

## The White Man's Fear of the Educated Negro: How the Negro Was Fitted for His Natural and Logical Calling

by Leon F. Litwack

**Editor's Note:** "White" and "Colored" signs, back-of-the-bus seating, racial etiquette that required black deference to whites, closed ballot boxes, "nigger" insults, and lynchings that reached epidemic proportions were the marks of white fears of blacks during the Jim Crow period. But according to one of America's major scholars of the slave period, the dominant fear of southern whites was of "educated niggers." This was the essential paranoia of the Jim Crow South.

SINCE EMANCIPATION, BLACKS had to overcome formidable obstacles to their education, ranging from organized white resistance to authorized white neglect. The very reasons that encouraged so many blacks to acquire an education after the Civil War were no less compelling in driving many whites to oppose black schools. Even as the debate persisted over the merits of such schooling, the opposition mounted in some areas made it a moot question. Speaking with "an intelligent business man," a visiting journalist was

startled by the virulence of his reaction to an important black school in the vicinity. The school should be dynamited, he

insisted, and the principal run out of the state. That, he explained, would force blacks to understand that ignorance, hard labor, and white domination constituted their permanent destiny. Although the visitor found the hostility contained in these remarks "incomprehensible," he did not find it exceptional.

That kind of hostility manifested itself all too frequently in violence directed selectively at black schools, teachers, and administrators. The deliberate burning of schoolhouses, along with the harassment and murder of teachers after emancipation and during Reconstruction, developed into a wave of terror directed at efforts to educate black children. The fate of Alonzo B. Corliss in Alamance County, North Carolina, typified the violence Klansmen visited on white teachers at black schools during Reconstruction. Employed by the Friends Freedman's Association, the lame teacher was dragged out of his bed and house without his crutches. The attackers flogged his body with raw cowhide and green hickory sticks, after which they cut off the hair from one side of his head and painted half of his face and shorn head black. For three hours on a cold November night, Corliss lay where they had left him

in the woods before he regained consciousness. When found, he was attempting to crawl home. He had asked his attackers what offenses he had committed against them, and they had responded, "Teaching niggers." Nimrod Porter, a farmer and sheriff in Maury County, Tennessee, tersely recorded in his diary the fate of the local black school in 1868: "The Ku, Kluck, Klan ordered the School Mistress to stop her School. She done so and told the children to go home, so the School is broken up."

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The sight of blacks carrying books often had the same effect on whites as the sight of armed blacks, and many would have found no real distinction between the two threats.

After the Civil War, in Charleston, South Carolina, black children hid their books in market baskets until they reached the schoolhouse, fearing they would be harassed or turned back if whites thought they were going to school. Caroline Smith, who lived in Walton County, Georgia, told how Klansmen were determined to keep black schools out of the area. "They went to a colored man there, whose son had been teaching school, and they took every book they [the family] had and threw them into the fire; and they said they would just dare any other nigger to have a book in his house." When whites burned down the first black school in Selma, Alabama, in the 1890s, a black resident thought it resulted from white resentment over the effects of education, particularly overhearing blacks called "Mr." and "Mrs."

### White Teachers Ostracized

The experience of white teachers in the black schools depended on whether they were native whites or northerners. While an often grudging accommodation was made to native white teachers, those who had come from the North



*The Zion School for Colored Children, Charleston, South Carolina, 1868*

were seldom fully accepted in the community. Accused of indoctrinating and overeducating black children, some found themselves ostracized in the community and subject to violence. Unable to find lodgings among whites, they often had to depend on black hospitality, and that in turn only increased white resentment over race mixing. Black teachers, whether native-born or not, found themselves labeled “dangerous niggers” and had to be particularly careful in what and how they taught. If not humiliated, beaten, murdered, or forced into exile, some teachers, white and black, found it nearly impossible to obtain credit in local stores.

