A Troubled Peace

1865: Beautiful, Cruel Year of Transition in the Black Struggle for Freedom

For African Americans in North and South alike, the Civil War had profound religious meaning from the beginning. Hundreds of thousands, writes Vincent Harding, "believed unwaveringly that their God moved in history to deliver his people, and they had been looking eagerly, praying hourly, waiting desperately for the glory of the coming of the Lord. For them, all the raucous, roaring guns of Charleston Harbor and Bull Run, of Antietam and Fort Pillow, of Shiloh and Murfreesboro and Richmond were the certain voice of God, announcing his judgment across the bloody stretches of the South, returning blood for blood to the black river." During the course of that war, African Americans believed, God did deliver them. He drove out the rebels and slaveholders, just as he had once driven out the Hittites and Canaanites. With the Confederacy's collapse, as one song went, "slavery chain done broke at last."

> *Slavery chain done broke at last!*
> *Broke at last! Broke at last!*
> *Slavery chain done broke at last!*
> *Gonna praise God till I die!*

Some reacted to their liberation with cautious elation. When a young Virginia woman heard her former masters weeping over the capture of Jefferson Davis, she went down to a spring alone and cried out, "Glory, glory, hallelujah to Jesus! I's free! I's free!" Suddenly afraid, she looked about. What if the white folks heard her? But seeing no one, she fell to the ground and kissed it, thanking "Master Jesus" over and over. For her, freedom meant hope—hope that she could find her husband and four children who had been sold to a slave trader.

Others celebrated their liberation in public. In Athens, Georgia, they danced around a liberty pole; in Charleston, they paraded through the streets. Many African Americans, however, were wary and uncertain. "You're joking me," one man said when the master told him he was free. He asked some neighbors if they were free also. "I couldn't believe we was all free alike," he said. Some African Americans, out of feelings of obligation or compassion, remained on the home place to help their former masters. But others were hostile. When a woman named Cady heard that the war was over, she decided to protest the cruel treatment she had suffered as a slave. She threw down her hoe, marched up to the big house, found the mistress, and flipped her dress up. She told the white woman, "Kiss my ass!"

For Cady, for the young black woman of Virginia, for hosts of other African Americans, freedom meant an end to the manifold evils of slavery; it meant the right to say

what they felt and go where they wanted. But what else did freedom mean to them? As black leaders of Charleston said, it meant that blacks should enjoy full citizenship, have the right to vote and run for political office. It meant federal protection from their former masters lest they attempt to revive slavery. And it meant economic security in the form of land, so that the blacks could exercise self-help and be economically independent of their former masters.

If the end of the war was a time of profound hope for black Americans, it was a monumental calamity for most southern whites. By turns, they were angry, helpless, vindictive, resigned, and heartsick. As we saw in "The Ravages of War" (selection 27), the Confederacy was devastated. Its towns and major cities, Richmond and Atlanta, were in rubble. Former rebel soldiers returning home found their farm and plantation houses ransacked and even burned down, their barns destroyed, their fields burned, and their livestock gone. As one historian says, "Many [white southerners] were already grieving over sons, plantations, and fortunes taken by war; losing their blacks was the final blow." Some masters shot or hanged African Americans who proclaimed their freedom. That was a harbinger of the years of Reconstruction, for most white southerners were certain that their cause had been just and were entirely unrepentant about fighting against the Union. A popular ballad captured the mood in postwar Dixie:

> *Oh, I'm a good ole Rebel, now that's just what I am*
> *For this fair land of freedom I do not care a damn.*
> *I'm glad I fit against it, I only wish't we'd won*
> *And I don't want no pardon for nothin' what I done. . . .*
>
> *I hates the Yankee nation and everything they do*
> *I hates the Declaration of Independence too*
> *I hates the glorious Union, 'tis dripping with our blood*
> *And I hate the striped banner, I fit it all I could. . . .*
>
> *I can't take up my musket and fight 'em now no mo'*
> *But I ain't gonna love 'em and that is certain sho'*
> *And I don't want no pardon for what I was and am*
> *And I won't be reconstructed and I don't care a damn.*

In Washington, Republican leaders were jubilant in victory and determined to deal firmly with southern whites in order to preserve the fruits of the war. But what about the new president, Andrew Johnson? A profane, hard-drinking Tennessee Democrat who bragged about his plebeian origins, Johnson had been the only southern senator to oppose secession openly. He had sided with the Union, served as war governor of Tennessee, and became Lincoln's running mate in 1864, on a Union ticket comprising both Republicans and War Democrats. As a result of the assassination of Lincoln, Johnson was now president, and he faced one of the most difficult tasks ever to confront an American

chief executive: how to bind the nation's wounds, preserve African American freedom, and restore the southern states to their proper places in the Union.

Lincoln had contemplated an army of occupation for the defeated South, thinking that military force might be necessary to protect the former slaves and prevent the old southern leadership from returning to power. Now there was such an army in the conquered rebel states, and a great number of these Union troops were black.

In the following selection, Vincent Harding, a scholar and civil rights activist who once wrote speeches for Martin Luther King, Jr., recounts the "beautiful and cruel" events of 1865 from the viewpoint of the former slaves. Instead of being passive and undeserving recipients of freedom (as an earlier generation of histories portrayed them), African Americans reached out and seized control of their destinies. As they set about defining and exercising freedom for themselves, federal black troops were present to protect them. It is an inspiring story, and Harding tells it in lyrical prose, described by one admirer as "the language of soul." Harding observes how President Johnson turned his back on the former slaves and adopted a reconstruction policy that was blatantly lenient toward ex-Confederate whites. And he relates how white leaders with Johnson's acquiescence, adopted infamous "black codes" that severely restricted the freedom of the former slaves. For the blacks, however, the first troubled year of peace ended joyously with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery in America formally and forever.

