

EPILOGUE

I never was a true believer in nonviolence.

—Cynthia Washington

Recalling her experience during the Civil Rights movement, the former field secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Cynthia Washington claimed, “I never was a true believer in nonviolence, but was willing to go along [with it] for the sake of the strategy and goals.” She explained that the deaths of the three civil rights workers—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—was a turning point for her, especially when she heard that Chaney had been brutally beaten before he was shot to death. Washington acknowledged, “The thought of being beaten to death without being able to fight back put the fear of God in me.” She also explained that she was her mother’s only child and that it would be an “unforgivable sin” for her to be endangered by white supremacists and go down without a fight. From then on Washington carried a handgun in her handbag. And though she never fired it, she made it clear that she was willing to do so. Even in her advanced age, she expressed the willingness to protect her son, his wife, and her grandson if necessary.¹

Cynthia Washington’s story illustrates that, when faced with violence, more black Americans than commonly believed sought to protect themselves and their community without apology. Washington’s words also reveal that women, too, were invested in armed defense and that this stance worked in tandem with their femininity, not against it. Indeed, it was the journalist Ida B. Wells who claimed at the end of the nineteenth century, “A Winchester rifle should have a place of honour in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give.”² Decades after the abolition of slavery, the sentiments of Washington and Wells toward self-defense were similar to the claims made by black abolitionists because it was clear that the “spirit of slavery” had lived on.

In 1837, the minister Joshua Easton was right when he claimed the remedy for slavery entailed the death of both the institution and the spirit of slavery. He claimed it was this lingering “spirit” that made color a mark of degradation.³ Black leaders sought to prove and assert their own humanity while simultaneously proving and asserting the notion that whiteness was not supreme. One of the deadliest tools against white supremacy was unapologetic black self-defense. No greater action demanded the rights and respect of black humanity than physical resistance.

For many black Americans, then, self-defense was godly, and guns were held in honor. Even in 1851, Martin Delany hoped “the grave may refuse my body a resting place, and the righteous Heaven my spirit a home” if he did not make slave catchers who tried to enter his home “a lifeless corpse at my feet.”⁴ Social liberty and political progress had to be defended. If black resistance was central to emancipation, then self-defense was central to equality. Freedom was fragile and had to be secured at all times.

From the beginning of the antislavery movement, black abolitionists understood their vulnerabilities and strengths. They also understood violence fluently. Violence, for them, was not about vengeance. While general violence as a means of producing liberation was a method of last resort, political violence as a means of protection against individuals and their communities was always a first response. Political violence was about asserting one's humanity, about being seen as a mother, father, son, and daughter before the eyes of God and under the protection of the law.

During the antebellum period, nonviolence could not be separated from the belief in black subordination. In other words, for many black abolitionists, moral suasion was predicated on people's acceptance of black inferiority. Activism or protest against slavery were only acceptable to white abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison so long as it did not interfere or threaten their authority. Black abolitionists understood this dynamic well and used the power of violence to challenge it. A San Francisco correspondent for *Frederick Douglass' Weekly* claimed, "The friends of the colored people took part in antislavery work as a matter of duty . . . but they were no more likely to believe that Negroes were naturally equal to whites than they were to believe that chalk was cheese."⁵

From the formalization of abolitionist movement in the 1830s to the militancy of the 1850s, black leaders attempted to push issues of freedom and equality to the forefront of American politics. The shift from moral suasion among black abolitionists to direct, combative, and violent strategies forced Americans to examine their allegiance to the ideal that "all men are created equal." This principle of the Founding Fathers remains in constant contestation to this day.

For many, it is difficult to believe that one hundred and fifty years after slavery's end, Americans can invoke a similar sense of frustration as black abolitionists did in fighting for equality. But it was James Baldwin who famously wrote to his nephew in 1962, "You know and I know that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too early."⁶ The lessons of the lingering spirit of slavery have not been learned. We have continually underestimated both black resistance to oppression and white resistance to emancipation and enfranchisement. During slavery, these contests culminated in the Fugitive Slave Law, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Dred Scott decision, and even the Emancipation Proclamation. Beyond the Civil War, black codes, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, *Brown v. Board of Education*, and incalculable legal and political agendas ignited battles for African Americans to obtain equal rights. The trajectory of change in black America has almost always depended upon the local, state, and federal government's willingness to accept (or be forced to accept) black humanity.

Ideologically, it is easy to see how slavery is problematic morally, politically, socially, and economically. Contemporary audiences can readily concede that slavery was wrong. They can even concede that violence would have been necessary to overthrow the institution. But it remains difficult for white Americans to separate it from the institutional advantages of antiblackness. In overthrowing the spirit of slavery, it is not violence that is required, but sacrifice. Advantage and equality cannot share the same space. Likewise, one cannot end inequality without sacrifice. The larger lessons of abolitionism have to include the

commitment to emancipation and enfranchisement. Frederick Douglass contended, “Until it is safe to leave the lamb in the hold of the lion, the laborer in the power of the capitalist, the poor in the hands of the rich, it will not be safe to leave a newly emancipated people completely in the power of their former masters, especially when such masters have ceased to be such not from enlightened moral convictions but irresistible force.”⁷ It is impossible to bring about change and transformation without the forfeiture of power.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the enslaved and free black Americans raised their fists and their finances to make themselves seen and heard. They employed both the pen and the pistol to accelerate the road to abolition. They used fear and intimidation in their speeches. They stole themselves away or aided and abetted the stealing of others. They defended themselves and each other. They utilized all necessary means and discarded what failed. They fled and fought and continue to fight. In short, black Americans have always had to force their own freedoms, and forcing freedom is what they will continue to do until white resistance to black humanity has at long last come to an end.