

IN DEFENSE OF LAW AND ORDER: THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON AND ITS BLACK CONSERVATIVE CRITICS

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Although nearly universally embraced and celebrated today, in 1963 the March on Washington was divisive not only among Americans in general but also within African American communities. Because historians have focused much more attention on the former than the latter, I use this commemorative occasion to excavate lost, buried, and forgotten moments of opposition to the march and critiques issued by African American figures who stood against it in principle and practice. We are much more conversant with critiques of the mass gathering from the *Left*, as encapsulated in Malcolm X's famous "farce on Washington" quip. But what about lesser-known patterns of opposition emanating from the *Right* of the mainstream of the civil rights movement, including those black conservatives of the era who would lay the foundation for the African American presence within the New Right of the late 1970s and early 1980s?

This essay is part of a larger project that considers moments of conflict and collusion between the civil rights movement, on the one hand, and the conservative movement, on the other. Both the book I am currently preparing (tentatively titled *Civil Rights Conservatism* and forthcoming from the University of California Press) and this present article attempt to delve into figures, such as James H. Meredith, who occupy positions within both of these major movements, which, in their post-World War II iterations, literally "grew up" together and remained intertwined in ways that are sometimes surprising and unexpected. Meredith is an ideal figure for this kind of analysis. Although a well-recognized symbol of the movement from the moment he successfully desegregated the University of Mississippi in 1962, he was never a willing movement operative. He belonged to none of its constituent organizations, and he rejected many of the movement's goals and tactics. Meredith's post-1960s drift toward the political Right, his denunciation of integration as "a con job," his work on the staff of North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms in the late 1980s, and his support for David Duke's 1991 Louisiana gubernatorial campaign are treated (when noted at all) as iconoclastic (at best) and simply crazy (at worst), but are never fully taken seriously.¹

1 Meredith quoted in Juan Williams, "Integration Is a 'Con Job,'" *Washington Post*, February 23, 1985, C1. Examples of attempts to assess Meredith's career include Lois Romano, "The Long, Long Journey of James Meredith," *Washington Post*, November 3, 1989; and Arturo Gonzales and Sandra Salinas, "The Long, Lonely Road of Rights Hero James Meredith," *People*, October 16, 1989.

In a recent assessment of Meredith, University of Mississippi historian David Sansing correctly observes that Meredith was never “in the mainstream of the civil rights movement,” and that he was “often critical of the leadership.” Sansing goes on to say, by way of explanation, that “He has always been a loner. He really does march to the sound of a different drummer.”² Sansing is not entirely wrong, but his interpretation renders Meredith not only safe but also inconsequential, like a strange uncle to be tolerated and not heeded. Such assessments also flatten out our view of the movement overall by branding certain kinds of uncomfortable critiques as wholly exceptional. An engagement with Meredith, and others like him, reminds us of the rich stew of arguments and debates that characterized black political culture in and around the movement. Critical voices, from the Left and from the Right, call attention to the fact that the movement involved protest not only against an oppressive and often indifferent white society. It also involved, and was structured by, arguments inside of black communities. Acknowledging that is a crucial part of the history of the movement and should be an equally important part of how it is remembered and represented. This essay is offered in that spirit.

Meredith was hardly the only prominent black spokesperson to question the efficacy of the March on Washington. The Reverend J. H. Jackson of Mt. Olivet Baptist Church in Chicago and head of the National Baptist Convention characterized the idea as a dangerous rejection of law and order; and the increasingly cantankerous journalist George Schuyler denounced the march — and the movement — as communist dominated. But that Meredith did so as a persistent symbol of the movement makes him especially provocative. His 1962 victory over the University of Mississippi officially desegregated that institution and firmly fixed his place in the “pantheon” of civil rights “heroes”; none of his criticisms of the movement seemed to matter or shake his hold on a reputation he deserved but didn’t want. His criticisms didn’t quite register in the press; nor did they deter the movement spokespersons from publicly claiming Meredith and his victory at Ole Miss as their own. Most dramatically, in his famous 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King Jr. expressed the hope that one day the nation would recognize its real heroes: “They will be the James Merediths, courageously and with a majestic sense of purpose, facing the jeering and hostile mobs and the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of a pioneer.”³

2 Sansing quoted in William Doyle, *An American Insurrection: James Meredith and the Battle of Oxford, Mississippi, 1962* (New York, 2001), 299.