GLOSSARY

BLACKS AND BLUES   Following the Emancipation Proclamation, African American soldiers enlisted in large numbers in the Union army. They represented a significant percentage of the troops who occupied the South at war's end. Harding views their presence in the South as a symbol of hope for the freedmen. At the same time, many whites felt the "blacks and blues" might initiate unwanted changes in race relations.

BLACK CODES   Local laws that all but kept the freedmen in a state of servitude. They placed severe restrictions on the ownership of land and the ability of the former slaves to move freely in order to seek better jobs. Because these laws came from white southern governments that came into power under President Johnson's reconstruction plan, Harding calls them the "slave codes revived."

DELANY, MARTIN   A major in the Union army, Delany was the highest-ranking black soldier in the Union military during the Civil War. Throughout Reconstruction, he was an agent of the Freedmen's Bureau who urged the federal government to protect the former slaves by providing them with land.

FREEDMEN'S BUREAU   A congressional statute established this agency in March 1865. It attempted to provide food and schools for former slaves, helped them secure jobs, and make certain that they received fair wages.

GILMORE, QUINCY ADAMS   The Union commander in South Carolina who felt that African American troops encouraged insubordination among the freedmen. Like many northerners, he did not desire a dramatic change in race relations in the South.

GRANT, ULYSSES S.   This former Union general was president from 1869 to 1877 and did little to help the freedmen achieve true social,

political, or economic freedom. As the Civil War ended, he advised President Johnson to remove the African American troops from the South.

JOHNSON, ANDREW   President from 1865 to 1869 and a product of the poor white South, he had no sympathy for those who wanted to achieve true racial equality. He defied congressional reconstruction measures and was impeached for political reasons. By one vote, the Senate failed to convict him, but Johnson was virtually powerless after the impeachment proceedings.

KU KLUX KLAN   Following the Civil War, this paramilitary organization emerged in the South and used violence and intimidation to subdue the freedmen. As a result, Harding writes that "stories of shootings, burnings, drownings, hangings, and decapitations abounded."

PERRY, BENJAMIN F.   The governor of Georgia, he was an Andrew Johnson appointee who reflected the president's view that this "is a country for white men."

THIRTEENTH AMENDMENT (1865)   It ended slavery in the United States, but Harding concludes that its announcement "seemed passive, compressed, and strangely flat." Southern resistance to change and northern complacency would delay significant improvements in race relations for another one hundred years.

TURNER, NAT   He led a slave revolt in 1831 in southern Virginia that was the focus of selection 15 in volume 1. As the Civil War ended, Turner's violent uprising still worried whites in the South and helps explain, but not justify, the restraints they placed on the former slaves.

WALKER, DAVID   A free African American revolutionary who wrote the *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World,* a pamphlet that urged slaves to revolt.

My children, my little children, are singing to the sunshine.

W. E. B. Du Bois

VINCENT HARDING

When the first summer of freedom began, the children were still singing, children of promise, children of hope, singing to the sunshine: My country, my country, sweet land of liberty. Saint Helena children, Memphis children, Vicksburg children, Slabtown children, Boston children, Wilmington children, Southhampton County children, Harpers Ferry children, Dismal Swamp children, Plaquemine children, Christiana children, everywhere children, all God's children, singing to the sunshine. My country.

In the first summer of freedom, the children sang, standing on bloody ground, land where their fathers died, challenging history, transcending history, flowing with the river [of struggle] to overcome history, calling on the sunshine to remake history. Slavery's children, freedom's children, Nat Turner's children, Harriet Tubman's children, Frederick Douglass's children, children first seen in visions while mothers hung from the mast of a ship named *Jesus,* children of parents last heard singing above the ocean's roar, children born in swamps and caves, children of promise, children of hope, Sojourner's lost/found children, claiming a country by the power of their hope, by the strength of their innocence, by the warmth of their embrace, by the history of the river, drawing America to their breasts, singing to the healing sun, singing warmth and wholeness to a cold and broken land. "My children, my little children, are singing to the sunshine."

In that year of parades and conventions, in those days of celebration and anxiety, through all the anguish

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This material by Vincent Harding was excerpted from "Black Hope, Black Soldiers, and Black Codes" and "The Struggle Ends, the Struggle Begins" in *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*, copyright © 1981 by Vincent Harding. Reprinted by permission of Vincent Harding.

and joy of the crossing over, there were many times when black and white America's history was transcended and transformed, if only for a blazing moment in the sun. It may be that none of those brief periods of epiphany were more dramatic and widespread than the scores of occasions, especially in the South, when black people, led by their marching, singing soldiers, lay special claim to the Fourth of July. By the time of the Civil War, the white nation had already forgotten much of the revolutionary significance of this central but ambiguous national symbol. The mocking existence of

slavery, the bitter debates caused by it, the harsh reality of other sectional conflicts, and the emergence of various antilibertarian forces had all sucked the essence out of the symbol. Thus it was not easy for white people to hold the Fourth as a celebration of revolution and a memory of a struggle for freedom and independence. Up to that time, of course, the black people of the South had never had any reason to make such connections. Then came the war and the Emancipation Proclamation, accompanied by their own flooding toward freedom, as well as the promise of the Thirteenth Amendment, all of which marked the vital change. So in 1865, even while the nature and extent of their freedom were being argued and fought through a bloody transitional year, black communities across the South seized on this symbol of American freedom and made it their own, challenging history itself. Invariably, white citizens retreated even farther from the public celebrations, leaving the streets and the squares to the new "Americans of African descent."