When Lura Beam, a new graduate of Barnard College in New York, chose to teach in a black school in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1908, she was warned the white community would ostracize her. Upon arriving at the train station and requesting that a hack driver take her to the school, she was told, “Lady, that’s a nigger school, you don’t want to go there.” Memories of the recent race riot

were still fresh, and Beam found an atmosphere demanding caution when dealing with both races. If black parents and pupils ignored her on the street, even crossing to the other side to avoid her, that was done, she learned, “to protect us both.” If they were to retain her, blacks needed to show her the same deference afforded all whites, even if local whites refused such deference. For Beam, however, there had been no way to prepare for this extraordinary situation. “I was told to get used to the fact that a Negro does nothing with me unless he is waiting on me. He walks behind me. He stands while I sit. He knows better than to eat in my presence.”

Along with their teachers, black students were always vulnerable, likely to encounter hostility and suspicion for the simple act of attending school. Increasingly, the students found themselves thrust into the political arena as a volatile issue, the objects of race-baiting politicians who hoped to exploit for their own benefit white fears of educated blacks. W.C. Handy recalled the number of times his

band was hired to provide music for white political rallies. That would invariably subject them to a "passel" of political oratory and demagoguery. He remembered in particular the gubernatorial candidate who vowed, if elected, not to spend one dollar for "nigger education," because "education unfits the nigger." After employing the traditional

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tribute to those faithful blacks who had stood by their masters and mistresses during the Civil War, the candidate asked the audience, "Now what kind of nigger did we leave them with? It was the uneducated nigger." In the event of another war, however, he asked the audience if they felt they could leave their families with "the nigger of today." The crowd responded with a chorus of "No's." That was why he would refuse to spend one dollar "for nigger education," the candidate concluded, his voice quivering, mist coming over his eyes as he extended one arm while resting the other dramatically over his heart. After the candidate's final words, Handy's band played "Dixie." When they were safely removed from the crowd, members of the band recalled the speech, exchanged "amazed" glances, and nudged each other with their elbows. "Then we all laughed — laughed." Recalling that incident, Handy reflected over the effects of the speech on his fellow band members. "We could laugh and we could make rhythm. What better armor could you ask?"

#### Teaching Deference for Superiors

The white South was never of one mind on the question of whether to educate blacks and, if so, to what degree and under whose auspices. Confronted with the establishment of schools and the apparent determination of blacks to utilize them, some white southerners relented. But the accommodation they made varied considerably in enthusiasm and tolerance. Under control of "the best white people of the community," and with the right kind of teachers, realistic goals, and an appreciation of limits, black schools could be geared to a productive and stable labor force. The idea was simple enough, and no one expressed it more coherently than Major Peter W. Meldrim of Savannah when he addressed a commencement at a black college. "I

believe in education for you people," he declared. "The state of Georgia needs intelligent Negroes [which he pronounced as "Niggras"] but I do not believe in educating you people to want things you can never get. We must educate the Negro to be the best possible Negro and not a bad imitation of a white man." The applause that greeted these remarks reflected the feeling of the mostly black audience that the speaker, in supporting black schools, was far in advance of local white opinion.

Since emancipation, numerous "leading" whites had embraced a similar argument: Teach the newly freed slaves a proper deference for their superiors, fidelity to contracts, respect for property, the rewards of industriousness, and other virtues calculated to ensure a compliant and efficient labor force. By the early twentieth century, that frame of mind could induce southern whites to encourage black education even as they discouraged any schooling calculated to inflate black expectations. And it could encourage certain northern philanthropists to devote their efforts and resources to develop in the South an education for blacks that in no way threatened white supremacy. The idea was to make black education compatible with the prevailing racial hierarchy — indeed, to use the classroom to preserve and reinforce that hierarchy. "The more intelligent the negro becomes," a Maryland newspaper editorialized, "the more he sees his dependence upon the republic that made his advancement possible, and the more he respects and treats with deference the dominant

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race, and the less boisterous, clamorous, and abusive he becomes." Considering itself a friend of black education, the same newspaper, in responding to those less friendly, thought the entire society benefited from teaching blacks "a greater respect for toil — manual toil." It envisaged blacks building houses, paving streets, making clothes, and painting and plastering, as well as farming. "What the negro needs is to be taught and shown that labor is his salvation — not books. The state appropriation is intended to encourage that teaching."