3 The full letter is at <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-birmingham-city-jail-0#>

James Meredith had other ideas and saw himself as a different kind of pioneer. “Concerning the proposed march on Washington,” Meredith opined, “I will say that in my opinion the march would not be in the best interest of our cause.” The cause, he insisted, was best served by pursuing black advancement through alternative means — specifically, economic development, education, and proper leadership. Indeed, it was to Meredith’s mind the “very low quality of leadership present among our young Negroes and the childish nature of their activities” that constituted his great “dissatisfaction” with the movement in general — or so he told the audience at the Youth Freedom Banquet at the NAACP annual convention in July 1963.⁴ It was classic Meredith: to be an honored guest who can’t resist the temptation to insult the host.

Convened just weeks before the scheduled march, the NAACP’s proceedings were rife with tensions over tone and tactics. The convention, therefore, supplies a way to explore some of eddies and rip tides that lay beneath the historic gathering in the nation’s capital in 1963, and which continue to shape American and African American political culture today. Fifty years later, it seems to be getting harder to recall that there were *white* critics of the march and the movement — apart from full-fledged segregationists like Bull Connor, the notorious sheriff of Birmingham, Alabama. How much more challenging, then, to recall and to credit — and to fully explicate — African American ones, including a prominent minister (Jackson), an influential journalist (Schuyler), and an icon of the movement itself (Meredith). This brief overview of the 1963 convention helps to set the stage for and to conceptualize these three distinctive critics.

For the NAACP, rolling into Chicago that early July meant setting up shop in territory dominated by the Reverend J. H. Jackson — no relation, either biologically or ideologically, to the better-known Reverend Jesse Jackson. Pastor of Olivet Baptist Church, the largest black Baptist church in the nation, since 1941 and head of the five-million-plus strong National Baptist Convention (NBC) since 1953, Jackson was formidable then even though he is not widely remembered now. He was also perhaps the most influential black critic of the movement in general and of Martin Luther King Jr. in particular. He had publicly denounced King as a “hoodlum” and a “power-keg philosopher” and pointedly refused to endorse any of King’s initiatives.⁵ Although King had known Jackson since childhood, the two came to blows, almost literally, as King conspired to oust Jackson

4 Meredith’s speech is reprinted in his memoir, *Three Years in Mississippi* (Bloomington, 1966), 312-18.

5 Wallace Best’s “‘The Right Achieved and the Wrong Way Conquered’: J. H. Jackson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Conflict over Civil Rights,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 16, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 195-226, gives a good overview of the nature of the conflicts between King and Jackson, as does Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York, 1988).

from the NBC's leadership through the latter part of the 1950s, hoping to use the powerful organization as the main institutional basis for the civil rights movement. If movement people had controlled the National Baptist Convention, a Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) might not have been necessary.

But Jackson thwarted King at every turn and ruled over the NBC with an increasingly iron hand until 1982. In 1968, when the Chicago city council decided to rename South Parkway in honor of the recently assassinated King, Jackson went so far as to change the official address of his church from Parkway to Thirty-First Street to avoid having King's name on the letterhead. He also changed the orientation of the church's front door to 31st so that congregants would not have to enter from a street named after King. This longstanding feud was more than mere petty jealous and rivalry among men of the cloth but a reflection, at least in part, of real philosophical, religious, and strategy-driven differences between the two men and the communities they represented.

