Chapter IV

THE DANGEROUS DECADE: BLACK PROTEST IN THE 1850s
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The 1850s saw a decade of rapidly changing political developments. From the very beginning, the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law focussed the prevalent political issue around the question of the place of blacks in American society. While there was relatively little to account for the rise of emigrationist ideas among blacks in the 1850s, the earlier decade had, by and large, emphasized the desire of blacks to integrate completely into the American society on the basis of absolute equality. Convention after convention called on the American society to grant equal rights of franchise to blacks. Blacks consistently argued for these rights on the basis of natural law, their historical contribution and the Constitutional law of the United States.

The entire philosophy of the earlier black movement was one of attaining economic, social and moral parity with the white society. The values espoused by black abolitionists were essentially the dominant white American values. Towards this, the black attempt at an all-round reform and their emphasis on self-improvement of their community mirrored the surge of reformist ideas within the larger white American society of the period. Nevertheless, the earlier decade contained the seeds of revolutionary positions as well. Garnet's own "Address to Slaves" advocating rebellion was perhaps, the most sensational. However, within the ideas espoused by the Rev. Lewis Jenkins were contained both the germ of national emigration developed by Delany, and the idea of a permanent national organization
for blacks espoused by Frederick Douglass in the 1850s. The persistent black demands for enfranchisement were, viewed in the context of the times, revolutionary.

Perhaps the most significant development was the support extended by a number of black leaders and Conventions to the Liberty Party and its successor the Free Soil Party. The support of blacks and other abolitionists to these parties helped create a small but significant lobby in the North which was to have important consequences in the 1850s.

In terms of individuals, the 1840s saw the rise of Frederick Douglass to pre-eminence in the black community in the North. His undoubted abilities as well as control over the most important black newspaper of the period The North Star (later Frederick Douglass' Paper) made him the most important black leader in the 1840s. In terms of sheer brilliance, Douglass was matched by Henry Highland Garnet. Garnet was, however erratic in his work and often caught up with his duties as a pastor. Besides, Garnet left the United States at the end of 1849 and returned only after six years. In the intervening years, the black movement had shifted its orientation drastically. There were, however, a host of black leaders who had


There were, however, several other trends in the United States that must be appreciated if we are to understand the context of black thought in the 1850s. Some of these trends were related to the demographic changes occurring in American society.

While importation of slaves had been suspended since 1808, a steady trickle of white emigrants from Europe found its way to the United States. Between 1846 and 1855 this trickle became a torrent fed by the turmoil of Europe and the Irish famine. While many of the European refugees were skilled workers who adjusted quickly in the American society, the Irish, themselves victims of oppression, ignorant and virtually destitute, landed in the Eastern seaboard states. The Irish began competing with the blacks in the margin of the American economic system. The blacks found out all over again that prejudice was

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4 Between 1846 and 1855, some 3 million immigrants came into the United States mainly from Ireland and Germany. This was about 12 per cent of the population of the U.S. in 1850. These immigrants settled mainly in the North. See Historical Statistics of the United States from the Colonial Times to 1957 (Washington, D.C., 1960), Series C-88-14, p. 57.
inextricably linked to their race and colour. In 1853 Frederick
Douglass pointed out that even the black "monopoly in the menial"
employments was a thing of the past, which James H. Whitfield
pointed out, was a consequence of European migration. The
swiftness with which these emigrants were accorded equal citizen­
ship rights was most galling to the blacks, many of whom were
better educated and better off and had always lived in the United
States.

However, to move up in the social, economic and political
ladder, the immigrants came to clash and compete with the blacks.
The fact that they, due to the prevalent racism, outcompeted
them, led to the belief that the blacks were destined to be the
"mud-sill" of society. If this problem was an education to
black leaders, the whites drew all the wrong lessons from the
situation.

Another development lay in the white settlement and the
growth of the mid-West—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Iowa.

5 Leon F. Litwack, North of Slavery: The Negro in the
Free States, 1790-1860 (Chicago, 1961), pp. 162-4; Fredericn Douglass to Harriet Beecher Stowe, 8 March
1853, in Philip S. Foner, The Life and Writings of
Frederick Douglass (New York, 1950-1975), 5 vols.,
vol. II, p. 234. Also "Whitfield's Sub-Rejoinder" in
M.T. Newsom, comp., Arguments Pro and Con on the Call
for a National Emigration Convention to be Held in
Cleveland, Ohio, 24 August 1854, by Frederick Douglass,
W.J. Watkins & J.E. Whitfield with a Short Appendix
of the Statistics of Canada West, West Indies, Central
& South America (Detroit: George E. Pomeroy & Co.,
1854), p. 28.

6 Litwack, ibid., pp. 165-7, 178; Robert Ernst, "The
Economic Status of the New York City Negroes, 1850­
1863," Negro History Bulletin, vol. 12, no. 6, March
1949, p. 142.
The tale of the poor immigrant moving West and becoming his own master became part of the folklore of American democracy. The relatively high social mobility provided in this era, especially in the West, a tendency to decry class barriers and celebrate the openness of American institutions. The fact that in most Northern states, especially the mid-Western ones, elective franchise was provided for every white adult, emphasized this. This factor went a long way in promoting political democracy in the North. However, as Eugene Berwanger has shown, the growth of democratic ideals in the mid-West was accompanied by a rising tide of anti-black attitudes. The buoyant new "democracies" of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, in the 1830s passed a series of laws designed to force out blacks. Since the number of blacks in these states was very small, these measures did not grow out of a threat of labour competition or a threat of miscegenation with blacks. It arose out of the unwillingness of the whites to perceive blacks as equals and perhaps even as human beings. Out of this arose the "free labor" doctrine which saw in the labouring capacity of any black, free or slave, a threat to the status of white labouring men. The expansion of America along capitalist lines required the presence of a highly mobile population reserve. This was provided by, in the 1850s, immigration. Given the historical development of America, it was also contingent on the expansion of political

rights and the rule of law. The need for "free labor" in American has to be accompanied by "free men." In such circumstances, the thrust of the political movement was turned against slavery and "Slave Power," which, by maintaining involuntary servitude, was a threat to wage-labour. The irony of this "progressive" perception was that it was completely racist in its outlook. It viewed blacks themselves as a challenge to the status of "free labor," not the system that kept them in bondage. Northern free blacks, occupying the lowest rungs of their society, were looked upon as little better than slaves and as a threat to the "Manifest Destiny" of a white democratic America.

Thus, in the decade before the Civil War, the politics of the North appeared to assume the dimensions of a great crusade of the democratic North against an anachronistic and anti-democratic South. The white populace was mobilized on the slogan of preventing the extension of slavery into what was projected as a pre-destined white region. In reality, however, the general thrust of politics had another edge as well, that is, that of an anti-black upsurge. The politics which led the protagonists of a dynamic, progressive and essentially white America to a war against slavery certainly points to the complexity of issues involved. For some of the answers it is important to look into the debate within the black society in

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the context of the most severe crisis faced by the blacks in the nineteenth century.