What underlay the movement for black education among some whites was clearly the pressing need to inculcate a

new generation of blacks with proper moral and religious values. That overriding concern persuaded a white bishop in Mississippi to insist that black education was too important to be left entirely or primarily to black teachers. The ideal school, he thought, would be under the supervision of a white clergyman, where "carefully selected" portions of the Bible would become a part of the curriculum, and "where the race should be taught that race integrity is obedience to God's own creation and appointment, and that race intercourse, kindly and cordial, is not race equality."

#### Dangers of Overeducation

Not only must blacks be given the right kind of education, but also they should not be overeducated. The woman for whom Richard Wright worked expressed surprise when he told her he was in the seventh grade. "Then why are you going to school?" she asked. Her surprise turned to shock when he told her of his ambition to be a writer. "A what?" she exclaimed, needing confirmation. "You'll never be a writer," she told Wright. "Who on earth put such ideas into your nigger head?" Benjamin Mays recalled the alienation he felt in his native county in South Carolina: "The chasm was so wide between black and white in my day that I never felt that any white person in Greenwood County or in South Carolina would be interested in anything I did." Actually, some whites were acutely interested in what blacks did and feared the consequences. The problem with northern-imported education and educators, many whites concurred, had been the attempt to make Negroes "ambitious" by training them as doctors, lawyers, and preachers. "They acquire uppishness; they begin to swell, and to fancy that they are equal to the whites." And some chose to abandon the countryside. "After a fellow has learned to wear a clean shirt at college," a white South Carolinian lamented, "he is not going into the cotton patch."

#### Intellectual Inferiority

The inferior mental capacity of Negroes had long been a staple in the arsenal of white racism. Under the cover of ethnological science, some whites argued with absolute certainty that the Negro's brain could only be educated within clear limits. "There's no bringing him past a certain point — and that's a low one" repeated a popular axiom

about the intellectual limits of blacks. Dating back to slavery, this belief confirmed the inability of black people to look after themselves and their need to defer to the superior judgment and wisdom of whites. While some thought the race could be improved through education over a long period of time, many felt the defects were irremediable, citing as evidence the relative mental capacity of white and black children, in particular the "imitative" qualities of the black race. "The black child has a good word-memory and a good eye-memory," the superintendent of the Birmingham public schools explained to a visitor in 1909, laying down the classic argument. "He will often learn by rote quicker than a white child — but it is a different thing when it comes to understanding what he learns."

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Of course, if blacks had natural intellectual limits that consigned them permanently to an inferior position, whites had nothing to fear. That was one way advocates of black education could justify expenditures for black schools. "You need not be afraid of the negro boy," a North Carolina legislator assured a joint session of the General Assembly. "It will take him a thousand years to get where your boy is." Even if black children competed favorably with whites, a southern white leader argued, the growth and development of black intelligence had its limits. "The Negro's skull is thicker," he explained, "his brain is smaller than the white man's," and he cited scientific testimony that the sutures of the skull, which permit growth and expansion, develop earlier for blacks, usually at the age of fourteen. "This accounts for the fact that while Negro children at school often compare favorably with whites, adults do not."

No matter how fervently whites embraced these beliefs in black inferiority, no matter what controls were placed on the quality and extent of black education, the fears and skepticism never really subsided. The principal concern remained readily apparent — the danger in teaching blacks until, in the words of one fearful educator, they had the same "instincts and drives" as whites. That would be a certain invitation to trouble. That would be "worse than foolhardy," a prominent white editor affirmed. "It was not unlike placing a loaded magazine rifle in the arms of a

chimpanzee." If taught the same lessons as the white child, would not the black child be encouraged to develop the same instincts, the same interests, and the same ambitions? Would that child not then aspire to the same goals and insist upon achieving them in the same way? No one summed up white fears more succinctly than the Mississippi politician who warned, "Ambition in the negro is concreted in lust."

#### Race-Baiting Politicians

That was reason enough for many elected public officials to rigidly control and minimize black educational opportunities, even to oppose expending funds altogether for the education of Negroes. "It is money thrown away," a Mississippi politician argued in 1899, alleging that education simply implanted in blacks aspirations and ambitions whites would never permit them to gratify. Deploping any efforts to encourage black education, J. Thomas Heflin warned the Alabama Constitutional Convention of 1902 that "as soon as you elevate him you ruin him." And that could prove disastrous to both races. "The negroes are being educated very rapidly, and I say in the light of all the history of the past, some day when the two separate and distinct races are thrown together, some day the clash will come and the survival of the fittest, and I do not believe it is incumbent upon us to lift him up and educate him on an equal footing that he may be armed and equipped when the combat comes."