The 1963 NAACP convention in Chicago embodied some of these differences. Much like the organization's national convention in 1937 in Detroit, during which the question of industrial unionization was hotly debated, the Chicago convention provided a forum for disputation around the appropriate strategies for civil rights activism and included debate about the upcoming March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Reverend Jackson had already lit the first match by issuing a statement in the days before the convention denouncing the march as a "dangerous, unwarranted" form of protest.⁶ Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley, who welcomed the organization to town by declaring, with a perfectly straight face, "there are no ghettos in Chicago," exacerbated the situation.⁷ Even though Daley participated in leading an estimated ten thousand convention delegates and others on the July 4th "Freedom March" down State Street that culminated in a rally at Grant Park, he was booed for ten to twenty minutes (accounts vary) before leaving the platform, unable to deliver his speech.

Jackson's reception by the angry and agitated crowd was little better than Daley's. The reverend did not deny the existence of segregation either nationally or locally, but he did attempt to call a halt to demonstrations for a six-day mourning period in honor of slain civil rights activist Medgar Evers. It was a resolution that Jackson, who had previously offered his very public support to President Kennedy's plea for a temporary cessation of civil rights demonstrations, never

6 Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 848-49.

7 *Ibid.*, 848.

got to put before the convention. He, too, was booed off the stage, and the following Sunday his church was picketed.⁸

A critique of the upcoming march and a call to halt demonstrations was entirely consistent with Jackson's political theology and his understanding of good and proper strategy. Back in 1957 he had issued a sharp critique of the NAACP for staging demonstrations against the Little Rock, Arkansas, school board's decision to place no more than six black children in schools that were previously all white but had endorsed the association's filing of a lawsuit. While the lawsuit was, he believed, a "step in the right direction, which should be encouraged by all who have worked for the preservation of free public schools," demonstrations were unwarranted. "The struggle for democracy in education is not only a legal question," he wrote at the time, "but a question of achieving constructive human relations and good will ... We must not sacrifice the latter in a meticulous contention for the letter of the law."⁹

A richer articulation of Jackson's views can be found in his 1964 address to the Eighty-Fourth Annual Session of the National Baptist Convention held that year in Detroit, Michigan. Therein, he framed the civil rights struggle not as "a struggle to negate the high and lofty philosophy of American freedom. It is not," he continued, "an attempt to convert the nation into an armed camp or to substitute panic and anarchy in the place of law and order."¹⁰ It was, instead, the very fulfillment of the promise of American freedom, and he argued that it should therefore remain in what he called the "mainstream" of American democracy. He allowed that this might feel like an uphill battle. "But we as a people," he insisted, "must keep ever the true meaning of our struggle so that we will never be used as tools in the hands of those who love not the nation's cause but seek the nation's hurt and not our help." He advocated that all "stick to law and order" and to a "commitment to the highest laws of our land and in obedience to the American philosophy and way of life."

For Jackson, this meant resisting the temptation to place the struggle in open opposition to the law. "In some cases," he asserted, "the technique of direct action and demonstrations have led to mob violence and to vandalism. At least some who have desired to practice these negative methods have used the technique of so-called direct action." In the speech's climax, he intoned:

8 Ibid.; "4th of July Crowd Boos Rev. J. J. Jackson Off Platform," *Philadelphia Tribune*, July 6, 1963, 1; "NAACP Convention Called the 'Boldest,'" *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 11, 1963, A1.

9 "Dr. Jackson Raps NAACP," *Daily Defender*, August 13, 1959.

10 The full text of Jackson's address can be accessed via TeachingAmericanHistory.org: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/joseph-h-jackson/>. The following quotations are all taken from this source.

Today, I call for another type of direct action; this is, direct action in the positive which is oriented towards the Negro's ability, talent, genius, and capacity: Let us take our economic resources, however insignificant and small, and organize and harness them, not to stop the economic growth of others, but to develop our own and to help our own community ... In the act of boycotting, our best economic talents are not called into play, and we ourselves are less productive and seek to render others the same. Why not build for ourselves instead of boycotting others?

