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Marcus Garvey: A Legacy Obscured by Infamy

NAACP leader W.E.B. Du Bois referred to Garvey as "the most dangerous enemy of the Negro race in America." Noted for his extreme separatist ideals and divisive rhetoric, Garvey sought to establish himself as the leader of a new African nation. While some of Garvey's notable projects like the Universal Negro Improvement Association or the Black Star Line provided economic growth for black Americans much of his career and legacy were shrouded in controversy. Most notably his collaboration with known white supremacist Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi and the Ku Klux Klan supporting their ideologies of racial separatism, (Editors, Biography.com). Despite the great strides Garvey made in the social and economic advancements of black people, his legacy has ultimately been obscured by the controversies in his career, specifically: his connection to white supremacists, lack of support from other black activists, and the mismanagement of his business enterprises.

Marcus Moziah Garvey was born on August 17, 1887, in St. Ann's Bay, Jamaica. The youngest of 11, Garvey was born to Marcus Garvey, Sr. and Sarah Jane Richards. His father, a stonemason, was said to have a large library, where young Garvey learned to read. Garvey was in school until age 14 when he became a printer's assistant. In 1903, he traveled to Kingston to join the unionization movement, participating in a strike in 1907. As a young man he traveled through Central America as a newspaper editor, he wrote pieces about the exploitation of migrant workers on plantations. After working in Central America, Garvey traveled to London to

attend Birkbeck College. While in London he worked for the *African Times* and *Orient Review*, both of which advocated Pan-African nationalism, (Editors, Biography.com). It was not until he returned to North America that his activism shifted from a passion to a career.

On August 1, 1914, upon returning to Jamaica, Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement and Conservation Association and African Communities League, commonly referred to as the Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.). The central goal of the U.N.I.A was to create a black-governed nation in Africa. Prior to traveling to America, Garvey was in contact with Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute, an African American trade school designed to promote the economic progress of black people. Garvey traveled to the United States in 1916 to raise funds for a similar school in Jamaica. Whilst in America, Garvey created a U.N.I.A chapter in Harlem (Editors, Biography.com). By 1919, Garvey is said to have had nearly two million followers, though the exact number was never clear. The U.N.I.A established its own newspaper, *The Negro World*, which profiled extraordinary figures in the black community and provided enticing depictions of African culture, with intent of promoting Pan Africanism. One of the central tenants of Garvey's philosophy was an emphasis on economic independence for black people. Working towards economic autonomy, Garvey established the Negro Factories Corporation and the Black Star Line in 1919. He also established a chain of restaurants and grocery stores, laundromats, and a hotel, all owned and operated by black people, for black people.

The U.N.I.A was the center of Marcus Garvey's movement. Upon founding, Garvey published a list of the organization's objectives. Some of the notable objectives included: "To establish educational and industrial colleges for the further education and culture of our boys and girls. To promote a better taste for commerce and industry. To promote a universal confraternity

and strengthen the bonds of brotherhood and unity among the race,” (Garvey, Marcus. “Objectives”). The U.N.I.A. was conceived as an organization designed to promote a unity amongst African diaspora, uplift black people in the western world, and provide economic growth for black people. Garvey also worked through the U.N.I.A to establish educational and industrial opportunities for black people, using the Tuskegee Institute as an inspiration. Establishing the first branch in Harlem in 1916, the U.N.I.A spread rapidly. By the spring of 1918, branches and divisions were popping up all across the United States. By 1920, the U.N.I.A had nearly a thousand local chapters in the United States, the Caribbean, Central America, Canada and Africa (“People & Events: Universal”).