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No matter what blacks learned in the classroom, white critics suggested, it could not really improve or elevate the race. To the argument that educating blacks equipped them for citizenship, the governor of Georgia responded in 1901, "We have failed. They are worse citizens today and more dangerous to the State than they were 30 years ago. Education has had no more effect on them morally and intellectually than it has physically. God made them negroes and we cannot by education make them white folks. We are on the wrong track. We must turn back." A Presbyterian clergyman in South Carolina reached the same conclusion in 1889, dismissing as absurd the notion

that education might be a panacea for blacks. "[A]n 'educated' negro," he noted, "is just as much negro as before, just the same raw hide volume with the incongruous addition of a gilt edge; he is only a little more aggressively offensive than his less ornate brother."

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The assumptions of whites about the intellectual capacity of blacks all too often betrayed the fear that they might be proven wrong. In much of the white South, the belief grew — with additional evidence of expressive if not aggressive black behavior — that the danger of black education still lay in the distinct possibility that it would succeed in elevating blacks to the same level as whites. "Let us be frank and honest," the *Charleston News and Observer* editorialized in 1904. "The great mass of the white people of the South have no idea of educating the Negro to be a citizen — their equal, either social or political. They want him to be the white man's help, and if he is not willing to occupy a subordinate position in this country, the sooner he leaves it, or the southern part of it at least, the better for all concerned." No doubt many whites would have seriously heeded the warning sounded by a Raleigh newspaper, though it was meant to mock opponents of black education: "Reading and writing still bear watching. When a negro learns to articulate correctly and say 'they' instead of 'dey' and 'that' instead of 'dat' we are prepared to expect the worst."

Whatever the safeguards, then, the specter of an educated Negro continued to haunt much of the New South. He was an affront to white sensibilities, a challenge to white expectations. It had long been an article of faith that an educated black person was subversive of good race relations. Education, like the ownership of land, spoiled the Negro as a laborer, developed in him wants that could never be satisfied, expectations that could never be realized. Education, like the ballot, inflated black aspirations toward full equality. Education, a South Carolina "gentleman" bluntly affirmed, "spoils him [the Negro] as a nigger, and it doesn't turn him into a man." Still worse, a Memphis newspaper insisted, blacks obtain "just enough of learning to make them realize how hopelessly their race is behind the other in everything that makes a great peo-



ple, and they attempt to 'get even' by insolence, which is ever the resentment of inferiors."

The problem for many whites finally came down to perceptions of the effects of black schooling in a society that depended on blacks to perform most of its menial tasks. "It's a question," a Montgomery, Alabama, lawyer argued, "who will do the dirty work. In this country the white man won't; the Negro must. There's got to be a mudsill somewhere. If you educate the Negroes they won't stay where they belong; and you must consider them as a race, because if you let a few rise it makes the others discontented." Rather than fit blacks for daily life, then, education made them increasingly useless and provocative. It raised as many if not more problems than it resolved. "It tends to make the negro unwilling to work where he is wanted," a white "gentleman" explained to an English visitor in 1909, "and desirous of working where he is not wanted. . . ."

#### Elevating Black Aspirations

The educational opportunities already extended to blacks had, in the estimation of many white observers, unsettled labor relations and exacerbated race relations. "It has taken him out of his true sphere and has not qualified him for any other," a prominent Virginian wrote in 1888. "Have you known one of these so-called educated negroes, who depends for support on the labor of his hands?" The consequences of educated blacks unable to make full use of their education went to the very heart of white concerns. Access to schools would mislead Negroes and falsely raise their expectations. Had not the experience of Reconstruction demonstrated to whites the disastrous consequences of elevating black aspirations? Bennet Puryear, a Baptist educator at Richmond College and former slaveholder, in a blistering published attack on black education, advanced the popular notion that the very qualities — docility, unthinking obedience, and improvidence — that "fit" the Negro for menial offices and a subordinate position disqualified him for "the higher walks of life." If black ambitions were heightened, Professor Puryear asked, how could blacks be expected to be satisfied with their low economic, social, and political position? To educate a laborer beyond his calling was to unfit

him for that kind of labor. "If a man is engaged in work below his education, he feels degraded by it, and that sense of degradation compels him to do inferior work."