The Fugitive Slave Law

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 had a catalytic effect on the antislavery movement. For blacks, the harshness of the Law was apparent from the fact that some 20,000 of them fled to Canada. Many of them were former fugitive slaves but many were justly afraid that the provisions of the Law would be misused to endanger their status. Moral suasion was no longer a viable doctrine when many free blacks faced the danger of re enslavement. Blacks resisted violently, and the Northern politics reeled from the consequences. Blacks organized Vigilance Committees to physically resist Federal marshals and slave-owners' agents and they dealt sternly with informers in their own community.

The provisions of the Law, which in effect were the tightening up of the older laws providing for the rendition of fugitive slaves, also operated to prevent the expansion of slave labour into the new Territories. This was a vital issue generated by the debates on the Wilmot Proviso, preventing slave-holding in areas acquired from Mexico. The white

leadership in the North, concerned more about the status of white labour, were not overly concerned about the black question. It was the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, threatening to re-open the Territories to slavery, which resulted in the birth of a Northern Party committed to an essentially white nationalism and opposing the South on the question of that section's supposed tendency to expand the bounds of slavery. It was primarily this division which was to lead to the Civil War.\(^{10}\)

The meetings held by blacks following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law had made their intent clear that they would challenge the Law by strategem and even by force. The challenge was not mere rhetoric--every black man felt threatened by the Law and the community reacted unitedly.

In the Jerry rescue of Syracuse in late 1850s, five blacks, including Jermain Loguen, Samuel R. Ward were indicted along with eighteen whites by the federal government. Only one person, who was a black, was found guilty. Both Ward and Loguen fled the United States while being indicted for their complicity in the rescue. In the "Christiana Riot" in the same year, 35 out of the 38 rescuers arrested for treason were blacks. The blacks killed Edward Gorusch and wounded his son, who had come with marshals to seize four alleged fugitives. In February 1851, in Boston, a black waiter, Shadrach, was freed by a black gathering acting spontaneously. Shadrach was next heard of in

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\(^{10}\) See Eric Foner, n. 8 esp. Chapters I and II.
Rescue of fugitives became common in the North, and but for a few cases, they were marked with success. One of the failures in 1854 was of the re-enslavement of Anthony Burns. In the tussle between the Franklin Pierce Administration trying to crush opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law and the abolitionists, Burns became a cause célèbre across the North. In spite of their best efforts, the abolitionists and the blacks could not prevent the re-enslavement of Burns. The resulting tension and struggle intensified the growth of public opinion against the South profoundly.

In the Passmore Williamson case in 1855, Passmore Williamson, William Still and four other blacks rescued a black woman, Jane Johnson and her two sons from a junior American diplomat in Philadelphia. Still and others were indicted but were acquitted later of riot charges. On the eve of the war,


it was the Oberlin-Wellington rescue that caught popular imagination. Here, 30 to 40 blacks, along with several hundred whites rescued John Price. As a result of this, Charles H. Langston was tried and found guilty mainly of having refused to stop the rescue. Langston's speech in his own defence was widely reprinted and meetings to support him endorsed his condemnation of the Law and emphasized the black determination to resist with force, if necessary, the working of the Law.

Stanley Campbell has calculated that there were 332 fugitive slave cases between 1850 and 1860. Of this, 141 fugitives, some 42.5 per cent, were returned to their owners without due process. Rescuers managed to free only 22 or 6.6 per cent. Sixty-eight cases were remanded by Federal Tribunals at government expense. The number of cases in court, does not, however, describe the magnitude of the escape operations. Fugitives who

separately, was imprisoned for over three months when the furore created by the case forced the judge who had imprisoned him to back down. Williamson steadfastly refused to accept any guilt of wrongdoing on his part. Ralph Lowell Eckert, "Anti-Slavery Partydom: The Ordeal of Passmore Williamson," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography (Philadelphia), vol. 100, no. 4, October 1976, pp. 521-33.


15 See Table 12 in Appendix in Campbell, n. 11, p. 207.
escaped were estimated at some 10,000 in this decade.

The Black Underground

This new mood of resistance found sympathy and support among white abolitionists. However, the most determined participants in numerous rescues were blacks. The direct confrontation with Federal authorities served to heighten sectional tensions. Unable to depend on laws, blacks brought to the very doorsteps of the Northern community the ugly realities of slavery. For a society which was based on the growth of self-conscious democratic principles, even if they were for whites only, the picture of slave catchers pursuing hapless fugitives across the land served to intensify the distaste for Southern institutions. Thus, of the several indictments brought against rescuers, only a few resulted in convictions. The acquittal of rescuers or light sentences on those found guilty, raised Southern suspicions of a monolithic Northern conspiracy. Shaping up around this time too, was a movement directed against the South to prevent the expansion of the area under slavery.

The rescue of blacks from slavery was, even prior to 1850, a predominantly black enterprise. This enterprise was, by and large, undertaken in an unorganized manner by blacks out of fellow-feeling for their comrades fleeing from slavery. These efforts were aided by black organized vigilance committees as well. The first Vigilance Committee was set up in New York

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16 Campbell, n. 11, p. 167.
with David Ruggles as its Secretary and in the Executive Committee were Theodore J. Wright, Samuel E. Cornich and other prominent black leaders. Its first annual report indicated an expenditure of $1288.71 and reported that the "total number of persons protected from slavery" by the efforts of the Committee was three hundred and thirty-five. The New York State Vigilance Committee helped to feed, clothe and shelter fugitives. One of those who had been helped by this Committee was Frederick Douglass. The Vigilance Committees also led the protect against the kidnappings of fugitives and their forced return to their owners. This was done at times by propaganda and at times by physically assisting fugitives in escaping from the marshals and other law enforcement officers.

In Philadelphia, Robert Purvis was president of the Vigilance Committee and William Still its corresponding Secretary. In Syracuse, N.Y., the Rev. Jermain Loguen sheltered many fugitives through the local Committee. In Detroit, William Lambert and George de Baptiste ran the local Committee which was particularly effective in helping fugitives in the mid 1850s. In a period of just six months in 1855, this Committee helped over one thousand blacks to reach Canada.

17 See The First Annual Report of the New York State Vigilance Committee, Aptheker, n. 9, pp. 162-3; Frederick Douglass, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass Written by Himself, His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage and His Complete History (New York, 1962 [1892]), pp. 204-5.

While most of the Vigilance Committees continued to be controlled by blacks, the temper of the times brought in greater white participation. Bi-racial committees were organized in New York and Boston with the participation of well-known anti-slavery whites like Samuel Gridley Howe, Issac T. Hopper, Garrt Smith, Stephen Myers and others.

The most complex organized effort in rescuing slaves, the so-called Underground Railroad, was a largely black operation. This network of formal and informal agents who used the terminology of the railroads in organizing themselves were instrumental in aiding the efforts of thousands of blacks in escaping from slavery. While whites like Levi Coffin, Thomas Garrett and Alexander K. Ross were well-known subsequently for their work in the Railroad, the work of thousands of blacks who helped in feeding, clothing and sheltering black fugitives in various stages of their journey to freedom is relatively less known.