Like their brothers and sisters elsewhere, the African-American community of Augusta, Georgia, called on the black troops stationed there to lead a procession of some four thousand marchers through the streets of the city on the Fourth. Among the participants was a contingent of black women who carried banners high in the summer's breeze, proclaiming "Freedom and equality is our motto" to a crowd of more than ten thousand. . . .

[A similar march, protected by black troops, took place in Louisville.] In any assessment of that freedom march through the streets of Louisville and many cities like it, the presence of the black infantry at the beginning and end of the line . . . must be understood as neither ornamental nor accidental. The black soldiers were present both as reminders of the cost their community paid in the Civil War, and as immediate guardians and leaders of this community as it set forth toward new life and freedom in the heart of a hostile, bitter, frightened white society. All through the chaotic year of transition the black soldiers were present, often playing the protective role, . . . as in

New Orleans, setting examples of protest and direct action. Frequently they were forced to move beyond marches, guard duty, and protest to engage in harsh, armed struggles on behalf of their people, for the sake of their own dignity. Indeed, those black men in blue are central to any proper understanding of the self-liberating movement of their emerging community in the year of jubilee. Only when we comprehend the meaning of their presence do we see the powerful potential for revolutionary transformation in the South which they represented. Only then can we sense the logic of the white Southerners who stood rigidly against that rushing black tide, and understand what was lost to the struggle when the black military vanguard was eventually removed.

By the time of Louisville's Fourth of July celebration, black troops comprised some thirteen percent of the Union army, and the very presence of the Blacks and Blues, as they were often called, had become both a part of the overall irony of the war and a critical element in the struggle for freedom. For in spite of their desire to enlist from the outset, black soldiers had not been accepted in any significant numbers until after the Emancipation Proclamation, in the winter and spring of 1863. At that time, when they began to stream into the Union armies, the majority came out of slavery, and their term of enlistment was for three years or the duration of the war, whichever was longer. This meant that when the war ended in the spring of 1865 and the white volunteers, many of whom had been in for a longer time, began demanding to be mustered out, the Union army was forced to use its black soldiers as a major force in occupying the defeated Confederate states. In the summer of 1865 there were more than 120,000 black troops in the army, most of them in the South, serving now as the official agents of the military governments which continued to oversee and share political power with the emerging provisional white civilian governments in the region.

An explosive and potentially revolutionary situation had again developed out of the accidents of war. By now these black soldiers, many of whom had been now these black soldiers, many of whom had been through the searing, transforming experiences of combat, considered themselves at once representatives of the conquering Union government, protectors of their ancestral community, and guarantors of their people's best dreams. In the uniform of the Northern armies they had fought to destroy slavery and its power over their lives. They had risked themselves to create their own freedom and the freedom of their people, to resurrect themselves and develop new lives. As loyalists and armed enforcers, they were prepared to play a powerful, radical role: former slaves turned soldiers of freedom. From all that anyone could tell, large numbers of these men were serious when they sang the powerful words of the most popular marching song of all: "As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free." In their own minds, they were still the primary bearers of the terrible swift sword.

Of course, their people felt and understood all this. So a correspondent to the *Christian Recorder* wrote from Wilmington, North Carolina, late that spring about how good it was to have black troops replace the white Union occupation forces there. "We have so long been annoyed by 'rebs' in the garb of Union soldiers," he said, "that it was almost like the transition from slavery to liberty, to feel that we had those around us who would be our protectors indeed. . . ." Unfortunately, a deep and widespread resistance to that transition had welled up in other quarters, and the soldiers in the army of black guardians were not the ultimate arbiters of their role, not even the owners of their own swords. All around them raged clashing, antagonistic visions. Everywhere white supremacy, fear, and greed were at work. At the head of the conquering government, as commander-in-chief of these black soldiers, was Andrew Johnson, and it was ever more obvious that this was a man who did not believe in black people's right even to be full and equal citizens, much less liberators and cocreators of a new age in America.

On an even more immediately explosive level, the black vision had to encounter the angry, bitter, frightened wills of all those white Confederate soldiers who now straggled back to their homes, many

bearing the scars of their defeats, some without limbs, others dreaming all the terror-filled dreams of cannon shot and piercing screams and unstanched fountains of blood. These men in tattered gray uniforms returned to their communities to find devastation on the earth, to see black Union soldiers representing the conquering armies. They knew that some of these armed black men had probably met them or their relatives on the fields of death. How were they to deal with former slaves whose first acts of freedom had apparently included the killing of Southern white men, legally, officially, with the approval of other white men? For some of the angry Confederate veterans it was like a fever on the brain, and the burning did not diminish when they saw the black soldiers marching in freedom parades, singing their songs of religious fervor, or encountered them on the streets and roads and sometimes had their military buttons cut off by these bold, assertive black men.

Finally, ranged against the black armies of hope were the Southern white men and women who never went to war, who sent their sons and fathers, their husbands and sweethearts off to die. Sometimes their bitterness and rage seemed the deepest of all, their blindness the most antagonistic to the dreams of liberation in the hearts of the Blacks and Blues. . . .