The results of black schooling, then, would soon be apparent. "The bootblack is not a better boot-black, but a worse one, the ditcher is not a better ditcher, but a worse one, if he can also calculate a solar eclipse or read with a critic's ken the choral odes of the Greek dramatists. . . . The cook, that must read the daily newspaper will spoil your beef and your bread; the stable pickaninny, that has to do his grammar and arithmetic, will leave your boots unblacked and your horse uncurried." By its very nature, Puryear noted, a public school system legitimized the doctrine of Negro equality, as it tried to prepare blacks for the highest functions of

life. But if the Negro was "by congenital inferiority" unfit for such functions, as Puryear insisted, to attempt to educate him had to be "a manifest absurdity." And it would be of lasting disservice to the black race. "To invite the negro from those pursuits which require firm muscles and little intelligence to those callings which demand less muscle and higher intelligence, is to invite him to his sure extermination."

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The argument advanced by Puryear would be repeated in various forms for the next half-century. For many whites it was nothing less than practical good sense. Appraising public sentiment, a black educator suggested in 1904 that "the mass of the whites" thought educating the Negro would make him of less material advantage to them. The Negro could be more easily exploited when ignorant. "[I]t really seems hard to be rid of the notion that the negro is to be 'used' without regard to his success and advantage." When two years earlier Alice May penned an essay, "What A Southern Woman Has To Say On The Negro Question," the practical consequences of elevating blacks through education was uppermost in her mind. "Why, education is ruination to [the] nigger, he does not want to



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work any longer after he learns to say A B C." That was bound to unsettle white families accustomed to black servants but finding none in whom they could any longer place much confidence. Fretting over his sister's inability to find a decent cook, Nathan C. Munroe Jr. blamed it directly on the schools open to blacks. Clearly, he wrote her, "too much learning drives them mad."

#### Praise for Tuskegee

To talk of a "good ole nigger," as did a white preacher in Tuskegee, Alabama, was to talk of an uneducated and satisfied Negro. "He never had any education and never wanted any. You take some of these young niggers that get a little learnin' and that ain't no gittin' along with 'em." The clergyman did, however, have some good words to say for the black school in Tuskegee. "I'll say one thing . . . for this nigger school of [Booker T.] Washington's hyar — they won't let 'em be too uppity that." He recited the story of a black student coming to Tuskegee on a crowded train who refused to give up his seat to a white "lady." Washington happened to be on the train and demanded to know the youth's destination. When he responded, "To the school," Washington retorted, "No, you ain't. We don't want your sort hyar. You can turn aroun' and go home." In telling the story, the preacher placed his seal of approval on Tuskegee Institute. "Yes, Booker's got some good ideas, if he is a nigger."

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The education of blacks had somehow to be reconciled with their political and economic subordination, and in the eyes of many whites the contradiction could simply not be successfully resolved. "If educating blacks injured whites, was not the state acting contrary to its best interests? "Our civilization and safety require the social bar to be forever preserved between the races. Education of negroes tends to throw down that bar. It is preparing the way for social equality. Enfranchisement was a step in that direction. Equal education is a tremendous stride."

The only way to make certain that the Negro never again became a factor in southern politics, as a voter or as an officeholder, was to curtail his educational opportunities. A

Mississippi editor talked of the benefits — "quiet, good order and perfect security" — the elimination of black voting in 1890 had brought to the state. But in 1898 he expressed alarm — "folly bordering on to crime" — over the future, if blacks should take advantage of educational opportunities to qualify to vote. That concern alone prompted whites in some regions to oppose black schools. As many whites readily agreed that the Negro as a voter was "a menace," why should the South provide the education that would enable him to vote and hold office? To uplift the black man politically, to place him on an equal basis with whites, was to uplift him socially, and that was reason enough for whites to be alarmed. "Equality is equality," an educator emphasized. "If the negro is fit . . . to make laws for the control of our conduct and property . . . he is certainly fit to eat with us at our tables, to sleep in our beds, to be invited into our parlors, and to do all acts and things which a white man may do."