In Ohio, for example, the Underground Railroad network was run largely by blacks. The Minutes of an Underground Convention in Ohio show how the organization functioned as a general convention as well. Thus, "missionaries" were appointed

19 Ibid., pp. 153-4.
to work in various Ohio counties to keep track of the social and economic condition of the black community. David Jenkins, a black man and a former emigrationist, presiding over the Convention, drew up an "Address" to Ohio blacks. The Address noted that blacks needed to secure education to pull themselves out of their menial occupations. Noting that whites were "closing every avenue" to blacks and trying to push them out to Liberia, the "Address" called on blacks to realize that they must find their place in American society itself.

A prominent "station master" of the Underground Railroad was John W. Jones. Jones was himself an escaped slave, having escaped bondage in 1844 at the age of 27. He settled down in Elmira, N.Y., where he was soon appointed sexton of the First Baptist Church. From 1850 onwards, Jones was an active underground agent, covering the areas of Central and Western New York State. Tendai Mutunhu has estimated that in the decade 1850-60, Jones helped over 1,000 fugitives to escape slavery.

While William Still was the best known agent based in Philadelphia, Frederick Douglass, George T. Downing, Robert Morris, Robert Purvis, Charles B. Ray, William Whipper, William

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C. Hall, Charles H. Bustill and Charles L. Reason were some of the black leaders associated with the Railroad's operations.

The work of Harriet Tubman in going to slave country itself to bring out fugitives was legendary. Singlehandedly she brought out over 200 fugitives from the South. Hundreds of ordinary blacks provided food and shelter to the escapees, and then sent them through a chain of "stations" northwards, to freedom. It was difficult for pursuers to find escapees once they merged with an actively sympathetic free black community in the North. This work was also helped by the Vigilance Committees set up by blacks. Men like Still and Loguen, besides being Underground Railroad agents, were also members of the Vigilance Committee in their respective communities.

Douglass' Split with the Garrisonians

The events following the debates on the Gilemot Proviso and the Compromise of 1850 resulting in the Fugitive Slave Law was to have a traumatic impact on most black leaders including Frederick Douglass. By 1851, Douglass officially broke with the Garrisonians on the issue of the efficacy of political


26 Still, n. 13; an indication of the nature of the underground that functioned within the black community can be gleaned from letters published as "Documents" in the *Journal of Negro History*, vol. 11, no. 1, January 1926, pp. 95-175.
action. In his autobiography, Douglass ascribed this change of heart to several reasons. He said that his increasing activities brought him into contact with many non-Garrisonian abolitionists who led him to "rethink the whole subject" of the Garrisonian idea that the American Constitution was a proslavery document. His meeting with John Brown in Springfield, Mass., in 1847 was another important factor. Equally important was Douglass' participation in the Free Soil Party Convention in 1848. Here he was able to detect a broader current of anti-slavery feeling that was to sweep the North in the ensuing decade.

It is clear that even before the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, a spirit of militancy was growing in Douglass' attitude. At Faneuil Hall in Boston in June 1849, Douglass closed a lengthy address with the remark that he would welcome any news of a slave insurrection from the South. He declared that a state of war existed in the South. For one who had successfully stalled the acceptance of Gannett's "Address to the Slaves" by the Buffalo Convention in 1843, Douglass' assertion seemed a virtual turn-around. Nevertheless, it would be safer to view the remark in the context of Douglass' ever-present posture of flexibility in respect of the tactics in the struggle for black liberation.

Douglass clashed frontally with the Garrisonians at a


meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society at Rochester in May 1852. Douglass had to defend himself against charges that he had changed his stand on the Constitution and that he had published a journal which was not antislavery but political in content. The conflict became evident in 1853 when Douglass attacked the Garrisonians but reserved his harshest invective for the black Garrisonians, Robert Purvis, William C. Nell and Charles Lenox Reid, whom he termed as the "practical enemies of the colored people." He brushed aside Nell as a "contemptible tool" and derided Purvis for his "blood-stained riches." 29 The Garrisonian counter-attack on Douglass was equally bitter. The episode marked the final break between Douglass and his former mentors who now considered him a principal enemy of the anti-slavery cause.

The Garrisonians were bitter about Douglass' growing independence. The attempts to show Douglass as a puppet of Gerrit Smith or Julia Griffith indicated their line of thinking. However, Douglass' activities in the National Convention of blacks at Rochester, just before this bitter tirade occurred, indicates that he was already firm in the direction in which he


30 For Garrison's counterblast see "Documents," ibid., pp. 380-2. See also Foner, n. 2, pp. 144-6.
had chosen to move. Douglass subsequently maintained that the
gulf between blacks and the Garrisonian American Anti-Slavery
Society arose out of an "unconscious" conviction held by members
of that society "that we [blacks] are inferior." This he
ascribed to the "Anglo-Saxon pride of race," which not even anti-
slavery convictions had been able to obliterate.

Black Nationalism: The Rochester Convention

The National Convention of blacks held in 1853 at Rochester
was, in a sense, "Frederick Douglass' "show". However, as a
mark of the times of the crisis, the Convention reflected remark­
able unity among blacks from all over the North. Not since 1835
had there been such an assemblage of black leadership. James
McCune Smith presided over the Convention which was attended by,
among others, J.W.C. Pennington, William J. Lilson who wrote as
"Ethiop" in Frederick Douglass' Paper, William H. Day, Peter H.
Clark, Charles and John Langston, Amos Gerry Bennan, William C.
Bell, Charles Lenox Remond, William Whipper, John B. Vashon,

The most important item on the agenda of the Convention was a
proposal to establish a National Council to supervise and co­
ordinate black efforts of attaining freedom and equality. The

31 Frederick Douglass' Paper, 18 May 1855 in Foner n. 8,
vol. 5, p. 531; see also Tyrone Tillery, "The Inevi­
tability of the Douglass-Garrison Conflict," Phylon,

32 Foner, n. 2, pp. 119-28; Howard H. Bell, A Survey of the
proposal was the outcome of Douglass' longstanding call for a National League.

At the end of 1852, Douglass had come up with the proposal for a Manual Labour School to help blacks to become skilled labourers. In the Rochester Convention, the proposal became the focus of a debate between Raymond and George T. Downing who opposed the idea, and Douglass, McCune Smith and J. M. C. Pennington. The debate was along the old lines of racially segregated versus integrated institutions, with Douglass believing that the crisis was too acute to follow a policy of fighting for desegregated institutions. Douglass' views were outlined in a letter to Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe who had agreed to sponsor such an institution.

To put these and other ideas into practice, a National Council of the Colored People was set up, consisting of two members each from ten states which would themselves be organized into state councils. The four committees set up by the Council were involved with every aspect of black life, a committee for Manual Training, a Publication and Protective Union to function as a cooperative, a Committee of Business Relationships which would act as an employment, business intelligence and promotional agency, and an arbitration court for groups of up to 3,000 blacks as a means of resolving disputes without recourse to American

33 See Douglass call for a National League to develop a cohesive organization for blacks to guide and control the community. Foner, n. s., vol. I, pp. 399-401.

law courts.