While the U.N.I.A attracted masses and provided many with a sense of belonging, it was not without its problems, both internal and external. Garvey was known to lead with an iron fist; it is said that he did not allow disagreement even on insignificant issues, and demanded complete loyalty from U.N.I.A. members. His leadership style caused considerable dissension within the ranks, and lead to a considerable amount of turnover amongst the U.N.I.A.'s top leadership. Beyond the group's internal problems, Garvey and the U.N.I.A as a whole became targets of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In a campaign lead by J. Edgar Hoover, who would become the first Director of the FBI, Garvey and the U.N.I.A’s actions were examined with great scrutiny (“People & Events: Universal”). Hoover referred to Garvey as a "notorious negro agitator,” fearing he was inciting a race war or encouraging black people to stand up in militant defiance. Hoover spent nearly five years investigating Garvey, with officers reporting on U.N.I.A. activities in over two dozen cities across the country. Hoover even hired the first black F.B.I. agent in 1919 in order to infiltrate Garvey's inner circle and spy on him (Editors, Biography.com).

Marcus Garvey and three other U.N.I.A. officials were eventually charged with mail fraud involving the Black Star Line in 1925, (Editors, Biography.com). Garvey served two years of his five-year prison term, but in 1927 his sentence was commuted by President Coolidge, he was deported back to Jamaica as an “undesirable alien” (Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica). U.N.I.A membership declined after Garvey’s arrest and the remaining members felt despondent after his deportation. Garvey continued his political activism and the work of U.N.I.A. in Jamaica, and then moved to London in 1935, where he died five years later after suffering several strokes. In 1964, the government of Jamaica proclaimed him the country's first national hero, (Editors, Biography.com). In spite of the social and economic advancements for African Americans Garvey made throughout his career, his legacy has ultimately been obscured by the controversies in his career.

One of the greatest points of controversy in Garvey’s career was his connection to known white supremacist Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi. Bilbo served as the Governor of Mississippi, and later represented his home state in United States Senate. Bilbo is noted for his often racially charged invective. Like other southern states, racism runs deep Mississippi’s history and Senator Bilbo was certainly a part of maintaining racial separatism in his state. Some of his most prejudicial rhetoric was published in his book entitled *Take Your Choice*, the thesis of this can be summed up in one of its opening statements: “This problem [racial divisions], which exists because of the presence of some 12,865,518 Negroes in this country, can be permanently solved only by the physical separation of the races,” (Tristram). Above all of these, his most divisive work as a statesman was The Greater Liberia Act of 1939, a bill that he drafted in conjunction with Marcus Garvey.

Michael Fitzgerald a history professor from St. Olaf College detailed the partnership between Garvey and Bilbo in his work “‘We Have Found a Moses’: Theodore Bilbo, Black Nationalism, and the Greater Liberia Bill of 1939.” This article piece focuses on Bilbo’s motives in partnering with Garvey as well as the objectives of this legislation. It should be noted that Repatriation, the mass exodus of African Americans back to Africa, was an issue at the forefront of Garvey’s ideology. This is made clear in the preamble of Garvey’s U.N.I.A objectives in which he states: “the Negro peoples of the world should concentrate upon the object of building up for themselves a great nation in Africa” (“Primary”). Garvey believed that African Americans could never truly thrive in the United States, arguing that there was no way for black people to succeed in a society that has historically oppressed them. Senator Bilbo also supported the idea of repatriation, but his motives differed severely from Garvey’s. Fitzgerald clearly articulates that Bilbo’s interest in repatriation was in no way related to African pride, but rather: “repatriation was to demonstrate his [Bilbo’s] soundness on white supremacy” (Fitzgerald, 312).

Senator Bilbo’s first public remarks about repatriation were in 1938, when he opposed and filibustered federal anti-lynching legislation. During his four hour remarks on the Senate floor Bilbo is quoted saying “if they keep this [anti]lynching bill before the senate much longer, I am going to succeed in getting the negroes deported to Africa,” (Fitzgerald, 296-97). In an effort to satisfy his own prejudices and please his constituency, Bilbo drafted the legislation to create a white America; going so far as to say: “No nation could prosper while degraded by the blood of inferior racial types,” (Fitzgerald, 301-02). Bilbo sought Garvey’s help, believing that the support of a prominent member of the black community would add weight to his bill. Garvey’s

support in turn also helped Bilbo discredit the NAACP. With the support of one black movement, it discredited the NAACP's claim to speak on behalf of all black people (Fitzgerald).