One of the major responsibilities the black soldiers took upon themselves was to protect their people's struggle for land. Though whites found this role insufferable, the soldiers were constantly encouraging the others to hold out for land of their own, rather than go back to working for whites. This recognition of black soldiers as supporters of black rights to the land and to their own labor was widespread in the South. In Florida, as in many other places, white military and civilian authorities identified black troops as those spreading the belief that the forty acres would be distributed around Christmas of 1865 or New Year's Day of 1866. . . . Nevertheless, in the context of America's moral, political, and economic climate, such action was considered seditious by

many. That was the meaning of a report by Gen. Quincy Adams Gillmore, Union commander in South Carolina, where in the first half of 1865 more than eighty percent of the fourteen thousand occupation troops were black. Gillmore complained that "I have found . . . many bad men among the non-commissioned officers and privates of some of my colored regiments—men, who by their false representations and seditious advice, have exercised a most baleful influence upon the plantation laborers." In Alabama a white resident of Sumpter County was more direct when he said that "negroes will *not work* surrounded and encouraged with black troops encouraging them to insubordination."

What whites called "insubordination" and "sedition" were, of course, black freedom and independence, and the Alabamian was right at least about the role of the black troops. For not only did they march in parades, participate in and lead conventions, secure land, and generally protect their community, but they also led that community toward new levels of freedom, sometimes in the most unexpected places. One Sunday morning early in the summer of 1865, in Aiken, South Carolina—one of the most difficult and threatening areas for blacks—a group of some twenty Blacks and Blues, with bayonets on their belts, entered the Baptist church. According to the story told later by the white minister, the soldiers were directed to the galleries by the ushers. Some started up to that section traditionally assigned to black worshipers, but others called them back. Together the group then sought out seats in the main section of the church. When some white men tried to block this black invasion of their holy sanctuary, the minister claimed that "the soldiers flourished their bayonets and began to curse." After those actions of freedom they were allowed to seat themselves, but the congregation decided not to hold its evening service. How long the whites closed themselves against the spirit and body of black freedom is not clear, but many sources confirm that black soldiers continued to lead the way in a variety of bold

ventures beyond the old boundaries of servitude and white supremacy.

As the provisional white civilian governments began to move back into power under Johnson's "restoration" of the South, and set out to block the black movement toward freedom, such action led to inevitable and widespread conflicts between black soldiers and white civilian and military authorities. In Vicksburg and Memphis they fought the Irish police. In Wilmington, North Carolina, the soldiers were accused of "defying and insulting" the police; indeed, on at least one occasion the black soldiers arrested the white chief of police and paraded him through the streets before an appreciative crowd of black people. Clashes between black and white soldiers—often over the treatment of the local black communities—were reported in Charleston, Atlanta, Danville, Chattanooga, and Jacksonville. Almost everywhere that black military men were stationed, it was said that "the Negro soldiers clashed with all forms of white authority." In some places black soldiers managed to break their people loose from jail, claiming that there was no real justice available to them. Considering the example set by these soldiers, it was not surprising to hear from various quarters the complaint raised by a white editor in Montgomery, Alabama: "We have heard freedmen declare that they will not submit to overhauling or arrest by any damned rebel police."

Indeed, as it became increasingly clear that a major goal of "white authority"—from the White House down to the smallest county jurisdictions—was to contain and limit black freedom, and hold the line for white supremacy, neither the clashes nor the attitudes behind them were surprising. As long as armed black soldiers were around, as long as a self-liberating black community kept insisting on defining, creating, and expanding the precincts of its freedom, and as long as white men and women sought to maintain maximum control over black lives and black labor, the explosive possibilities were clear to all. In the summer of 1865 Martin Delany, now an agent of the

Freedmen's Bureau, explained a key aspect of the situation to a group of newly freed men and women on Saint Helena's Island. Under discussion was the burning question of the black right to freedom and the land. Delany held forth on how those rights had been won and how they must be maintained. He told the excited audience: "I want you to understand that we would not have become free, had we not armed ourselves and fought out our independence." Later, picking up that theme and suggesting its explosive potential, he added, "I tell you slavery is over, and shall never return again. We have now two hundred thousand of our men well drilled in arms and used to warfare, and I tell you it is with you and them that slavery shall not come back again, and if you are determined it will not return again."

Martin Delany saw part of the picture, but missed the rest. Having clearly explained the powerful potential of the black troops, he called upon the black people of Saint Helena to depend not upon the soldiers but upon the government to keep its word in making land available to them and in protecting them. Almost at the same time, in New Orleans the *Tribune* also saw the tremendous revolutionary possibilities of the black soldiers. According to the editors, "a system of terror" had been let loose upon the black people of the state as they sought to exercise their freedom: "Several have already been murdered and many more will be if we do not resist. The right of self defense is a sacred right." But the editors felt there was a better way than for individual black citizens to take up arms: "It would probably be sufficient to send a few companies of colored troops into the worst parishes. The presence of our armed brethren, wearing the United States uniform, would do a great deal toward bringing the slaveholders to their senses. The black regiments carry with them the vivid and forcible image of the revolution, i.e. of the elevation of the downtrodden race to the level of citizens."

Because, as usual, the *Tribune* was absolutely right about the significance of the black troops, and be-

cause the white government which controlled them had no interest in allowing that kind of revolution to move any further than it had, black people could not count on any consistent, official dispatching of their soldiers to help them in time of need. Rather, just the opposite was happening. Petitions and protests from white people across the South were pouring into the White House, calling for the removal of the black troops. Typical was the action in Georgia, where the state legislature sent a special commission to the nation's capital to protest vigorously against the presence of the occupying black soldiers. The commission said it objected to the placing of "our former slaves with arms in their hands, to arrest, fine or imprison . . . to maltreat our citizens and insult their wives and daughters." This was the context in which the Georgia editor had declared, "We shall never be loyal until they are taken away." Because this view was shared by the President and his highest military leaders, the black troops began to be taken away, and quickly. But as long as they were present, black soldiers continued to do what they thought necessary in their confrontations with white police and military forces which were often made up of Confederate veterans, most of them determined to crush the fragile new institution of freedom.