And, finally:

The progress of the race lies not in continued street demonstrations, and the liberation of an oppressed people shall not come by acts of revenge and retaliation but by the constructive use of all available opportunities and a creative expansion of the circumstances of the past into stepping stones to higher things.

The substance of Jackson's views was not terribly different from James Meredith's, who also encountered some problems during the 1963 NAACP convention in Chicago. In his Youth Fund dinner speech, Meredith raised critical questions about the proposed March on Washington for suggesting the entire business of civil rights legislation be left in the hands of the six "Negro congressmen." He also dressed down the Youth Council members for their lack of discipline, their lack of attention to the virtues of thrift, economic self-reliance, and saving, ultimately losing his temper and denouncing the crowd as immature "burr-heads."¹¹ Yet Meredith's point, much like Reverend Jackson's, was that the march was wrong, strategically, from a law-and-order point of view, and that it encouraged, ideologically, an insufficient focus on legislative action as opposed to economic and community development.

Reverend Jackson was not a full-fledged conservative. His views reflect a fairly characteristic 1950s' "vital center" preoccupation with national consensus, political moderation, and religious unity. And part of what lay beneath the disputes between King and Jackson, as Wallace Best, a contemporary professor of African American religious history at Princeton argues, was a struggle over the nature and the role of black religion in the public realm.¹² Yet both Meredith and

11 Meredith tactfully omits the "burr-heads" reference in the text and discussion of his remarks reprinted in his *Three Years in Mississippi*, but they are captured in Frank L. Spencer, "Meredith Bemoans 'Bigotry' in NAACP," *Atlanta Daily Word*, July 7, 1963, among other contemporary newspaper sources.

12 Best, "The Right Achieved and the Wrong Way Conquered," 197-98, 205-209.

Jackson do embody a set of ideas that would be seen as a hallmark of *black* conservatism. This is especially true when these ideas are read back in time through the lens of Booker T. Washington with the stress on economic self-help and respect for law and order as opposed to faith in overt political activism. Although both were chastised in Chicago in 1963 for their critical views of the march and the movement, it is equally important to note that they were both there, on the ground, and part of a significant dialogue and debate that was taking place within African American communities.

George Schuyler was not present in Chicago in 1963, but he, too, was part of a series of debates about the efficacy of the civil rights movement and its strategies. Unlike Meredith and Jackson, he issued what looks like a much more recognizably mainstream conservative critique and aligned himself directly and increasingly with the American Right — which Meredith would not do until almost two decades later. Once a member of the post-World War I Socialist Party, this expressive Harlem-based writer was one of the most prolific black journalists of the twentieth century. By the late 1950s, he had embraced the Cold War and moved decisively rightward.¹³ He tended to believe that all mass protests and marches — not only the 1963 March on Washington but also the 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage — were essentially useless. “The great illusion of the civil rights strategists,” he wrote in a *Pittsburgh Courier* column in 1965, “is that by provoking and inciting inconvenience and nuisance, leading inevitably to law violations and force to suppress them, the prejudices of whites in the Deep South will be minimized to the point where whites will love and respect blacks” and that the federal government would protect them.¹⁴

Schuyler articulated a classic law-and-order position that was similar to Reverend Jackson’s but far more overtly conservative, especially because of Schuyler’s virulent anti-communism. In November 1963, he lectured on why Congress should not pass civil rights legislation. He argued that the law should not be used as a weapon to compel social change and that the full achievement of African American civil rights depended on the tolerance and will of the majority — something that would only come about gradually. “Changes have been slow since 1865, but there have been marked changes; and civil rights laws, state or federal, have had little to do with it,” he insisted. “They have been enforced and accepted only when the dominant majority acquiesced and have generally lain dormant in the law books. In short, custom has dictated the pace of change.”¹⁵ His views were not dissimilar to