It was an ambitious program but it failed to take off. Mrs. Stowe backed out from funding the Manual Labour School. Nevertheless, the Rochester Convention marked a new departure of black thought. The Convention provided a platform to a large number of black leaders to voice their agreement on certain matters -- firstly, that the blacks were a distinct group within the United States with distinct "national" interests and secondly, that those interests could primarily be served by blacks acting in unity through separate racial institutions.

The presence in the Convention of James K. Whitfield, William C. Monroe and the Rev. A.M. Green, close associates of Delany, underlined the united attitude of the blacks on this issue. The Convention was, of course, aware of the moves afoot by the emigrationists to float a National Convention. Thus the outlook of the Convention must be seen as a firm statement of the idea that blacks were, and intended to remain, American citizens, who were deprived of their just rights and were committed to struggle for gaining them.

The "Address" of the Convention was in the form of a petition for the granting of all the rights of citizenship, legal and social and was signed by Frederick Douglass, James K. Whitfield, Henry O. Wagoner, A.M. Freeman and George B. Vashon.

35 National Anti-Slavery Standard, 30 July 1853; Foner, n. 5, vol. II, pp. 32-33; and Bell, n. 32, p. 168.

The idea of the National League or National Council was an important manifestation of the growing black nationalism. The fact that a segment of this feeling was emigrationist did not blur the essential unity of both these trends. The ideas underlying the National Council were those of separatism, but, as articulated by Douglass, it was a separatism that had been forced on blacks. William J. Watkins, assistant editor of Frederick Douglass' Paper was to make this point in his debate with James Whitfield when he pointed out that the black destiny was to remain in America. He noted "we will not willingly segregate ourselves" and do so only as a last resort. It is in this light that we can take Douglass' earlier statement to a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society that "I have no patriotism, I have no country." This statement, he subsequently explained, was used as a tactic to "exhibit forcibly the glaring fact that the colored man is denied the rights and privileges of an American citizen."

Douglass, the most vehement integrationist, had come to the conclusion that separate institutions were necessary at certain levels of black activity. From the very foundation of the North Star, this trend in Douglass' thought was evident. His break with the Garrisonians was inevitable in the context of such a line of thought. Writing on the progress of equal school rights in 1855, Douglass made it clear that "we would not have our people support a colored school, or colored church, in those

places...in which there are no complexional distinctions..."

As Howard Bell has put it, the difference between the emigrationists and the integrationists "lies...in the choice of the area where they could work out their destiny than in a basic difference in the urge for a nationalistic cohesiveness in meeting their problems."

The response to the Rochester Convention was initially favourable. By the end of the year, auxiliary bodies had been established in Boston, Chicago, Albany, New York and several smaller Northern towns. Yet, by mid-1855, the Council idea died, "killed by parochial interests, personal bickerings, and insufficient theoretical underpinnings."

The Kansas-Nebraska Act

The turmoil that ensued after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act set the nation on the final stage of the slide towards the Civil War. The agitation against the measure was eventually to weld the entire North and North-west against the South. With respect to the theme of the present study it must


40 Pease and Pease, n. 9, pp. 153-5.

be noted that agitation on the Act concerned the blacks only peripherally. Violence in Kansas ranged Northern white settlers against white migrants from the South. The issue that was raised by the North was that any extension of slavery into the Territories was a blow to "free" white labour. They wanted no black slaves in the Territories and they thundered against the Southern slavocrats. That did not mean that they were ready to welcome the inflow of free blacks into the Territories or offer to treat them differently there than in the Northern states.

The aftermath of the Kansas-Nebraska Act was the split in the great Democratic Party that had dominated American politics for the previous twenty years. The Whig party which was strong in the North-east, went into a steady decline in the face of a movement calling for a united antislavery party. The disintegration of the two parties was accompanied by a "fusionist" movement which sought to unite the Free Soil Whigs, anti-Kansas-Nebraska Democrats and other smaller political segments into a single antislavery extension combination. This combination, arising spontaneously across the North, eventually found political expression as the Republican Party. By the very process of its birth, the Republican Party was arrayed against the

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South, and as such, represented a qualitative shift in favour of the antislavery movement. However, as pointed out earlier, the Kansas-Nebraska agitation ignored slavery where it already existed. Blacks were excluded from either participation or consideration by the movement. But the indirect benefit to the blacks was the widening and deepening antagonism in the North towards the South and the emergence of the Republican Party to pose a challenge to the South-dominated Democratic Party which had long held power in Washington, D.C.

The Dred Scott Decision

In 1857 a judgment by the United States Supreme Court aimed yet another hammer blow at the already fragile American political system—and a body blow at the black community. The judgment was rendered on a case brought before the Court by a black slave, Dred Scott, suing for freedom on the grounds that he had been carried from a slave state to a free Territory, had resided there for a period of time, and had then been taken back to servitude in a slave state.

In their judgment, Chief Justice Roger Taney and a majority of Supreme Court judges, ruled against Dred Scott. The actual judgment, however, had more to it than the mere denial of freedom to a slave. The judgment declared that blacks could not be considered citizens of the United States, and further,

43 Kevins, ibid., pp. 341-6.
that Congress could not legislate against slavery in the Territories. The decision invalidated the Missouri Compromise and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Court had handed out a judgment that, in effect, proclaimed that the Republican Party's main plank of halting of extension of slavery into the Territories would be contrary to the Constitution.

A decision of such a sweeping nature, declaring that slavery had no national limitation, pitted the Supreme Court against the political currents that were gathering momentum in the North. Throughout the North the judgment was considered partisan. William Henry Seward, one of the most prominent Republican politicians declared it to be the result of a conspiracy between the new Democratic President-elect James Buchanan and Chief Justice Taney. The legislature of New York state, Massachusetts, Maine, Connecticut, Rhode Island and Vermont condemned the decision. It is to be noted that critics tended to downplay the question of the denial of the right of citizenship to blacks. What excited them profoundly were the provisions nullifying the Missouri Compromise. In the ensuing months, the

sections of the judgment distasteful to the North became the rallying cry of the Republican Party, sworn to protect the North from the blighting presence of the slave black.

For the black community, the Dred Scott decision seemed to have appalling consequences. It categorically declared that blacks could not be recognized as citizens either in retrospect or prospect. Free blacks, who had few enough rights as such, were outraged at the manner in which their race had been dealt with. While their enslaved brethren were treated as chattel, by the judgment, it also implied that they could never, under the existing Constitution, become citizens.

Shocked by the decision black leaders held numerous meetings to denounce it. Though the tone of black militancy reached an even greater intensity, blacks could not fail to take note of the near-unanimous condemnation of the decision by the whites throughout the North. For the first time, in American history, the issue of slavery, in some form or other, had become a concern of the white population at large. The focus of Northern anger was slavery extension—and the threat of slavocracy. Blacks could see that on the question of the rejection of their citizenship rights there was comparatively less indignation among their Northern neighbours. Black leaders, including those who had hitherto been committed to one or the other form of peaceful protest, denounced the Court's decision with a single voice.