In Mississippi, where one of the bastions of black troops was located, there continued to be clashes. On several occasions it was reported that groups of these ambiguous soldiers of the Union "met and engaged in minor skirmishes" with white militiamen. In addition, "individual clashes resulting in violence between whites and Negro soldiers were not uncommon." The similarity between the black soldiers and the free blacks and outlyers of an earlier time was striking, and it was highlighted when Mississippi's provisional governor reported to President Johnson that local blacks "congregate around the negro garrisons in great numbers, and are idle and guilty of many petty crimes."

Even as they recognized that soon they would not be able to serve officially as protectors of their people's freedom, the soldiers continued to set an example of resistance and struggle. . . . [For whites] there was no room in the South—or anywhere else in the United States—for black soldiers like these. Indeed, there seemed to be no place in the minds or hearts, or the social and political structures, of most white Americans for a community of four million former slaves whose words and deeds demanded for them a role of parity within the society, who claimed the traditional American right of self-defense, whose children were taught to sing of a "sweet land of liberty," while their fathers and mothers literally fought to possess their share of it.

How should people who only yesterday had been part of an exploitative master class now deal with the news that summer from Georgia that "the negroes are frequently out very late at night, attending the meetings of a society they have formed . . . for the protection of female virtue"? Or what should white women say about the black washerwomen of Jackson who seemed to believe that their freedom and virtue required the organization of their own protective association? The new images and realities were hard to deal with. For instance, what could one make of yesterday's "ignorant slaves" who now seemed fiercely determined to educate themselves and their people? At least one white man was deeply moved when he saw the epitome of this quest in Macon, Georgia: "a young negro woman with her spelling book fastened to the fence, that she might study while at work over the wash tub." Such testimony of black determination to master the printed word came from every corner of the South, and no one summed up its ubiquitous fascination more adequately than Sidney Andrews, a young white Northern journalist:

Many of the negroes . . . common plantation negroes, and day laborers in the towns and villages, were supporting little schools themselves. Everywhere, I found among them a disposition to get their children into schools, if possible. I had occasion very frequently to notice that porters in

stores and laboring men about cotton warehouses, and cart drivers on the streets, had spelling books with them, and were studying them during the time they were not occupied with their work. Go into the outskirts of any large town and walk among the negro inhabitants, and you will see the children, and in many instances grown negroes, sitting in the sun alongside their cabins studying.

Such black people, who not only sang but studied in the sun, were a threat to many white Southerners, and the smouldering ashes of their "little schools" often provided mute testimony to that fact. But if reading, writing, sunlit former slaves were threats, what were a frightened people to make of the ever dangerous black preachers, many of whom now seemed to be exploding with sun, like a group in Mobile, Alabama, accused of "inculcating the freedmen with doctrines of murder, arson, violence and hatred of white people"? It was said that these men preached sermons in which whites were described as "white devils," "demons," or "proslavery devils." Following the traditions of David Walker and Nat Turner and anticipating much to come, Mobile's black prophets spoke of an impending race war in which all whites would be exterminated. According to the local newspaper, one of the preachers who was arrested "frequently cried out 'In this hour of blood who will stand by me?' and his question ever met with most enthusiastic replies of 'I will, bless God!' from the assembled auditory." Obviously, such men were clear and present dangers to all white definitions of good news.

So it was not strange that so many white Americans found these developments hard to grasp. For even if the terrible blindness of race and fear had not been at work, the nation was actually being called upon to respond to a remarkable event in human transformation—one not easily absorbed. A people just emerging from the supposedly dehumanizing experience of slavery, a people for the most part desperately poor and materially deprived, a people assumed to be ignorant of "civilization," was an-

nouncing in words and deeds an agenda for the continuing movement toward freedom and new humanity in the United States. Supposedly subdued by paternalist domination, these former slaves were prophesying a new nation for all, including the paternalists. Instead of adopting the masters' values, a significant body of men and women had sensed the necessity of reshaping themselves and the entire society to address their definitions of freedom. At great cost, and with a vision exceeding that of their allies or enemies, black people were declaring that freedom meant the death of white supremacy and the creation of a new philosophy and a new politics for the United States. In 1865, this was something that almost no one in America could see. Instead, the generally approved white dreams involved new steel mills and railroad tracks, miles of grain and loaded ships, and the conquest of nonwhite savages and unbounded markets across the globe. Still, the fundamental tragedy was not that there were such clashing visions, or that whites could not immediately grasp the black revelation. Rather it inhered in the fact that men and women consciously chose not only to set themselves against the coming of the light, but to try to break the spirit and hold captive the lives of the human channels of hope.

Resistance to the black vision and the bold actions which often accompanied it came from everywhere, beginning with Andrew Johnson in the White House. His earlier promises to be a Moses to black people and his highly publicized disdain for the Confederate aristocracy had originally suggested some ground for hope. However, by the summer of 1865 clear-minded observers of either race could see that this erstwhile slaveowner was no Moses that any freedom-oriented black person would want to follow. It was obvious, too, that his supposed dislike for the Southern aristocracy seemed to fade quickly as their representatives—including a significant number of women—came to pay court to him and seek pardons allowing them to reclaim the land they had abandoned and the political leadership they had

renounced. By summer's end Johnson's direction was frighteningly clear, and in turn newspapers were quoting his announcement that "This is a country for white men, and by God, so long as I am President, it shall be a government for white men." Thus, he was not only permitting an unrepentent Southern white ruling class to move back into power, but he was making every effort, and giving the Southern leadership every license, to curb the rising black movement toward authentic freedom, beginning with the search for basic political rights and land.

