

# FORUM

## The debts we owe Haitians



**Oscar H. Blayton**

Guest Columnist

On Oct. 9, 1779, more than 500 Haitian soldiers (referred to as “Les Chasseurs-Volontaires de Saint-Domingue”) fought alongside French troops to aid the Americans in trying to force the British out of Savannah, GA in order to open its port for the colonists’ use. The attack was unsuccessful, but it has been noted that the Haitians played a significant role in providing cover for the French soldiers who had to retreat from their positions on the battlefield. But even though Haitians shed blood for American independence, the United States in its foreign policy has always held a deep-seated hostility towards Haiti, despite denials to the contrary.

Haiti was born of a slave revolt that began on the French half of the island of Hispaniola and resulted in a revolution costing 200,000 black lives.

When the Haitians threw off the French yoke of oppression to become the independent Republic of Haiti, France demanded recompense for the loss of its slaves. This demand for payment was backed up by the threat of an invasion, with the French navy laying off the Haitian coast. This forced payment, totaling more than \$21 billion over the years, began Haiti’s slide from being France’s wealthiest colony to one of the poorest nations in the Western Hemisphere.

When Haiti gained its independence, Southern slaveholders in the United States were horrified by the liberation of enslaved black people by their own efforts. And in response, the U.S. government did not recognize the Black nation until 1862, when the United States was in the throes of its own brutal and bloody war over the perpetuation of slavery and the Southern states had seceded from the Union.

But recognition never meant respect. And ever since its creation, Haiti has had to battle against American hos-

tility, with the United States keeping its heel on Haiti’s economy and domestic politics. This included a U.S. invasion in 1914 that precipitated a military occupation lasting until 1934.

The U.S. military occupied Haiti again in 1994, the year Haiti’s democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, returned from exile after fleeing from a coup by the Haitian military. When Aristide was re-elected in 2000, the U.S. military, in combination with the Haitian military, forcibly removed him from the country and sent him into exile again, this time in South Africa.

It is important to point out the irony of how badly the United States has treated Haiti, given the presence of a statue standing in Savannah’s Franklin Square. This statue was erected in 2007 to honor the Haitian soldiers that came to the aid of American revolutionaries 240 years ago in 1779.

But this statue is not the first recognition of America’s debt to Haitians. In April 1944, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had Secretary of State Cordell Hull deliver a commemorative plaque to a cathedral in Haiti that reads, “Today we pay tribute to the courage and spirit of those Haitian Volunteers who in 1779 risked their lives for the cause of American Liberty.” The placement of Roosevelt’s plaque and the assistance given by the Haitians is unknown to most Americans. And even a 10-foot monument standing in a busy downtown square of a major U.S. city does not bring this piece of our history to the attention of most Americans.

Haiti’s contributions to the United States are not widely known because, throughout our country’s history, America has shown itself to be hostile towards Haiti and Haitians.

On Oct. 30, 2018, the British newspaper, The Guardian, ran the headline, “Flee or hide: Haitian immigrants face difficult decisions under Trump.” This headline, curious to most Americans, has a backstory. After a 7.1-magnitude earthquake hit Haiti in 2010, the U.S. government offered Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to

thousands of Haitians whose lives had been destroyed. But now, Donald J. Trump has decided that their imminent deportation is best for America. Haitians who have made new lives in this country are now on the verge of becoming “illegal aliens” by the stroke of Trump’s pen.

But a monster like Trump has neither empathy for, nor any sense of obligation to, people of color whose ancestors helped to birth and build this nation. People of color can expect no consideration from this despicable, disgusting bully who wants to “make America white again.”

The White House also is planning to terminate TPS for people of color from other countries whose conditions have necessitated our compassion and offers of refuge because hostility towards Haitians is simply a part of the pattern of widespread American hostility towards people of color. Just as ancient barbaric people created narratives that gave animals human form and characteristics in an anthropomorphic attempt to conform them to the familiar, Trump and his supporters are pursuing a europomorphic attempt to mold America into a European form that is familiar to them. In short, he is attempting to make all Americans look as much like European Americans as possible. As ancient barbarians wanted to conform their world to their own image, these present-day barbarians want to conform America to their own image.

It is up to right-thinking Americans to stand up to Trump and the cynical, cowardly senators and congressional representatives who cater to his attempts at despotism. It is time to stand up and say “No!” to the deportation of Haitians and others living in the United States with Temporary Protected Status.

We must have compassion for our fellow human beings, even if the disgusting tenant in the White House does not.

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## What shaped King’s prophetic vision?



**Kenyatta R. Gilbert**

Guest Columnist

The name Martin Luther King Jr. is iconic in the United States. President Barack Obama spoke of King in both his Democratic National Convention nomination acceptance and victory speeches in 2008:

“[King] brought

Americans from every corner of this land to stand together on a Mall in Washington, before Lincoln’s Memorial... to speak of his dream.”

Indeed, much of King’s legacy lives on in such arresting oral performances. They made him a global figure.

King’s preaching used the power of language to interpret the gospel in the context of black misery and Christian hope. He directed people to life-giving resources and spoke provocatively of a present and active divine interventionist who summons preachers to name reality in places where pain, oppression and neglect abound.

In other words, King used a prophetic voice in his preaching – the hopeful voice that begins in prayer and attends to human tragedy. Indeed, the best of African-American preaching is three-dimensional – it is priestly, it is sage, it is prophetic.

So what led to the rise of the black preacher and shaped King’s prophetic voice?