At a meeting at a church in Philadelphia, Robert Purvis declared that he could maintain no allegiance to a government based on the premise that a black man had "no rights that a white
man need respect." Charles Lenox Remond called for the establishment of a committee to prepare an "address" calling on slaves to rebel at a Convention of blacks of New England. The proposal was vetoed down by others who advocated a more sober response. The issue also figured at a meeting held at Faneuil Hall on 5 March 1858 to celebrate Crispus Attucks Day. In attendance were a galaxy of Garrisonians--Theodore Parker, Wendell Phillips, William C. Nell, John S. Rock, Charlotte Forten and Garrison himself. That moral suasionists had rallied to honour a black man who had fought and died for American Independence indicated the changed temper of the times.

John J. Rock delivered one of his most militant speeches at the Boston meeting. Rejecting imputations of the black cowardice, he declared that "sooner or later the clashing of arms will be heard in this country and the black man's services will be needed." There was, in spite of the militancy, a general feeling of helplessness. It was this feeling which prompted Josiah Henson to oppose Remond's call for a slave rebellion. Henson maintained that the circumstances were by no means propitious for such a course. Charles Langston, in a

46 *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 13 April 1857.


letter to Salmon P. Chase, voiced the utter powerlessness of blacks in the face of the new assault on the status of blacks in America. 49

There were, however, other blacks who, in viewing the decision, were not too perturbed. James McCune Smith pointed out that the decision was primarily a political and a sectional measure and had little to do with law. It was best for blacks, he argued, to help strengthen those political tendencies which opposed the decision and would eventually nullify its provisions. This was an implicit endorsement of the Republican Party. 50

Frederick Douglass, similarly saw the decision in its wider context. While he condemned the decision, he pointed to the immense propaganda value of so gross a miscarriage of justice. Echoing spokesman of the Republican Party, Douglass projected the decision as an example of the aggressive designs of the slave South. He went on to assert that "the nature of the American Government, the Constitution; and the tendencies of the age" would nullify the Dred Scott decision. 51 By extending support to the white critics of the Court's decision, and by aligning themselves with the "tendencies of the age"--the Republican movement, blacks hoped to advance their cause.

49 Charles Langston et al., to Salmon P. Chase, cited in Pease and Pease, n. 9, p. 241.


Frederick Douglass and the American Mainstream

In the period following the Rochester Convention, Douglass maintained his views on the efficacy of political action as well as those of promoting a black racial identity. He continuously exhorted blacks to elevate themselves through their own efforts. Towards this end, he appealed to black leaders like Samuel Ringgold Ward, Henry K. Garnet, Alexander Grummell to come back to the United States and help in this endeavour. Douglass' influence increased tremendously in the 1850s. In spite of his opposition to emigration, Douglass maintained his commitment to black racial solidarity. In line with the trends indicating a greater self-assertion of blacks, Douglass had broken from the Garrisonians. Now he began to lay stress on the record of black efforts. Speaking before Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society on "The Anti-Slavery Movement," he pointed out that black efforts for abolition had preceded the Garrisonian movement.

Douglass himself saw the Liberty Party as "the only abolition organization in the country." He differentiated it from other parties in that it not only opposed slavery, but affirmed the positive duty of the Federal Government to bring about the abolition of slavery. This he contrasted with the negative Garrisonian position of seeking a dissolution of the


Union, which, Douglass maintained, would not benefit the slaves. He hammered home this point later in the year in answer to "U.B.," noting that any dissolution of the Union would imperil the slaves. Douglass assured the position that slavery was not justified by the Constitution and, as such, was illegal. His activity was not directed towards legislating the end of slavery, but having Congress "provide all necessary means in having this principle (of the illegality of slavery) carried out in practice."

Thus, Douglass was quick to applaud steps which worked towards the upliftment of blacks through, if necessary, political action. Commenting on a petition by Pennsylvania blacks for reenfranchisement, Douglass cited the achievement of the blacks of that state noted by the petition. The petition showed Philadelphia blacks owning substantial property and active in business and agriculture. Douglass noted, "we will doggedly persist in remaining here, we will buy houses and lands, and we will not leave for Africa."

Similarly, Douglass saw in the success of the agitation for desegregating Boston schools as another nail in the coffin of prejudice. While he clearly spelled out his opposition to "exclusive organizations among" blacks where they were not necessary, they could be acceptable only under "certain exigencies."


55 Ibid., pp. 353-4.

56 *Frederick Douglass' Paper, 20 April 1866*, ibid., vol. V, pp. 345-7; *Bell, n. 32*, p. 185.

While Douglass advocated political action to attain equality, other counsels were not wanting. Though Delany and the emigrationists were completely alienated from the American political process, others, often less optimistic, were confused. This was evident from the reply received from Samuel Golden in the columns of the Christian Recorder when he advocated petitioning the powers that be "firmly, but calmly," for equal rights.

Johnson Woodlin criticized Golden, and drew a different lesson from the political processes of the time. He cogently argued that all legislatures were amenable to pressure from those who had "direct or indirect(ly)" control of the legislature. Blacks being outside the political process could hardly expect such legislatures to heed them. He declared pessimistically: "The idea of our political elevation in the United States seems to us but little more than vanity." Woodlin's assessment was that "the basis of our political elevation is yet to be laid."

Douglass' arguments display his sagacity and foresight. With the true qualities of leadership, he sought to analyze the long-term impact of policies that might appear to have adverse short-term effects. Douglass could not but be aware that the Northern black community had a substantive economic stake in the United States which would not permit the blacks to easily participate in any voluntary mass migration. To a considerable extent he was able, with the help of his influential newspaper, to stem the tide of emigrationist ideas. But what was of importance was the real and demonstrated reluctance of free blacks to leave

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59 Christian Recorder, 16 September 1856 and 18 October 1856.
the United States.

Douglass in the mid-1850s, was at the height of his influence within the black community. He was tireless in his work, travelling four to five thousand miles in one winter, as he wrote to Mrs. Tappan, lecturing and agitating and trying to rally the black community.  

The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, added more turbulence to the already unsettled conditions of American political life. This Act was to lead to the foundation of the Republican Party. A broad anti-South alignment of Democrats, Whigs, Free Soilers and Abolitionists formed the core of this grouping. Its' anti-South alignment, though not extending to calling for the abolition of slavery, halted at a call to prevent its extension. Nevertheless, it was a step forward, and leaders like Frederick Douglass were quick to see it.

Douglass personally stuck it out with the Liberty Party till the middle of 1856, coming close to being nominated for Vice-Presidency in the Liberty Party Convention that year. He then abruptly switched to the support of the Republican Party and its nominees, John C. Fremont and William L. Dayton. This change itself was indicative of Douglass' flexibility in taking stands which he thought would further the black cause. Douglass


60 Speaking at the Convention, Douglass had held forth on the danger of the Republican movement, just weeks away from his endorsement of the Republican nominees. The Radical Abolitionist cited in Foner, n. 5, vol. V, pp. 385-90.
argued through the columns of his paper that while the Republicans did not espouse abolition, he would work within the party, to press them forward towards it. Douglass' political acumen in recognizing the broad current of political opinion represented by the Republicans in 1856 was remarkable. He mixed pragmatism with far-sightedness when he declared:

From our political philosophy, we are at liberty to consider the state of the public mind; and to look at immediate results, as well as remote consequences...it is our indispensable duty to cast our vote in that direction, which upon survey of the whole facts in the case, will best promote that great end. (62)

Though Frémont lost the election, the rise of the Republican Party had been phenomenal. Frémont lost by just 500,000 popular votes and considering the fact that the Republicans were barely two years old, it indicated a qualitative shift in American political alignments. Douglass was perceptive enough to see it and courageous enough to change his stand at the cost of alienating his colleagues and indeed his financial backers like Gerrit Smith, who stuck with the Liberty Party.

Douglass outlined his tactics to Gerrit Smith when he noted that "we have turned Whigs and Democrats into Republicans and we can turn Republicans into Abolitionists." Subsequent events were to prove him right. Douglass always retained his faith in the efficacy of political action subsequently. In one


62 Cited in Foner, n. 2, pp. 84-85.

63 Ibid.
case, he bitterly criticized Horace Greeley who advised blacks to avoid agitating for their rights as it would harm their interests and to concentrate instead on their economic upliftment. Douglass noted that while Greeley advocated agitation against the anti-Irish movement and for women's rights, he had no right to ask blacks to use other methods.

Douglass' efforts to influence the mainstream of American politics was not singlehanded. He was following a policy undertaken by a number of prominent black leaders who worked quietly in a similar direction. There were those like Stephen Pyers, a "station master" in the Underground Railroad, who used his location in Albany, N.Y. to lobby amongst New York State Congressmen to revoke property qualifications on black franchise in New York as well as to oppose any financial support to the Colonization Society.

Henry Highland Garnet on his return on the United States after a six-year period of self-exile (1849-1855), resumed his pastoral work in the Shiloh Presbyterian Church in New York, as well as his earlier alignment with the Liberty Party and the Radical Abolitionists. While Douglass bolted from the Liberty Party in September 1856 and carried the New York State Suffrage Association with him, Garnet maintained his support to the Radical Abolitionists. Though never very active politically, in the 1858 gubernatorial elections, Garnet supported Gerrit Smith,

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64 Frederick Douglass' Paper, 24 August 1855, 5 October 1855, Foner, n. 5, vol. II, pp. 367-77.
the Liberty Party candidate.

Unlike Garnet, Douglass was a completely political man. Besides arguing for a closer association of antislavery men with the Liberty Party and later the Republican Party, Douglass continued to address the black community as well. He criticized the black community for failing to perceive its best interests in the political turmoil of the time. Douglass railed against fellow blacks who were content to stagnate in "masterly inactivity" in the face of a movement "by which our rights will be determined." He called on the black community to join wholeheartedly in the struggle to attain equal rights by using their right to petition, the right of press and free speech.

While Douglass, Garnet, James McCune Smith and others could still see the efficacy of political action, some other black voices sounded a more militant note, reflecting disillusionment with the tactics of moral suasion and peaceful remonstrance. Speaking at the meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in May 1857, William Wells Brown stated that he could not be restrained from wishing a "general insurrection" even at the cost of a million lives. He glorified the achievement of the blacks of Santo Domingo, who had proved that blacks were not docile. The more potent cause of anger was, of course, the


68 National Anti-Slavery Standard, 23 May 1857.
Dred Scott decision placing all blacks outside the pale of United States citizenship rights.

The Ohio State Convention of 1858 endorsed "the right and duty of resistance by force of arms, when it was feasible."

The publication of William C. Nell's *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* in 1855, served to stimulate black assertiveness. Nell himself was a confirmed Garrisonian, but his work was the first scholarly historical work by a black that attempted to link up the identity of blacks with the very foundation of the United States.

In the first part of his book, Nell dwelt on the contribution of Crispus Attucks, the first casualty of the American Revolution, and other patriots. He then portrayed the achievements of Phyllis Wheatly, Paul Cuffe, Benjamin Banneker and a host of other blacks whose lives were inextricably linked with American history. Nell made a state-by-state analysis of the contributions of blacks to American life. He pointed to the careers of James Forten, John B. Vashon and other black abolitionists of the 1820s and 1830s. Significantly he pointed to the work of David Walker and gave accounts of the slave insurrections led by Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. Nell sought thus to inculcate a sense of "self-respect and confidence" among blacks.

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69 Cited in Pease and Pease, n. 9, p. 243.

70 William C. Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution with Sketches of Several Distinguished Colored Persons: to which is added a brief survey of the Condition and Prospects of Colored Americans* (Boston: Robert F. Wallcut, 1855). The first part was published as a pamphlet in 1851.
Bell's work marked the trend towards demanding equal rights on more positive grounds than had earlier been adduced. The entire thrust of his work was a more aggressive assertion of the black contribution to the American Republic.

Other black writing of the period reflected the theme of violence. Martin Delany's novel, Blake; or, the Huts of America had a message of insurrection, indeed, race war against the whites. His principal character Blake declares at one point: "I am for war--war upon the whites." This novel, written sometime in the 1850s, appeared first in The Anglo-African Magazine and later in the Weekly Anglo-African. Similarly, The Anglo-African Magazine published an account of the Nat Turner uprising in its November 1859 issue—the very month John Brown was executed.

Another barometer of black militancy in the 1850s was the attempt by blacks to form their own militias. State laws in the North and the South barred blacks from participating in military service. The Rochester National Convention had, in July 1853, protested against "all laws and usages which proclude the enrolment of colored men in the militia." In Massachusetts, 65

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72 "Address of the Colored National Convention to the People of the United States," in Aptheker, n. 9, p. 346.
blacks drew up a petition protesting their exclusion from the state militia and requesting permission to form an independent military company. William J. Watkins and others who signed this petition, argued that blacks had fought and shed blood for America in 1776 and 1812. The petition was rejected, but Boston blacks went ahead and formed their own company, furnishing their own arms. There were already such units in New York and Cincinnati and blacks in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania organized the "Henry Highland Garnet Guards."

John Brown's Raid

As the nation was convulsed by the angry agitation over the Dred Scott decision, there took place the raid on the Federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, by John Brown and his band of black and white followers. The failure of the raid and the subsequent trial and execution of John Brown made him, in the eyes of the many black leaders he had known and befriended, a true martyr in the cause of freedom and equality for blacks.

The Kansas strife contributed in a different way to the development of the black movement. This was in shaping the ideas of John Brown. It was in Brown's experience of the armed conflict against pro-Southern settlers, a struggle that cost him a son, that Brown shaped his ideas about the feasibility of a black armed revolt. Brown first set about obtaining funds from

73 Ibid., pp. 357-9; Quarles, n. 11, pp. 69-70.

74 Filler, n. 42, pp. 250-1; for a frankly laudatory biography of Brown by a contemporary, see James Redpath, (footnote contd.)
his white admirers like Gerrit Smith, Thomas C. Higginson, George L. Stearns, and then to persuade black leaders like Douglass and Felony to join him. Most whites took Brown for a fanatic and an adventurer. He had his admirers in the New England elite like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas C. Higginson, John A. Andrus, the Civil War Governor of Massachusetts, Henry David Thoreau and Theodore Parker.