Andrew Johnson was a Southern white supremacist, as well as a stubborn, insecure, and volatile man. Thus he was one of the most unfortunate leaders possible for a moment in history when the best future of the nation required great vision, courage, humanity, and strength—a moment in which a society might have moved to overcome its own past, respond creatively to its former slaves, and begun the struggle to create an authentically new future, starting in the South. Instead, as they considered the postwar Southern situation, neither Lincoln nor Johnson had envisioned any radically new departures. Indeed, as penalties for treason and armed rebellion go, the arrangement that Johnson and his supporters . . . offered these white Southerners was rather gentle. No demands were made for fundamental change in the antebellum Southern order of things, except that the death of slavery had to be acknowledged through the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, and that the Confederate war debts had to be repudiated. When he was called upon to determine what portion of the white population had to be loyal for a state to rejoin the Union, Johnson set no percentage or proportion at all, simply declaring that whenever "that portion of the people . . . who are loyal" had rewritten the constitution and established the new government, the state could rejoin the Union. In Johnson's mind there was no question but that "the people" who would do all these things were the white people. Black men and women were not slaves any longer, but they were surely not to be participating, decision-making citizens.

On the other hand, by the time the hot-tempered Tennessean had begun to settle into his new role, black men and women all over the South and across the nation had spoken their own minds, were continually projecting their own vision of citizenship, of collective rebirth. Not only were they meeting, voting, and marching, but they were creating churches, claiming land, establishing newspapers, developing protective associations, and taking special pride in the creation of schools everywhere. So when the first white teachers from the American Missionary Association arrived that summer in Raleigh, North Carolina, they found a school already established in the local African Methodist Episcopalian church. In Atlanta others discovered a school organized by two former slaves in the basement of a church, and another developing in the confines of an old railroad car. Blacks were moving with their vision, refusing to wait: in one place the school was simply an awning stretched over a framework of pine poles; in another, the front yard of the teacher's bare shack, or a mule stable, or an abandoned white school, or the overhang of a rocky ledge where fugitives once hid but hid no more, standing now in the sun.

It was a powerful dynamic. Indeed, this refusal to hide, to wait, this black insistence on defining their freedom and re-creating themselves, carried with it a fundamental challenge to the old order. Thus it was not surprising that the new white state governments felt they had to respond quickly and directly. The former slaves had imaginatively seized the initiative in defining the possibilities of a transformed South. In response to the black demands for freedom and justice, in reaction to the black insistence on new lives and new institutions, the old white supremacist reaction came thundering back from every one of the "restored" governors' mansions, constitutional conventions, and legislatures. Fearful, reactive, self-

ish, and arrogant, they sought to force back the tide. Understandably, they felt the President of the United States was on their side.

In Georgia Benjamin F. Perry, the provisional governor appointed by Johnson, was a far cry from the "people's governor" that the black community of that state had asked for. He opened the constitutional convention with a speech announcing that "this is a white man's government, and intended for white men only." In neighboring Alabama another Johnson appointee echoed Perry's statements, saying, "It must be remembered that politically and socially ours is a white man's government." . . .

But it was in Mississippi, dark heart of the frontier of the South, that the most fundamental statement of the white supremacist vision was expressed—appropriately enough, in reaction to the demands of the black men and women of Vicksburg for full political participation in the reconstruction of their state. Recognizing the power of the black argument, and the danger it represented to white supremacy, the *Natchez Courier* set forth the essential philosophy which guided the majority of whites in the South—and the North—as they responded to all black demands for equality and national transformation. The editor claimed that no two dissimilar races could live together on a basis of equality anywhere: "One *must* be superior—one *must* be dominant. If the negro should be the master, the whites must either abandon the territory, or there would be another civil war in the South—a war of the races—the whites against the blacks—and that war would be a war of extermination."

In the context of this narrow, beleaguered, but very common American view, any move by black men and women to define their freedom as the act of sharing power was perceived as a total threat to the power of the whites. Of course what the black movement really represented was a threat to *total* white power, which was not the same. However, white men were not making such distinctions, and

where confusion reigned or doubts arose, members of the planter-entrepreneur classes were always ready to force the issue of black power *or* white power as the only real question at hand. They were aided in this action by the fact that most white people, north and south, agreed with Joseph E. Brown, the outgoing governor of Georgia, who said he believed in the essential, God-created inferiority of blacks and then told the new legislature: "Unless madness rules the hour, they will never be placed upon a basis of political equality with us . . . they are not competent to the task of self-government, much less to aid in governing a great nation of white people."

Given the fact that the emerging black thrust toward freedom had to deal with such vehement definitions of sanity and madness, it was understandable that many of their conventions, petitions, and individual actions tried to move with caution to allay these white fears, especially in those counties where blacks outnumbered whites in overwhelming proportions. Nevertheless these same white fears, so antithetical to the coming of a new time, made it absolutely necessary that the newly freed black community continue to work out—and live out—a theory of society which could counter this deeply held racial supremacist point of view.

It is in such a setting of black initiative and white reaction, of creativity and vision from the former slaves and narrow, frightened rigidity from the former master class, that the Black Codes of 1865 are best understood. When that newly restored sector of the "great nation of white people" who lived in the South began to create the laws for their state and local governments, those laws had to reflect their world view, their fears of black (and white) freedom, their delusions, their definitions of themselves and the black people who lived all around them, who lived within them, who filled the surreal world of their dreams. Only when these realities are added to the obvious issues of economic and political privilege and unenlightened self-interest, can one fully appre-

ciate the reactive nature of the Codes. They were a direct response to the rising power and revolutionary potential of the black surge toward freedom. The Codes were a reply to the creative and thoughtful proposals, pleas, and demands for an interdependent black and white society of equals coming from the conventions, petitions, sermons, and life of the newly freed community. At their deepest level the Black Codes were a declaration of white people's incapacity—or unwillingness—to envision such unprecedented freedom and equality in the South, or to face its necessary accompaniments: the death of their own distorted self-vision, their own narrow definitions of self-interest, and their own least authentic selves.