In my book, “The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching,” I discuss the historical formation of the black preacher. My work on African-American prophetic preaching shows that King’s clarion calls for justice were offspring of earlier prophetic preaching that flowered as a consequence of the racism in the U.S.

### From slavery to the Great Migration

First, let’s look at some of the social, cultural and political challenges that gave birth to the black religious leader, specifically those who assumed political roles with the community’s blessing and beyond the church proper.

In slave society, black preachers played an important role in the community: they acted as seers interpreting the significance of events; as pastors calling for unity and solidarity; and as messianic figures provoking the first stirrings of resentment against oppressors.

The religious revivalism or the Great Awakening of the 18th century brought to America a Bible-centered brand of Christianity – evangelicalism – that dominated the religious landscape by the early 19th century. Evangelicals emphasized a “personal relationship” with God through Jesus Christ.

This new movement made Christianity more accessible, livelier, without overtaxing educational demands. Africans converted to Christianity in large numbers during the revivals and most became Baptists and Methodists. With fewer educational restrictions placed on them, black preachers emerged in the period as preachers and teachers, despite their slave status.

Africans viewed the revivals as a way to reclaim some of the remnants of African culture in a strange new world. They incorporated and adopted religious symbols into a new cultural system with relative ease.

### Rise of the black cleric-politician

Despite the development of black preachers and the significant social and religious advancements of blacks during this period of revival, Reconstruction – the process of rebuilding the South soon after the Civil War – posed numerous challenges for white slaveholders who resented the political advancement of newly freed Africans.

As independent black churches proliferated in Reconstruction America, black ministers preached to their own. Some became bivocational. It was not out of the norm to find pastors who led congregations on Sunday and held jobs as school teachers and administrators during the work week.

Others held important political positions. Altogether, 16 African-Americans served in the U.S. Congress during Reconstruction. For example, South Carolina’s House of

Representatives’ Richard Harvey Cain, who attended Wilberforce University, the first private black American university, served in the 43rd and 45th Congresses and as pastor of a series of African Methodist churches.

Others, such as former slave and Methodist minister and educator Hiram Rhoades Revels and Henry McNeal Turner, shared similar profiles. Revels was a preacher who became America’s first African-American senator. Turner was appointed chaplain in the Union Army by President Abraham Lincoln.

To address the myriad problems and concerns of blacks in this era, black preachers discovered that congregations expected them not only to guide worship but also

change. These three pastors were particularly inventive in the way they approached their preaching task.

Baptist pastor Adam C. Powell Sr., the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ) pastor Florence S. Randolph and the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) bishop Reverdy C. Ransom spoke to human tragedy, both in and out of the black church. They brought a distinctive form of prophetic preaching that united spiritual transformation with social reform and confronted black dehumanization.

Bishop Ransom’s discontentment arose while preaching to Chicago’s “silk-stocking church” Bethel A.M.E. – the elite church – which had no desire to welcome the



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X

to be the community’s lead informant in the public square.

### The cradle of King’s political and spiritual heritage

Many other events converged as well impacting black life that would later influence King’s prophetic vision: President Woodrow Wilson declared entrance into World War I in 1914; as “boll weevils” ravaged crops in 1916 there was widespread agricultural depression; and then there was the rise of Jim Crow laws that were to legally enforce racial segregation until 1965.

Such tide-swelling events, in multiplier effect, ushered in the largest internal movement of people on American soil, the Great “Black” Migration. Between 1916 and 1918, an average of 500 southern migrants a day departed the South. More than 1.5 million relocated to northern communities between 1916 and 1940.

A watershed, the Great Migration brought about contrasting expectations concerning the mission and identity of the African-American church. The infrastructure of Northern black churches was unprepared to deal with the migration’s distressing effects. Its suddenness and size overwhelmed preexisting operations.

The immense suffering brought on by the Great Migration and the racial hatred they had escaped drove many clergy to reflect more deeply on the meaning of freedom and oppression. Black preachers refused to believe that the Christian gospel and discrimination were compatible.

However, black preachers seldom modified their preaching strategies. Rather than establishing centers for black self-improvement (e.g., job training, home economics classes and libraries), nearly all southern preachers who came North continued to offer priestly sermons that exalted the virtues of humility, good will and patience, as they had in the South.

### Setting the prophetic tradition

Three clergy outliers – one a woman – initiated

poor and jobless masses that came to the North. He left and began the Institutional Church and Social Settlement, which combined worship and social services.

Randolph and Powell synthesized their roles as preachers and social reformers. Randolph brought into her prophetic vision her tasks as preacher, missionary, organizer, suffragist and pastor. Powell became pastor at the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. In that role, he led the congregation to establish a community house and nursing home to meet the political, religious and social needs of blacks.

### Shaping of King’s vision

The preaching tradition that these early clergy fashioned would have profound impact on King’s moral and ethical vision. They linked the vision of Jesus Christ as stated in the Bible of bringing good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind and proclaiming liberty to the captives, with the Hebrew prophet’s mandate of speaking truth to power.

Similar to how they responded to the complex challenges brought on by the Great Migration of the early 20th century, King brought prophetic interpretation to brutal racism, Jim Crow segregation and poverty in the 1950s and ‘60s.

Indeed, King’s prophetic vision ultimately invited his martyrdom. But through the prophetic preaching tradition already well established by his time, King brought people of every tribe, class and creed closer toward forming “God’s beloved community” – an anchor of love and hope for humankind.

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