13 For a good overview, see Oscar R. Williams, *George S. Schuyler: Portrait of a Black Conservative* (Knoxville, 2007).

14 Schuyler, “Views and Reviews” Column, *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 3, 1965, 10.

15 Schuyler quoted in Williams, *George S. Schuyler*, 141-42.

those penned by William F. Buckley in the pages of the *National Review* at the time. What is particularly interesting is that Schuyler's pieces appeared on a regular basis in his column in the *Courier*, then one of the most popular and widely read black newspapers. Not all of his views were embraced by all of his readers, and the paper's editor did indeed ask him on several occasions to stop sniping at King, but Schuyler's commitment to gradualism, patriotism, and economic empowerment surely resonated with many people inside black communities across the country.

Schuyler's was not really a lone voice on the margins of black political culture. He was howling but not in the wilderness. While he mostly parted ways with the pro-civil rights movement paper by the end of 1964, his writing appeared in the *Courier* until 1966. As far as I know, there is only one recorded instance of his views being deemed too extreme — his 1964 editorial insisting that King had made no contribution to the world or to the cause of peace and that instead of a Nobel Prize, the "Lenin Prize" would be more appropriate. Not only did he describe King as being part of an international communist movement; Schuyler also characterized him as a "sable Typhoid Mary, infecting the mentally disturbed with perversions of Christian doctrine." It was just too much for *Courier* editor Robert L. Vann. He refused to run that particular piece, and William Loeb in his far-right *Manchester Union Leader* ultimately published it instead.¹⁶ It was a pivotal moment for Schuyler. From there it was but a short hop to the John Birch Society — one of the key organizations of the far or "radical" Right of the 1950s and 1960s.

Schuyler became a Bircher. James Meredith went on to campaign for ex-Klansman David Duke on the grounds of their shared opposition to affirmative action, welfare, and "forced busing." That both Schuyler and Meredith became increasingly marginal within mainstream black political culture should not allow us to ignore the fact that in the early 1960s they represented and voiced opinions and critiques that were part of the fabric of black political thought. Examining the lives and views of difficult figures like Schuyler, Meredith, and Reverend Jackson, who were in positions that allowed them to function as thought leaders and provocateurs, should remind us that African Americans responded to the civil rights movement in myriad ways. Some resisted the movement out of fear of violent reprisals while others thought the time and energy would be better spent attacking problems of drunkenness, extramarital sex, and other manifestations

16 Schuyler, "King No Help to Peace," *Manchester (N.H.) Union Leader*, November 10, 1964, 25.

of moral decay. Still others were gradualists made uncomfortable by direct-action tactics, and some were, for various reasons, supportive of segregation. A 1966 study by Donald Matthews and James Prothro revealed that one in three “Negroes is not committed to the goal of racial integration,” with 16 percent favoring “strict segregation,” and 15 percent favoring “something in between” strict segregation and integration.¹⁷ This snapshot study calls our attention to the idea that the civil rights movement, and the Black Freedom struggle overall, was not simply a series of confrontations between (white) segregationists and (black) integrationists. Rather, at every step and throughout each era there was a certain degree of ambivalence and uncertainty as people were forced to choose among competing values and strategies.

The fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington is a good reminder of how one-dimensional and sanitized “commemorative history” can become. At the same time, it can signal the need for better, more complicated stories about figures like Meredith, Schuyler, and the Reverend J. H. Jackson, and for a more expansive narrative about the movement overall. Taken in isolation, each of these examples can be written off as merely iconoclastic or opportunistic — the product of political sour grapes and personal disappointments. Viewed together, however, they start to appear not only to be the product of individual choices but also to be part of broader political and historical trends that are reshaping how we think — and argue about — race and rights in twenty-first-century America.

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¹⁷ Donald R. Matthews and James W. Prothro, *Negroes and the New Southern Politics* (New York, 1967), 128-40, cited in Lauren F. Winner, “Doubtless Sincere: New Characters in the Civil Rights Cast,” *The Role of Ideas in the Civil Rights South*, ed. Ted Ownby (Jackson, 2002), 158.