Though the laws dealing with black people varied from state to state, from city to city, essential patterns were constant across the South. Everywhere the Black Codes attempted to set up hard barriers against the forward movement of black men and women toward freedom, attempted to press them as far back into slavery as possible. Reacting against the basic black demand to possess the land, several states imposed restrictions against land ownership or rental by black people. For instance Mississippi, whose laws set much of the pattern, prohibited its black population from renting or leasing any land outside the towns and cities. On the other hand the city of Opelousas, Louisiana, denied the rights of blacks to own or rent a house in the town, if they did not already do so on January 1, 1866. Laws like these were not simply aimed against the ownership of property; they were part of a network of legal and extralegal attempts to guard against untrammeled physical movement by black people. They were meant to keep blacks bound to jobs and land controlled by white people. If freedom meant the right to move about in search of new jobs and new lives, then these laws were set against freedom, and new versions of the slave patrols were established to enforce them.

Vagrancy laws were another crucial element of control. In Alabama a vagrant could be any "laborer or servant who loiters away his time, or refuses to comply with any contract for a term of service without just cause." Mississippi's laws demanded that, by the second Monday of January 1866, every black person must have a "lawful home or employment and . . . written evidence thereof." South Carolina was vaguer in its definitions, but a vagrant there could be sentenced to as much as a year of hard labor and be hired out to an individual. Whatever the details, one obvious intent was to make it as difficult as possible for black people to refuse to sign work contracts while holding out for the long-expected forty acres.

In reaction to the rising black movement toward self-reliance, every state created harsh penalties against any black workers who broke their contracts with landowners or other employers. In the same

vein, the laws placed severe limits on the kinds of independent work and trades that black men could enter. Some states like Mississippi included sections in their codes which could only be called fugitive worker clauses, because of their similarity to the earlier fugitive slave laws. So-called apprenticeship laws were another thrust back toward slavery, denying the black community's attempts to shore up its family life; providing easy ways for children to be taken away from any black parents or guardians deemed unable to support or guide them, these laws placed such children as unpaid laborers in the hands of white families.

Throughout the structures of this postwar legal assault, black people were subjected to many special punishments which did not apply to whites. They were also barred from service in the state militia, and from ownership of a military weapon. The patterns were clear: in almost every situation having to do with black-white relationships, freedom of movement, freedom of choice in jobs, a personal sense of independence, and control over their own families, the Black Codes were the slave codes revived, with the sole exception of certain limited, specially defined rights to hold property, to have marriages legally recognized, to enter into contracts, and to sue and be sued. But under no circumstances whatsoever did any of these newly loyal states make provision for black men to govern themselves, vote, or hold office, or for black children to receive publicly funded education.

In the final analysis, though they were cruel reactions against black hope, the Codes were not surprising. For a people with the world view of white Americans, such laws were a predictable response to the black thrust toward self-defined freedom, especially in the absence of white national leadership or any other contrary pressure. Moreover, these Southerners were the only white Americans who shared the land and daily life with large numbers of black people; they were the ones who most depended on controlled mass black labor; they had seen and felt at

first hand the revolutionary potential of the black movement surging toward the future. For such people, the Black Codes were an almost foreseeable response to the breakdown of slavery as well as to the unmistakable black will to be free. In other parts of the nation, to be sure, many white Americans had already demonstrated the deadly uses of the law against the best aspirations of those nonwhite natives of the land who sought to live free and independent among them; so Southerners were really doing nothing new.

Important though they were, the Black Codes were only the official white Southern reaction. As soon as it was clear that black men and women meant to create new realities, as soon as their hunger for freedom was perceived as a threat to the white vision of the world, then other forms of reaction developed. Whether there were laws or not, white men and women in local communities across the South conspired to keep land out of black hands, refusing to sell, lease, or rent. In addition, in the summer of 1865 white men, led by veterans of the Confederate armies, began forming paramilitary organizations to supply the extralegal force which they knew would be needed if they were to contain the rising black river. In some states they organized as official militia units. Eventually, in the post–1865 period, many of these local organizations expanded and took names like the Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of the White Camelia, but even before they had names they had chosen their purpose, their methods, and their weapons. Before 1865 was over the stories of shootings, burnings, drownings, hangings, and decapitations abounded; word of black bodies putrefying on the ground began to come out of the South. The two visions were in conflict, and wherever black men could keep their weapons, could find ground to stand on, the armed struggle to defend their vision went on. . . .

On the other hand, no less a national leader than Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, the hero of Appomattox, offered another kind of response to the black struggle

for a new America. In the last month of the year, Grant made a perfunctory tour of the South for Andrew Johnson. One of the issues on his agenda was the future of black soldiers in the volatile South. In Grant's opinion, there was no doubt about what and where their future should be, especially in regard to the life of their people:

The good of the country, and economy, require that the force kept in the interior, where there are many freedmen . . . should all be white troops. The reasons for this are obvious without mentioning many of them. The presence of black troops, lately slaves, demoralizes labor, both by their advice and by furnishing in their camps a resort for the freedmen for long distances around. White troops generally excite no opposition, and therefore a small number of them can maintain order in a given district. Colored troops must be kept in bodies sufficient to defend themselves.

