern people and their laws.

When, several months subsequently, you returned to Georgia, the mob spirit, as if to evince its supreme contempt for your presence and the federal executive authority which you represent, boldly broke into a prison shed, where were confined helpless negro prisoners on a charge of incendiarism, and brutally murdered five of them. These men were American citizens, entitled to the rights of American citizens, protection and trial by due process of law. They were, in the eye of the law, innocent until convicted by a jury of their peers. Had they been in legal custody in Russia or Spain or Turkey they had not been slaughtered by a mob under like circumstances; for the Russian military power, or the Spanish or the Turkish, would have guarded those men in their helpless and defenceless condition from the fury of the populace who were seeking their blood. Sir, they were men; they were your brothers; they were God's children, for whom Jesus lived and died. They ought to have been sacred charges in the hands of any civilized or semi-civilized State people. But almost in your hearing, before your eyes (and you the chief magistrate of a country loudly boastful of its freedom, Christianity and civilization, they were atrociously murdered.

Did you speak? did you open your lips to express horror of the awful crime and stern condemnation of the incredible villainy and complicity of the constituted authorities of Georgia in the commission of this monstrous outrage, which outbarbarized barbarism and stained through and through with indelible infamy before the world your country's justice, honor and humanity?

Still later considering the age, the circumstances and the nation in which the deed was done, Georgia committed a crime unmatched for moral depravity and sheer atrocity during the century. A negro, charged with murder and criminal assault, the first charge he is reported by the newspapers to have admitted, and the second to have denied, was taken one quiet Sunday morning from his captors, and burned to death with indescribable and hellish cruelty in the presence of cheering thousands of the so-called best people of Georgia, men, women and children, who had gone forth on the Christian Sabbath to the burning of a human being as to a country festival and holiday of innocent enjoyment and amusement. The downright ferocity and frightful savagery of that American mob at Newnan outdoes the holiday humor and thirst for blood of the tiger-like populace of Pagan Rome, gathered to witness Christian martyrs thrown to lions in their roaring arenas. The death of Hose was quickly followed by that of the negro preacher, Strickland, guiltless of crime, under circumstances and with a brutality of wickedness almost matching in horror and enormity the torture and murder of the first; and this last was succeeded by a third victim, who was literally lashed to death by the wild, beast-like spirit of a Georgia mob, for daring merely to utter his abhorrence of the Palmetto iniquity and slaughter of helpless prisoners.

Did you speak? Did you utter one word of reprobation of righteous indignation, either as magistrate or as man? Did you break the shameful silence of shameful months with so much as a whisper of a whisper against the deep damnation of such defiance of all law, human and divine; such revulsion of men into beasts, and relapses of communities into barbarism in the very center of the republic, and amid the sanctuary of the temple of American liberty itself? You did not, sir but your Attorney-General did, and he only the throw out to the public, to your meek and long-suffering colored fellow-citizens, the cold and cautious legal opinion that the case of Hose has no federal aspect! Mr. President, has it any moral or human aspect, seeing that Hose was a member of the negro race, whom your Supreme Court once declared has no rights in America which white men are bound to respect? Is this infamous dictum of that tribunal still the Supreme law of the land? We ask you, sir, since recent events in Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Virginia and Louisiana, as well as in Georgia and the Carolinas, indeed throughout the South, and your own persistent silence, and the persistent silence of every member of your Cabinet on the subject of the wrongs of that race in those States, would appear together to imply as much.

Had, eighteen months ago, the Cuban revolution to throw off the yoke of Spain, or the attempt of Spain to subdue the Cuban rebellion, any federal aspect? We believe that you and the Congress of the United States thought that they had, and therefore used, finally, the armed force of the nation to expel Spain from that island. Why? Was it because "the people of the Island of Cuba are, and of right ought to be free and independent?" You and the Congress said as much, and may we fervently pray, sir, in passing, that the freedom and independence of that brave people shall not much longer be denied them by our government? But to resume, there was another consideration which, in your judgment, gave to the Cuban question a federal aspect, which provoked at last the armed interposition of our government in the affairs of that island, and this was "the chronic condition of disturbance in Cuba so injurious and menacing to our interests and tranquility, as well as shocking to our sentiments of humanity." Wherefore you presently fulfilled "a duty to humanity by ending a situation, the indefinite prolongation of which had become insufferable."

Mr. President, had that "chronic condition of disturbance in Cuba so injurious and menacing to our interest and tranquility as well as shocking to our sentiments of humanity," which you wished to terminate and did terminate, a federal aspect, while that not less "chronic condition of disturbance" in the South, which is a thousand times more "injurious and menacing to our interests and tranquility," as well as far more "shocking to our sentiments of humanity," or ought to be, none whatever? Is it better to be Cuban revolutionists fighting for Cuban independence than American citizens striving to do their simple duty at home? Or is it better only in case those American citizens doing their simple duty at home happen to be negroes residing in the Southern States?

Are crying national transgressions and injustices more "injurious and menacing" to the Republic, as well as "shocking to its sentiments of humanity," when committed by a foreign state, in foreign territory, against a foreign people, than when they are committed by a portion of our own people at home? There were those of our citizens who did not think that the Cuban question possessed any federal aspect, while there were others who thought otherwise; and these, having the will and power eventually found a way to suppress a menacing danger to the country and a wrong against humanity at the same time. Where there is a will among constitutional lawyers and rulers, Mr. President, there is ever a way; but where there is no will, there is no way. Shall it be said that the federal government, with arms of Briareus, reaching to the utmost limits of the habitable globe for the protection of its citizens, for the liberation of alien islanders and the subjugation of others, is powerless to guarantee to certain of its citizens at home their inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, because those citizens happen to be negroes residing in the Southern section of our country? Do the colored people of the United States deserve equal consideration with the Cuban people at the hands of your administration, and shall they, though late,

receive it? If, sir, you have the disposition, as we know that you have the power, we are confident that you will be able to find a constitutional way to reach us in our extremity, and our enemies also, who are likewise enemies to great public interests and national tranquillity.

I. D. BARNETT,
President. EDWARD E. BROWN,
Vice-President. EDWARD H. WEST,
Secretary. ARCHIBALD H. GRIMKE.
EDWIN G. WALKER
JAMES H. WOLFF.
EMERY T. MORRIS
WILLIAM O. ARMSTRONG.
THOMAS P. TAYLOR
AND OTHERS.

Footnotes

1 I. D. Barnett et al., *Open Letter to President McKinley by Colored People Of Massachusetts* (October 3, 1899). Statement read by Archibald M. Grimke at *Charles Street Church, Boston, Massachusetts*. First printed in I. D. Barnett et al., *Open Letter to President McKinley by Colored People Of Massachusetts* (n.p.: n.p, n.d.), pp. 2-4,10-12.