However, Garvey's involvement in the drafting of the bill, still left many African Americans feeling uneasy. Perhaps because this partnership was not the first time Garvey collaborated with white supremacist; infamously meeting with the leader of the Ku Klux Klan in 1922. Further, Garvey's sentiments about repatriation were not shared by those in the mainstream civil rights movement. Garvey received a lot of criticism from the NAACP and other civil rights groups due to his connections to Bilbo. While Bilbo depended on the U.N.I.A.'s support, they were excluded from the majority of the drafting of the bill. Many U.N.I.A. members feared that their exclusion from the drafting process was a strategic move on Bilbo's part, perhaps indicative of a plan of forced emigration (Fitzgerald).

In 1939, Senator Bilbo released The Greater Liberia Act, which encompassed much of the information from Bilbo's previous proposals. This new draft also included new information drafted by Ramon Martinez, a lawyer who served as the president of the Negro Nationalist Society of America (Fitzgerald). In this form, the bill called for the cession of West African territories held by the British and French, as well as territories provided by Liberia to accommodate the new settlers. This bill also stipulated that the U.S. military would be in charge of establishing the new civil administration for up to two years, and could govern for up to four more years ("Theodore"). Many U.N.I.A members opposed this addition, out of fear of an oppressive white military presence in the new colony (Fitzgerald). Volunteers of African descent between the ages of twenty-one and fifty were the only people allowed to participate in this mass emigration. The bill ensured that settlers would be granted fifty acres of land, and would also

receive aid until they became self sufficient through farming or trade. Bilbo set the maximum federal expenditure on this bill at \$1 Billion (“Theodore”).

Ultimately, this bill did not pass. Fitzgerald argues that Bilbo was “too dependent on his Mississippi constituency, and too racist personally,” to maintain a respectful working relationship with his African American allies (Fitzgerald 302). Additionally, at the start of World War II in 1939, the U.S. government’s focus shifted heavily and the aid of France and Britain could no longer be relied on. While Garvey’s involvement in the drafting of this bill did not drastically hurt his public image, because he died in 1940, it did affect the image of the U.N.I.A. Many of the major black news publications of the time opposed the plan, and other black civil rights activists heavily criticized it. Fitzgerald also notes that the U.N.I.A expected to receive financial subsidies from Bilbo but this never came to fruition, citing this as a factor that sped the organization’s dissolution (Fitzgerald). Had it not been for Garvey’s emphatic support of Bilbo’s legislation, the U.N.I.A. would not have received nearly as much criticism from the NAACP and other similar groups, and would not have relied so greatly on the financial support of the Senator Bilbo, which still remains unfulfilled.

While Garvey received great criticism from the public, he also received a fair amount of judgment from other black activists of his time. One activist who took particular issue with Garvey was Robert W. Bagnall. Born in 1883, Bagnall was a Minister and civil rights activist. He served as Director of Branches of the NAACP during the organization’s first period of growth in the early 20th century. Bagnall is also well known for being on of the first public critics of Marcus Garvey and the United Negro Improvement Association. In the mid-1920s, he denounced Garvey’s black nationalist ideology as “race arrogance.” Bagnall felt that Garvey was a megalomaniac, advocating only for his personal gain (Bragg).