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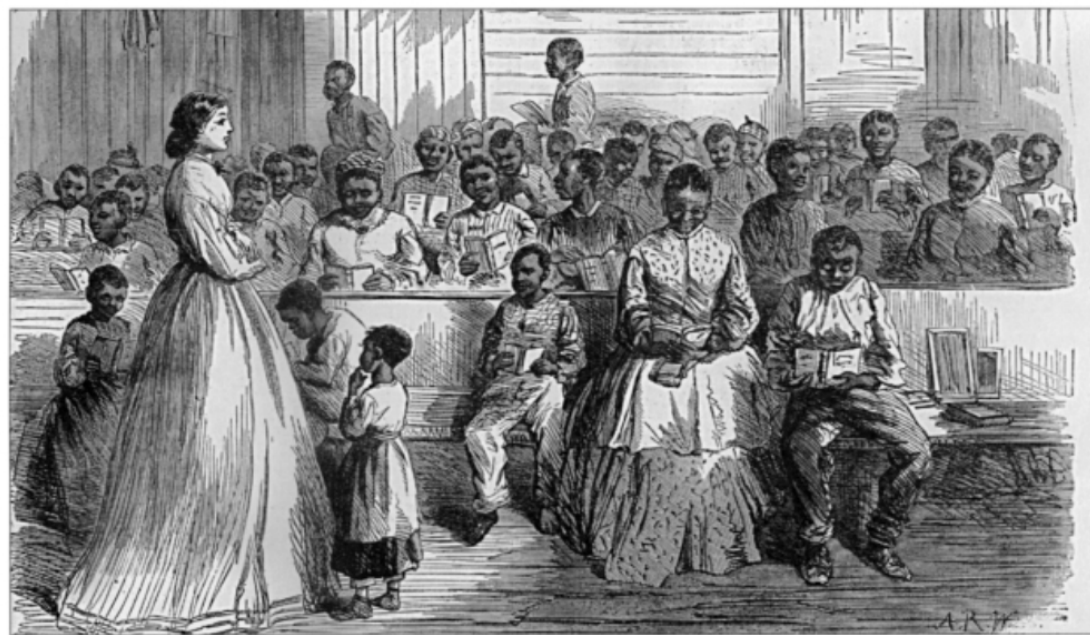
*"The cook, that must read the daily newspaper will spoil your beef and your bread; the stable pickaninny, that has to do his grammar and arithmetic, will leave your boots unblacked and your horse uncurried."*

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White opinion could run deep on this question, tapping the very core of white racial fears. To educate the Negro was to inflict on him cruel and unusual punishment, and to inflict on society a potential monster. Inflated with ideas of his own importance and capability, the educated Negro was bound to become discontented, resentful, and dangerous. "When a negro boy or girl is taught to regard himself or herself as the social equal of white children," a white psychologist warned in 1904, "a state of feeling is engendered in the breast of that pupil that is to curse his or her life for all time." No matter what was taught in the classroom, education fed the propensity of blacks to think themselves the equals of whites, potentially if not now, and such perceptions inflicted serious damage on the black psyche, with far-reaching consequences for the entire society.

#### Protecting the Chastity of White Women

Thwarted in his ambitions, marked by public sentiment as an inferior, denied a social elevation commensurate with his



*A school for children of freedmen in Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1868*

intellectual training, the educated Negro was likely to visit his resentment on the most prized possession of white men — their women.

To protect "the chastity of white women," to preserve southern white civilization, was to reduce black expectations and ambitions. And because education did more than anything else to elevate those expectations and ambitions, common sense — if not the internal security of the white South and the sanctity of white womanhood — demanded a reconsideration of the issue. Was it not possible, a prominent white politician wrote to President Theodore Roosevelt, that educating blacks armed them with a weapon they might use to combat whites? That argument, he thought, was gaining credence in the South "by the disposition on the part of the negro everywhere apparent to declare himself independent of the white man." In her crusade to awaken the nation to the nature of the black menace, Rebecca Felton noted that in her state of Georgia the number of crimes committed by blacks increased proportionally to the amount of money spent on black education. In expressing support of Felton's crusade, a northern woman offered advice Felton had already embraced: "When the

people of the South I mean the *white people* learn to curb the education of the Negro then will they learn the value of the purity of our sex."