To blacks however, Brown represented the epitome of a hero. Blacks of all opinions were to find in John Brown’s actions, the ultimate commitment they could expect in a white man. Garrison, Phillips and other great white abolitionists commanded the respect of blacks. However, no other white man fired the imagination or received the unstinted praise of blacks as John Brown did. The reasons for this are apparent. When John Brown led his group to Harper’s Ferry to initiate a black slave revolt, black militancy in the North had reached a fever pitch—accompanied by a nagging feeling of helplessness. We have shown that even black Garrisonians like Purvis, Rosend, William Wells Brown and others began espousing a militant rhetoric that stopped barely short of giving a call for an armed insurrection. Pride and anger led another group of blacks like

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Sanborn, n. 74, pp. 492-517.
Delany, Holly, Whitfield to advocate a separate black nationality. Even Douglass, the most sagacious black leader, was compelled to point out that while people thought insurrections were prejudicial to blacks, it was not possible for blacks to ignore the fact that abolition had often followed insurrection, as in the West Indies.

Benjamin Quarles has pointed out how firm Brown's commitment was towards blacks even a decade prior to the Harper's Ferry Raid. He notes that while Brown's Pottawatomie "incident" was considered a "stain" on his record by many of his white admirers, blacks refused to see it that way. The whole perspective of black slavery and oppression argued against any "critical" assessment of a man who killed proslavery men because they were proslavery.

In the spring of 1858, Brown set about organizing a Convention at Chatham, Canada West. He drew up the plans for the Convention at Frederick Douglass' home at Rochester. Brown was in correspondence with a number of black leaders like Henry O. Wagoner, Jermain Loguen, Martin Delany, Garnet, George T. Downing,


77 Quarles, n. 11, pp. 34-35. Brown's influence on Frederick Douglass has been referred to earlier. Douglass ascribed his break with the Garrisonians to his meeting with John Brown, whose name Douglass notes, was only "whispered of" in the black community. Douglass also claimed that Brown's plan for a slave insurrection was described to him the night he spent with John Brown at his house in 1847. See, Douglass, n. 17, pp. 271-3.
James II. Gloucester—almost the entire range of black leaders at that time.

At the Chatham Convention, Brown presented his plans for the insurrection as well as for a provisional government to direct the revolt. The meeting was attended by 33 blacks and 12 whites. Martin Delany, now resident of Chatham, was instrumental in organizing the Convention and the Canadian blacks comprised the bulk of the black contingent. Present at the Convention besides Delany, were Israel Shadd, publisher of the Provincial Freeman, William C. Monroe, William Lambert and James E. Bell, along with several less prominent personalities. Significantly, Frederick Douglass, Jermain Loguen and Charles Lenox Remond chose to absent themselves though invited. It seems that the national emigrationists like Delany and Monroe, alienated from the possibility of non-violent liberation, were prepared to hear what John Brown had to say.

The proceedings of the Convention were lively, and on the second day, a President and a Cabinet of a Provisional Government were decided upon. Though none of the executive posts went to the blacks, each of the orders were signed by William C. Monroe who had presided over the National Emigration Convention in 1854. Osborne P. Anderson, who worked at the Provincial Freeman, and Alfred H. Ellsworth were elected members of a

78 Quarles, n. 11, pp. 33-39.
79 Ibid., pp. 43-45; see also Victor Ullman, Martin J. Delany: The Beginnings of Black Nationalism (Boston, 1971), pp. 195-200. In his autobiography cited above, Douglass makes no mention of the invitation, however.
projected Congress.

A period of 18 months was to elapse between the Convention and the actual raid. Of the blacks who attended the Convention, only Anderson was to follow Brown to Harper's Ferry. Dolany and Monroe had left for Africa and the other Canadian blacks, frustrated by the delay, had lost interest. At this time, Brown was wandering from Kansas to the East, trying to raise funds to launch his insurrection. It is possible that while admiring Brown's dedication, blacks were skeptical of the prospect of success in the venture. Brown did not receive much support from other Northern blacks as well. Henry Highland Garnet felt that the time was not opportune for such a revolt. Douglass met Brown twice in the period between the Convention and the raid. In spite of the latter's fervent appeals, Douglass did not join him. He instead favoured guerrilla activity in the South but was opposed to the specific plan that involved the capture of Harper's Ferry. Besides, as Douglass wrote later, he was unconvinced of the feasibility of Brown's plans. This, as Dubois pointed out, in fact, reflected the majority opinion of the black community. Besides, it has been suggested that a

80 Quarles, n. 11, p. 49; Dubois, n. 75, pp. 259-65.
81 Quarles, n. 11, pp. 74-75.
82 See Jane and William E. Pease, n. 9, p. 247; Frederick Douglass, n. 17, pp. 317-9; Dubois, n. 75, p. 344 and Quarles, n. 11, pp. 76-79; see also Leslie Friedman Goldstein, "Violence as an Instrument for Social Change: The Views of Frederick Douglass (1817-1895)," Journal of Negro History, vol. 61, no. 1, January 1976, pp. 70-71.
large number of militant black leaders in the North—men like Garnet, Jermain Loguen, James H. Gloucester, Daniel A. Payne and J.W.C. Pennington—were clergymen, who were not likely to join a raiding party. Loguen and Gloucester, however, did make considerable efforts helping Brown to recruit blacks.

Quarles poses the question of why Northern blacks refrained from active association with Brown's enterprise despite their militant rhetoric. He suggests espousal of violence was often employed as a threat rather than a plan of contemplated action. Brown himself may have failed to comprehend their stand. In a period of rhetorical calls to violence, Brown might have been led to believe that blacks were ready for an enterprise such as his.

The Impact of John Brown's Raid on the Black Community of the North

Brown's execution aroused profound grief among blacks. Like white abolitionists, blacks celebrated Brown as a martyr. Across the North, meetings were held praising John Brown. Blacks, however, had to be careful lest their unstinted praise for Brown be mistaken for insurrectionary behaviour. Thus, a

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83 Quarles, n. 11, p. 75; James H. Gloucester to John Brown, 19 February 1858 and 9 March 1858 in Benjamin Quarles, ed., Blacks on John Brown (Urbana, Ill., 1972), pp. 3-5.

84 Ibid., pp. 83-84. There has, however, been speculation that the black underground, i.e. the vigilance groups and the Underground Railroad was to be involved in the enterprise. This cannot, however, be ascertained to be a fact so far. See Lurpkin, n. 18, pp. 71-77.
meeting in Providence, R.I., while deploring violence, called
Brown "a hero, philanthropist and unflinching champion of
liberty." Nevertheless, bolder blacks of the local antislavery
society, warned Americans to heed the lesson of "Insurrection"
taught at Harper's Ferry.

