

*Pursuing Liberty: The Long Tradition of African American Heroes*

Joe Feagin, Texas A&M University

No group in U.S. history has had more impact in pressing this country toward *real* liberty, justice, and democracy than African Americans. Yet this reality remains unrecognized by most white Americans, who still demonize African Americans in their commonplace white-racist framing. In the 1950s the great American writer, Richard Wright, insisted African Americans were "the only group in our nation that consistently and passionately raises the question of freedom. . . . *This is a service to America and to the world.*" Uncounted millions of African-descent peoples and other people of color have had to spend much of their blood, treasure, and lives in trying to counter and replace the oppressive practices of centuries of European and European American oppression with *real* liberty and justice for all. This is indeed a service to America and the world.

Let me cite just a few examples, some well-known and others less well-known, of how Black Americans have regularly pressed this country toward greater liberty and justice:

(1) First, we can emphasize the 210,000 African Americans who served in the Union (U.S.) army and navy during the Civil War, and another 200,000-300,000 who served in essential military support roles. The majority had been enslaved in 1861, but now were fighting for their *permanent liberty*, and for a *much freer* country. During the first years of our bloodiest war, most northern whites, including President Lincoln, felt that the union had to be restored, but abolition of slavery was not a principal goal. After the U.S. Army's General Order to recruit Black soldiers belatedly came down in May 1863, and with the help of Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass and white abolitionist George Stearns, large numbers of Black Americans were recruited. These courageous soldiers provided the U.S. military strength needed at a time of troop shortages, due in part to northern whites resisting the new draft law. By war's end more Blacks were serving in U.S. military units than the total of *all* Confederate soldiers. Another 200,000-300,000 Black women and men served as support troops (e.g., nurses), spied for U.S. forces, destroyed Confederate facilities, or fled plantations to the North. The withdrawal of enslaved Black labor (W. E. B. Du Bois's "general strike") played a major role in the Confederacy's demise. Without the slaves' abandonment of the southern economy and large-scale Union military service, the U.S. cause would likely *not* have seen victory—a point that Lincoln himself made late in the war. Without that victory, the U.S. would have had a dramatically different history than what has taken place. (Who actually "freed the slaves"?) These heroic efforts and often life-sacrifices of hundreds of thousands of African Americans made morally necessary and politically likely the just and liberating Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution—called the "second American revolution."

(2) Moving forward to the decades around 1900, one courageous Black *freedom activist* was Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Born enslaved, she was an extraordinary journalist, sociological researcher, rights activist, founder of a women's suffrage organization, and NAACP co-founder. She traveled to Europe to establish an anti-lynching society. She organized nonviolent resistance to Jim Crow in Tennessee and fought railroad discrimination in court. Suffering the loss of a friend to a lynch mob, she worked tirelessly in researching and fighting violence targeting African Americans. She was among the first social scientists to explain how white violence was grounded in whites' protecting their economic exploitation of Blacks and their unjust enrichment under that systemic racism. Facing regular death threats and white violence against her, she courageously wrote and spoke against white mythologies of lynchings being necessary to protect white women from Black men. She published a major pamphlet on lynching, in which she and her Black sources speak vigorously of the need for *authentic* liberty, justice, and equality before the law. She argued that the anti-lynching crusade, in which she was a major leader, "will determine whether [U.S.] civilization can maintain itself by itself, or whether anarchy shall prevail; Whether this Nation shall write itself down a success at self government, or in deepest humiliation admit



its failure complete; whether the precepts and theories of Christianity are professed and practiced by American white people as Golden Rules of thought and action, or adopted as a system of morals to be preached to heathen until they attain to the intelligence which needs the system of Lynch Law.” Additionally, she was strongly supportive of African Americans’ actively defending themselves against white violence, calling on families to have “a Winchester rifle” at the ready to protect their homes.

(3) Moving to the dramatic 1950s-1960s civil rights movements, we enter another era in which a great many courageous Black activists engaged in civil rights protests resisted by many whites, including fierce segregationists engaging in violent assaults and murders. These Black protesters included famous civil rights leaders like Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but also many activists who need to be better known. To take just one example, in Monroe, North Carolina, a large white Klan group periodically held large anti-black rallies; thousands gathered, burned crosses, raided Black areas shooting guns. Robert Williams, a military veteran and NAACP leader, organized sustained and successful armed resistance. After one huge 1957 Klan rally, armed white men drove into Black communities, but found a substantial group of armed Black men who fired back at the Klan terrorists, who quickly fled. Numerous armed Black self-defense groups played a very important role in the black civil rights movements. In states like Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, voter registration and desegregation activists of the NAACP, CORE, and SNCC were often quietly protected by these courageous Black men. Many were veterans; most were experienced in keeping firearms to protect their homes from white terrorism. Some civil rights leaders or their bodyguards had hidden firearms. Indeed, as Dr. King put it, “the right to defend one’s home and one’s person when attacked has been guaranteed through the ages by common law.” Another important group was the Deacons for Defense and Justice. In 1964 a group of Black men organized secretly to resist Klan-type terroristic violence against Black demonstrators and their communities. Soon there were 21 chapters across Louisiana and Mississippi. When federal officials feared alienating white southerners and abdicated enforcement responsibilities, these well-armed groups guarded demonstrations and protected Black communities from white night-riders and even local police. The brave Black men in these armed self-defense organizations protected, and thus often made possible, numerous nonviolent demonstrations accenting *liberty and justice for all*.

(4) African American women were extraordinarily important to the growth and successes of these civil rights movements. The contemporary movement is dated as accelerating in the 1955-1956 Montgomery bus boycott. Rosa Parks, an NAACP activist, is deservedly celebrated for resisting Montgomery bus segregation. Yet, there is the larger, less well-known story of numerous other Black women activists there. The bus boycott idea began with Jo Ann Robinson, a faculty member at a local college, and Montgomery’s Women’s Political Council. In a bold May 1954 letter to the white mayor, she demanded bus desegregation, threatening a boycott. The mayor took no action, and later when Parks was arrested for not adhering to segregation, Robinson and other Black women and men began implementing the local boycott. Another too often forgotten hero of the rights movement was Ella Baker, a Virginian who served as NAACP branches’ director and one of the most effective civil rights organizers. For decades she dedicated her life to grass-roots democracy, working tirelessly to expand NAACP branches. She built extensive activist networks, the necessary “spade work” among ordinary people. She played pivotal roles in organizing voting rights and other antidiscrimination efforts for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, as well as in founding the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, with its successful organizing, voting, and protest efforts. Like many civil rights leaders, she had a global vision. As leading African American historian Barbara Ransby has put it, over her life “she was involved in more than thirty major political campaigns and organizations, addressing such issues as the war in Vietnam, Puerto Rican independence, South African apartheid, political repression, prison conditions, poverty, unequal education, and sexism.”

(5) Finally, let me conclude with a recent example of African American courage and devotion to *liberty and justice*. In the mid-1990s, Dr. Noel Cazenave, a brave young professor at the University of



Connecticut decided to teach a course specifically titled "*White Racism*," apparently the first in the country. His sociology department approved it, but the college curriculum committee tabled it because white faculty were upset at what they called the "derogatory" course title. (The committee had no Black members.) White committee members were quoted saying the course was "offensive to whites because it implies that whites are morally defective." After intensive white campus opposition, the course was barely approved as an experimental course. Then, on and off campus, whites, including newspaper editors and politicians, got involved to try to end it. The course's "title alone is an example of racism," insisted a Connecticut state senator in a letter to the university president requesting the course be eliminated. An article in the major Connecticut newspaper by head of the Yankee Institute attacked him: He has a "racial agenda so strongly implanted in his psyche that you want to jump across the faculty lounge and strangle him." Bravely, as an untenured and rare Black professor, Cazenave wrote well-documented articles for local papers and gave professional and community lectures explaining why this type of course was *necessary* to improve the "social health" of the U.S. (He also did research and found those opposing the course on campus were exclusively white men.) In the end, the support of his students in the rigorous course and of the sociology department was important. In February 1997, the *White Racism* course was finally approved and has been a permanent course to the present day. This success story involved courageous scholarship and teaching of an untenured Black professor—with great commitment to *real* liberty for this country.

These courageous actions by freedom-loving African Americans are only the tip of the historical iceberg. I can offer hundreds of examples of this (especially white) country's large-scale forgetting, concealment, or misrepresentation of pathbreaking African American actions in regard to freedom, equality, and justice. This is a *huge loss* for all of us, Black and non-Black. Clearly, much needs to be done to get these valuable histories out to the general population—and to building yet more freedom protests on the foundation of brave deeds of millions of Black men and women over centuries of struggle.

In one 1857 address, the great Frederick Douglass, who freed himself from slavery to become one of the greatest American freedom-fighters, emphasized that "The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle... If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. ... Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. ... The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress." Just before he died, a young Black man visited him, asking for advice for his own life. Douglas quickly replied: "Agitate!... Agitate!... Agitate!... Agitate!"

**Some Sources:** W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1935); D. S. Cecelski, *Fire of Freedom* (U. North Carolina Press, 2012); *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (U. Chicago Press, 1970); I. B. Wells-Barnett, *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States* (Donohue & Henneberry, 1895); R. F. Williams, *Negroes with Guns* (Marzani and Munsell, 1962); L. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense* (U. North Carolina Press, 2006); J. A. G. Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It* (U. Tennessee Press, 1987); B. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* (U. North Carolina Press, 2003); J. Feagin, *Racist America* (Routledge, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2014); J. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame* (Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2013); J. Feagin, *How Blacks Built America: Labor, Culture, Freedom, and Democracy* (Routledge, 2015-2016). Email: jrfeagin@yahoo.com Scholarly Blog: <http://www.racismreview.com> (Please contact me if you wish to use this handout.)