In a 1923 article entitled “The Madness of Marcus Garvey,” Bagnall divulges his specific grievances with Garvey’s behavior and posits that Garvey may indeed be mentally unsound. Bagnall begins the article by comparing Garvey to other “notable madmen” including Nero and Caligula, dubbing him “Boastful, egotistic, tyrannical, [and] intolerant.” Bagnall’s main claim is that Garvey is an egomaniac. In one line of the article Bagnall writes: “Read *the Negro World* [The U.N.I.A.’s news publication]. See how its pages are thick with the words ‘I, Marcus Garvey’ in every issue. See the self-laudation and egoism manifested there. No sane man would be so gross in self-laudation as Garvey,” (“Robert”). Additionally, Bagnall, argues that Garvey’s “madness” further presents itself in his constant paranoia. For example, in a printing of *The Negro World*, published on May, 13 1921 Garvey wrote: “Millions of dollars were expended in the shipping industries to boycott and put out of existence the Black Star Line,” (“Robert”). However, according to Bagnall, Garvey never provided any information to substantiate this claim. Bagnall also argued that Garvey’s madness was reflected in the near constant turnover of his cabinet group. Garvey was constantly suspicious of traitors amongst his inner circle, firing colleagues over minor disagreements. Bagnall concludes the article by writing: “Certainly the movement is insane, whether Garvey is or not,” (“Robert”). Clearly, Robert Bagnall was highly critical of the Marcus Garvey’s personality and leadership style. This article fails to acknowledge the positive aspects of Garvey’s career, only dwelling on the negatives; thus, supporting the assertion that Garvey’s legacy was shrouded by the controversies in his career.

Another famous black thinker to clash with Garvey was W.E.B. Du Bois. Born in 1868, William Edward Burghardt “W. E. B.” Du Bois was a prominent African-American sociologist, writer and activist. Du Bois was also a founding officer of the NAACP and editor of its magazine. He too was an outspoken critic of Marcus Garvey, believing Garvey was a

demagogue. Similarly to Bagnall, Du Bois was highly critical of Garvey's leadership style and much of his political ideology. While Garvey advocated for a complete exodus from North America, Du Bois was strongly in favor of a Northern migration in a quest for equality and integration. In December of 1920 and January 1921, Du Bois wrote two profiles of Garvey in *The Crisis*, the NAACP's publication. The first profile depicted Garvey as a responsible leader; Du Bois praised Garvey for his dedication to his cause and his ability mobilize African Americans to join his movement. The second profile, however, took a drastically different position.

The second profile attacked Garvey's ego, highlighting his narcissism and hubris. Ultimately, Du Bois vehemently disagreed with Garvey's assertion that life for African Americans in the United States was hopeless (Chalk). Du Bois publicly condemned Garvey in May of 1923, saying: "Marcus Garvey is without a doubt, the most dangerous enemy of the Negro race in America and in the world. He is either a lunatic or a traitor [who] should be locked up or sent home" (Chalk 139). Du Bois comments did not go unnoticed by Garvey, in his first address to his followers after his arrest, entitled "First Message to the Negroes of the World From Atlanta Prison," Garvey addressed Du Bois' comments. Most notably saying: "I want you, the black peoples of the world, to know that W.E.B. Du Bois and that vicious Negro-hating organization known as the Association for the Advancement of 'Colored' People are the greatest enemies the black people have in the world," (Garvey "First"). I find the relationship between Du Bois and Garvey incredibly fascinating. These two men both want the same thing, a better life for the next generation of African Americans, yet they have fundamentally different methods of execution. These two individuals could have been great allies had it not been for Garvey's separatist ideals or extremely divisive language. Without the support of mainstream civil rights leaders like Bagnall and Du Bois Garvey's efforts and his legacy went the way of all things.

While the Black Star Line was the main economic venture of Marcus Garvey's movement it was woefully mismanaged and one of the main sources of controversy in Garvey's career. The Black Star Line was the steamship company operated by Garvey and the U.N.I.A from 1919 to 1922. The Black Star Line was originally envisioned as a tool for promoting world wide commerce amongst black communities; in Garvey's vision, Black Star Line ships would transport goods among black businesses in North America, the Caribbean, and Africa, and become the central cog of the global black economy, ("People & Events: Black). The establishment of the Black Star Line is said to be the foundation of Garvey's popularity amongst African Americans. Du Bois cited the idea as "a brilliant suggestion and Garvey's only original contribution to the race problem," ("The Collapse"). Despite its promising start, the Black Star Line failed shortly after it launched, making it yet another stain on Garvey's career.