The association of crime and education gained in popularity in proportion to the increased publicity given to aggressive behavior by literate blacks. "Book learning has not proved to be a blessing to them as a rule," a North Carolinian affirmed, citing the growth in court cases and blacks in prisons and on chain gangs. "You do not find many in these places that are unable to read." The president of North Carolina Agricultural College, after estimating that blacks were "three times as criminal" as whites, found that literate blacks committed the majority of the crimes. Unpersuaded by these arguments, a Raleigh newspaper defended black education. Comparing the number of crimes committed by "educated" whites and uneducated blacks, it questioned the growing inclination to view the educated black criminal "as a victim of his ill-advised opportunities."

For black southerners, this proved to be a frustrating, an exasperating, an impossible situation. Even as whites scorned black incompetence, they feared evidence of black competence. Even as whites mocked the intellectual preten-



sions of blacks, they feared intelligent blacks. Even as whites derided blacks for their ignorance, they resented educated, literate, and ambitious blacks. "We, the Southern people, entertain no prejudice toward the ignorant per se

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inoffensive Negro," an Alabama editor explained. "It is because we know him and for him we entertain a compassion. But our blood boils when the educated Negro asserts himself politically. We regard each assertion as an unfriendly encroachment upon our native superior rights, and a dare-devil menace to our control of the affairs of the state." After insisting that the South had given the Negro "the best education fitted for the life he was to live," a Georgia editor and publisher threw up her hands in exasperation over the effects of black schools. "The more education the negro receives the more ungrateful he becomes for the blessings that have made this education possible."

For blacks to acquire an education threatened many whites, including those who argued that blacks were mentally unfit to be educated. For blacks to remain ignorant and illiterate, on the other hand, invited toleration, even as whites used that ignorance and illiteracy to exploit blacks and to justify white superiority. What fed white apprehension and talk of race war were not so much perceptions of a race regressing but rather of one that was progressing. How were black southerners to resolve this kind of paradox? What could they do for themselves that would not be construed as a threat to the internal security of the dominant society? W.E.B. Du Bois came to appreciate the depth of white fears and how those fears were directed less at the vagabond or the criminal black as at the educated black "who is coming forward":

If my own city of Atlanta had offered it today the choice between 500 Negro college graduates — forceful, busy, ambitious men of property and self-respect, and 500 black cringing vagrants and criminals, the popular vote in favor of the criminals would be simply overwhelming. Why? because they want Negro crime? No, not that they fear Negro crime less, but that they fear Negro ambition and success more. They can deal with crime by chain-gang and lynch law, or at least they think they can, but the South can conceive neither machinery nor place for the educated, self-reliant, self-assertive black man."

Curtailing the educational opportunities of blacks, along with segregation and disfranchisement, were important mechanisms of racial control. In the white mind, these were all ways to resolve racial tensions. Not only would limited schooling contain black political and social ambitions, but it would also help whites to maintain an adequate source of cheap labor. And, consistent with white perceptions of a new generation of blacks, it would discourage black independence, advancement, and achievement. Reflecting over why whites should be so "unsettled" over "a few inefficient, grotesquely inefficient negro schools," a University of Mississippi professor provided a response that went to the very heart of the issue: "Because the white people want to 'keep the negro in his place,' and educated people have a way of making their own places and their own terms." If whites feared "liberated minds," he suggested, it was because such minds contemplated rights and demands that, in the case of black people, would result in racial strife and endanger the entire community. "So thinks the average white man."

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Black southerners readily understood the professor's observation. They understood, too, that in the estimation of many fearful whites what separated the New Negro from the old Negro was access to schools and the acquisition of literacy. A story that would make the rounds among blacks, no doubt spanning several generations, revealed once again a marvelous insight into the workings of the white mind. As he was leaving the railroad depot with a northern visitor, a southern white man saw two Negroes, one asleep and the other reading a newspaper. He kicked the Negro reading a newspaper. "Would you please explain that?" the northerner asked. "I don't understand it. I would think that if you were going to kick one you would kick the lazy one who's sleeping." The white southerner replied, "That's not the one we're worried about."

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