In jail awaiting execution, Brown received letters from
blacks, individuals and groups. A group of blacks in Chicago
expressed deep sympathy for him. The letter signed by Henry O.
Wagoner and others promised to do all for the family "of one who
has suffered, bled, and now ready to die for the
cause."

Frances Ellen Watkins wrote a letter in "the name of a
young girl sold from the warm clasp of a mother's arms," to the
man who had "rocked the bloody Bastille." She, too, promised to
help Brown's wife and the dependants of all those captured with
him.

Black women from Brooklyn recognized Brown as the "savior
commissioned to redeem" the blacks and indeed all the Americans.
For most blacks Brown's act was a reaffirmation of hope that
blacks could yet gain equality in white America, "an unexpected
realization of some of our seemingly vain hopes." The black

85 Weekly Anglo-African, 19 November 1859; and cited in
Pease and Pease, n. 9, p. 248.
86 "From the Colored Citizens of Chicago to John Brown,
17 November 1859," in "Documents" in the Journal of
Negro History, vol. 10, no. 4, October 1925, p. 772.
87 Frances Ellen Watkins to John Brown, 25 November 1859,
ibid., pp. 772-3.
88 "I.S.J.T." on behalf of the Colored Women of Brooklyn
to John Brown, 26 November 1859, ibid., pp. 773-4.
women of New York also wrote to John Brown's wife to promise her the little they could for the dependants of one "whom they felt had offered up his life for the "God given rights" of blacks."

For Frederick Douglass the immediate consequence of raid was to necessitate his fleeing to Canada, across the river from his home in Rochester. Aware of the black complicity in the plot he was afraid that a witch-hunt would be launched against all blacks who were active in the abolitionist movement in the North. Though Douglass was criticized by some for this action, he was justified in his course as the Governor of his state, New York, pressed the state prosecutor to indict Douglass.

Douglass outlined his stand in a long letter to the Rochester Democrat on 31 October 1859. He offered fulsome praise to Brown but denied that he himself was in any way involved with the raid. Maintaining that every man could work for the cause of abolition in his own way, he noted that Brown was the man who had shaken the very foundations of the United States and the filled the Slavocrats with dread. Douglass pointed out later, and rightly so, that in the Virginia courts, even if his innocence of complicity in the raid was established, his association with Brown would have been enough to hang him.

Charles H. Langston who, too, had been approached to participate in the raid, took the precautionary step of publicly


90 Quarles, n. 83, p. 115.
dissociating himself from Brown's actions. However, he praised Brown in the same letter, written to a Cleveland newspaper, maintaining that Brown had acted out of the highest principles of Christianity and justified by the traditions of the American Revolution. He declared that he could not deny the deepest sympathy for Brown but, however, he would deny any complicity on his own part in the raid.

On the day of John Brown's execution, meetings were held all across the North in all the black communities. For blacks, Brown had become a saint. Even where white abolitionists had organized meetings, blacks predominated. In Boston's Tremont Temple, a mammoth meeting attended by Garrison and other New England abolitionists, the Rev. J. Bells Martin, the black pastor of Joy Street Baptist Church, compared John Brown to Biblical heroes like John the Baptist. Martin noted that in spite of criticism of Brown's adopting violent means, he himself was willing to justify violent means for ends sanctioned by "Christian Principle." As Martin put it, Brown had carried out a programme similar to the one undertaken by the Revolutionary leaders, but this time "for the black man." At another meeting in Boston at the same time, Charles Lenox Remond, William C. Nell

91 Frederick Douglass, 'Monthly, November 1859, Douglass, n. 17, pp. 320-1. Douglass had also planned a visit to England in the autumn of 1859. A notice to this effect had been published earlier. See the Weekly Anglo-African, 10 September 1859.

92 Quarles, ed., n. 83, pp. 75-76; C.R. Langston to the Cleveland Plain Dealer, 18 November 1859 in Quarles, n. 11, pp. 11-15.
and others led the black community in a continuous prayer meeting singing antislavery songs.

The meeting in Detroit was held in the Second Baptist Church and presided over by William Lambert, a participant of the Chatham meeting of 1857. The meeting consisted of prayers and singing of antislavery songs. After that, Lambert moved a resolution hailing Brown for causing the South "to tremble with a moral earthquake." Calling Brown the blacks' "first disinterested martyr," the resolution called upon blacks to fan the flames of liberty "until the proper time."

Meetings similar to this were held in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, New York and even in Montreal. The theme of the meetings was similar. For the first time the black community found itself relating to the deeds of a white man. Behind this identification lay their own hopes and increasing frustrations in which Brown's venture gave a boost to the black morale.

John Brown's conduct between the period of his capture and execution caught up the moral imagination of the North. The picture of a patriarch-like figure evoking God's name against slavery was powerful imagery for the North already primed by the intensely anti-Southern propaganda of the previous years.

Abolitionists of all creeds effusively canonized Brown and threw their moral suasionism to the winds. Northern

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93 Speech of J. Sella Martin, in Quarles, ed., n. 83, pp. 25-31; and Quarles, n. 11, p. 126.
95 Quarles, n. 11, pp. 128-31.
intellectuals like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Henry David Thoreau and others joined the abolitionists like Garrison and Phillips in viewing John Brown's actions as the expression of God's own will. A sudden outpouring of militant literature was visible from the abolitionist press. The Garrisonian American Anti-Slavery Society published a tract on the major slave insurrections in America. The *Anglo-African Magazine*, black owned and edited, published an account of the Nat Turner revolt in November 1859. The *Atlantic Monthly* published an account of the Denmark Vesey revolt. Talk of slave revolts no longer seemed taboo in the moral suasionist abolitionist circles, indeed, insurrection was evoked as God's ultimate wrath against the slave-holders.

Northern politicians sought to dismiss Brown as a madman. They pointed out the fact that there was, in fact, no slave uprising as indicative of the lack of support for Brown. Nevertheless, there was almost total unanimity in the admiration, if not support for Brown among various circles of moderate and even conservative whites in the North.

Just as the North rallied around Brown, the South was united in its condemnation for Brown as well as all abolitionists. The South viewed the scenes of mourning for Brown in the North,


97 Quarles, n. 83, pp. 152-3; The *Anglo-African Magazine*, vol. I, no. 11, November 1859, pp. 386-97; and the *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 7, no. 6, June 1861, pp. 728-44.

98 Frederickson, n. 96, pp. 47-49.
as well as open display of support for him, as direct evidence of Northern, if not Republican complicity in the raid. A Congressional Committee set up to investigate the raid failed to come up with any evidence of a general Northern conspiracy. Nevertheless, Southern fears of a slave revolt aided and abetted by the North brought the nation to the brink of disunion.

The timing of John Brown's raid and its subsequent denouement is significant. 1860 was to be the election year. The turbulence created by the raid was not allowed to subside in the following months. With the beginning of the new session of Congress in 1860, a long and acrimonious struggle developed around the election of a Speaker for the House of Representatives. The two month long struggle ended in a partial victory for the Republicans. However, the issues thrown up in the wrangle, and the positions taken up by the various protagonists served to harden the lines of sectional division that would lead to a Civil War by the end of the year.