The Black Star Line was virtually always in a chaotic state. Garvey began with a fleet of three ships, all with major functional issues. His first ship *The Yarmouth* was an old coal boat from World War I, and was in poor condition from the time he purchased it. Reports indicate that the ship was not worth more than \$25,000, yet the U.N.I.A. paid \$165,000. The fleets next two ships were not much better, both bought well above their value and in extremely poor condition. *The S. S. Shadyside*, took one cruise down the Hudson River in the summer of 1920, and in the fall, sprang a leak and sank. The steam yacht *Kanawha* blew a boiler on its first voyage, killing a man, ("People & Events: Black).

In addition to the numerous safety issues associated with the Black Star Line, Garvey was also responsible for a number of managerial issues. One notable instance of mismanagement was during the "Yarmouth's" first commission, the Black Star Line was processing a shipment of whiskey from the U.S. to Cuba. The boat arrived in Cuba on time, but no one from the U.N.I.A.

made docking arrangements in Havana. Garvey also lacked good judgment when it came to planning the routes of the Black Star Line voyages. Once a cargo load of coconuts rotted at sea because Garvey forced the ship to stop at ports of political importance. As a business the Black Star Line was a disaster, many U.N.I.A members had taken out shares in the company, some investing their life's savings. Records indicated that the company's losses could have been as high as \$1.25 million. Garvey announced the suspension of the company shortly after he was indicted in 1922 for mail fraud related to the sale of Black Star Line stock ("People & Events: Black).

Du Bois, who once found The Black Star Line promising, believed it was extremely mismanaged. In his article "The Collapse of the Only Thing in the Garvey Movement Which was Original or Promising," Du Bois details the specific faults of Garvey's leadership and casts aspersions on Garvey's character. The article initially focuses on the falsehoods in Garvey's financial records, specifically the Black Star Line's first financial reports from 1920. Firstly there were no losses recorded in the report, however the company did lose money in its first year of operation. Garvey wrote in the report: "We have much to be thankful for in that no unfortunate accident has befallen us!" ("The Collapse"), however, given the incidents involving the *The S. S. Shadyside* and *The Kanawha* it is clear that this was untrue. In the spring of 1921, the Black Star Line announced a new ship to sail sometime in the next year. However, in August of the same year, the Black Star Line Shareholders convention was held in New York City. According to Du Bois' article, one delegate remained in the city for thirty-two days, constantly being promised to see the ship "tomorrow" or "soon," but was never actually shown the ship. Du Bois leaves readers questioning Garvey, as he discredits his ability to actually right the wrongs of the Black Star Line, ending his article by asking: "What are his statements and promises worth?" ("The

Collapse”). This is another prime example of the way Garvey’s work was impeded by controversies. This time Garvey’s downfall did not come from a partnership or the criticisms of others, but his own leadership style.

Despite Garvey’s accomplishments he remains relatively unknown outside of the world of academia. The choices he made as he developed connections and partnerships as well as his unbridled self importance, undermined his inspired mission. Garvey’s quest to uplift the 400 million African people in the world posed a threat to European colonialism and the social structure of the United States. Garvey’s unrelenting opposition to white supremacy was not only alarming to many white Americans, but also to assimilationist blacks like Du Bois and Bagnall. Garvey lacked the support of the mainstream civil rights activists of his time in spite of his myriad revolutionary ideas and substantial following. Garvey's hubris and controversial rhetoric allowed for him to be easily written off by his mainstream contemporaries. While I do not support all of his methods, I can not deny his contributions to African American History, and American History as a whole. It saddens me that the controversies of his career and his inability to join the mainstream civil rights movement caused Garvey to be completely erased from the national narrative.

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