Inadvertently, Grant's conclusions provided a vivid summary of the contribution of race, politics, and economics to the white American refusal of "the right hand of fellowship." To accept that offer would mean letting go of too much that was precious. Meanwhile his recommendation to remove the black troops from the South was both an acknowledgment of their actual and potential power and a serious blow to the freedom movement.

By then, the mustering out process had already begun, exposing hundreds of thousands of people to their enemies. But the struggle did not stop: the river [of struggle] continued, because black people could not be mustered out of its flow. . . .

[Thus they cheered fervently] when the historic word finally came. On December 18, 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States ended its difficult journey through Congress and the state legislatures and was finally proclaimed for all the people to hear. After so long a time of waiting and praying, of hoping and dying, the central announcement now seemed passive, compressed, and strangely flat: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude . . . shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

> My Lord!
> No more!
> No more auction block for me.
> No more.
> No more driver's lash for me.
> Many thousands gone.

In spite of all the troubles, in spite of all the trials, in spite of all the betrayals of the year of jubilee, it was still a time to shout, to sing and pray and dance. No more! So the black celebrations went on into the night of liberation, but as usual the free people who rejoiced were doing much more than extolling the actions of a Congress or a group of individual states. Far more deeply ran the river. In the midst of a harsh new struggle, they were celebrating their God, seeing again his divine chariots of vengeance, feeling the power of his terrible swift sword. Near the end of this cruel and beautiful year of transition, they were celebrating themselves, remembering all the meetings and petitions, all the conventions and boycotts, all the women in their new bonnets carrying parasols and freedom signs, all the men marching out to vote when the world said they had no vote, all the ears cut off for the love of freedom, all the lives lost on this pilgrim way.

Even as the forces of oppression began to be marshaled again, the black community was celebrating all its former crippled members who now rowed boats and raised corn, and testified to new birth. In the midst of fear and violence and orders for mustering out, they were celebrating the black soldiers who tried in war and peace to guarantee their freedom; they were holding on to the black children who embodied this hope in their lives and in their songs. Even as presidents, generals, and editors turned deaf ears, black folk were celebrating the ways they had stood together to support one another in the harsh

struggles for land, to hear each other in the town meetings and prayer meetings, in the legislatures on the Sea Islands and in the mass meetings in the big churches of Norfolk, Charleston, and Nashville. While white men and women rose up again to deny them their freedom, while representatives in Congress discussed their freedom, black families rejoiced in the night, recognizing the life-long mixture of bitter and sweet, of birth and death, determined not to be turned back, refusing to lose hope. For they were celebrating themselves.

This new amendment was their creation. These were the words that the waiting, struggling, dying, living community had heard in the first guns of dawn in Charleston harbor. These were the words they had written in all the marching and singing, in all the fighting and praying, through all the running and falling, with all the poisons and fire. These were the words they had brought up from the terror-filled depths. No more. This was the amendment they had shaped with their hopes, written in the flow of their blood.

Always the blood, blood of life, blood of death. Knowing that more would be shed, they were re-membering the blood streaking the waves of the At-lantic, remembering the blood on Nat Turner's dying ground, remembering the blood in the tracks of the Underground Railroad, remembering the blood on a thousand white hands, remembering the blood crying out from the battlegrounds of the Freedom War, blood so freely shed in that year of jubilee, blood for the remission of sins. Many thousands gone.

Near the close of that chaotic, brooding year, black people were remembering the past and mov-ing forward, committing their lives to all the unfin-ished struggles of the river. With the crossing over just begun, with the requisites of true freedom still beyond their grasp, still beyond the vision of white America, with fierce but needful battles just ahead, black people were celebrating their God and them-selves, for a great victory had surely been won. It had been a brutal, magnificent struggle, reaching over more than three centuries, over thousands of miles, from the sunburned coasts of the homeland to the cold and dreary trenches near Petersburg, Fort Wagner, and Milliken's Bend. And they were the soldiers, their people were the soldiers, the singers, the petitioners, the creators of the new time.

So as they sang and prayed and cried into the night, the night when slavery was officially ended in the United States, black people were celebrating themselves, honoring their forebears, holding up their children to the midnight sun, praising the mys-terious, delivering God who had made it possible for them, and all who lived before them, to come so far and stand so firm in the deep red flooding of Jordan.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 Why did the meaning of the Fourth of July have special significance for the former slaves? Why had they failed to attach any meaning to that date before?

2 What role did the presence of African American soldiers play in the celebrations that the freedmen enjoyed at war's end? At what point did blacks be-come a significant force within the Union army? Define the hopes and aspirations they had for their race in a transformed American South.

3 Describe the feelings and fears of the Confederate troops as they returned home after the war. What influence did they think African American troops had on plantation laborers? Why did they place pres-sure on the president to remove black troops from the South? How did Andrew Johnson respond to that pressure?

4 Describe the freedmen's desire for an education and the reasons why many southern whites saw this as a threat. Why did black ministers represent yet an-other disruptive influence to the former planters? Does this help explain what Harding describes as the "clashing visions" of whites and blacks following the Civil War?

5 Why was there initially some hope that Andrew Johnson would become a "Moses to black people"? Why were these aspirations soon dashed? Explain Harding's assessment that Johnson was an "unfortunate" leader for the crucial moment in history that is the focus of this selection. What did the former Confederate states have to accomplish to reenter the Union under Johnson's plan for reconstruction?

6 What efforts did the former slaves make to initiate actions to protect their own freedom? How did the black codes negate those noble actions? Why does Harding argue that it was clear that there would be no significant change in race relations even with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment?