Then And Now

Exploding 'docile sheep' myth, defiant, daring black men revolt against injustice in multitude of ways

By Jack Slater

[He] was our manhood, our living black manhood! This was his meaning to his people. And in honoring him we honor the best in ourselves, . . . And we will know him then for what he was and is—a Prince—our own black shining Prince!—who didn’t hesitate to die, because he loved us so.”

—Ossie Davis on Malcolm X

“I AM a man!”
He probably told himself those words, or some variation of them, over and over, like a litany, until the words seemed to become giant voices shrieking in his brain. Eventually those words would save him, but for the moment he simply kept repeating them, needing to believe them, in spite of the fact that his life had never revealed any evidence of manhood. His name was Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey and Gabriel Prosser, yet he might have been any other slave sane enough to say No! or driven enough to plot mass murder. His name was Frederick Douglass and Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, yet he might have been any other brother off the block angry enough or alive enough to demand relief from racial grief. He might have been, in fact, any committed yet suppressed black man determined to risk all—to get out or to get others out. But white folks, who thought, all those years ago, that black men were docile sheep, didn’t understand such an individual.

DENMARK Vesey and Gabriel Prosser, for instance, had certainly declared themselves to be men. Both, one a freedman and the other a slave, planned slave revolts in the early 19th century, and intended to liberate their respective communities by killing every white man, woman and child within the radius of their insurrections. Prosser, a powerful, 24-year, six-foot-two slave, persuaded several thousand blacks to join his army and march on Richmond, Va., in August 1800. And Vesey, a taciturn, muscular carpenter in his early fifties recruited an estimated 9,000 slaves to join his army in 1822 to march on Charleston, S. C. But both men were betrayed by “loyal” house servants, and their respective revolts collapsed. And both were hanged.

In August 1831, a short, somewhat dumpy, 31-year-old man—one who was deeply religious, very gentle and very ruthless—also plotted to kill every white person who would have the misfortune of crossing his path. He was a mystic, and he heard voices, saw drops of blood on the corn in fields and witnessed “white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle.” All of those things spoke as if in a single voice to tell him that he, Nat Turner, must seek vengeance against the white man and particularly against the white slave master in Southampton County, Va. At first, Nat shrank from such a command, but after a long period of hesitation and an even longer period of self-doubting, he submitted himself to the voice and reluctantly undertook to plot his vengeance for God.

Unlike Vesey and Prosser who had led thousands, Nat recruited only four slaves who, in turn, persuaded two others to join the insurrection. And as the world would learn, Nat and his fellow conspirators were not betrayed.

“[Nat] came into a world that defined him violently,” writes historian Lerone Bennett Jr., “and there was no other way for him to define himself except in reaction to that violence. He had either to meet it, to run away from it, or deform himself by conforming to it.”

On the Sunday night of August 21, 1831, Nat Turner set out to meet that violence. At about 10 o’clock, he and his six rebels first visited the house of his master, then the houses of others; and before sunrise, after a night of blood and butchery, 57 whites lay dead and 60 slave recruits had joined Nat’s vengeful band.

The whites in the community retaliated, but Nat escaped into the Virginia swamps for two months. Eventually he was captured and stood trial to plead not guilty, because, as he said, he did not feel guilty.
Meeting secretly in Virginia woods, Nat Turner and his fellow rebels, who are among America's first "crazy niggers," plan bloody slave revolt which would eventually convulse entire South in waves of panic. Below, more modern "crazy nigger," Dick Gregory, gives symbolic sign of peace from jailhouse window.

Later, after Nat had died on the gallows, author W.S. Drewry would write that the Turner insurrection, which had convulsed the entire South with waves of panic, "was a landmark in the history of slavery. . . . It was the forerunner of the great slavery debates which resulted in the abolition of slavery in the United States and was, indirectly, most instrumental in bringing about this result. Its importance is truly conceived by the old Negroes of Southampton and vicinity, who reckon all time from 'Nat's Fray' or 'Old Nat's War.'"

Nat Turner, however, was—and remains—unique among those black men who are now described as liberationists. He became a murderer, a mass murderer, and those words, curiously enough, can be applied to no other prominent so-called "crazy nigger" in America, even though each, like Nat, was defined by violence and chose to meet it head-on rather than run from it.

The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, for instance, was surely one such "crazy nigger." As others have observed, Douglass laid the foundation for today's black protest movement. One hundred and fourteen years ago he was staging sit-ins in Massachusetts railway cars. One hundred and ten years ago he was leading the battle to integrate public schools in Rochester, N. Y. But before he began doing any of those things, even before he escaped North to become a fugitive slave, the young Douglass had become such a "crazy nigger" that he took on his own nigger-breaker. According to Douglass, this is how it happened: His master, it seems, was at his wit's end in trying to make Douglass a more docile, more obedient servant. When threats didn't succeed, Douglass was sent to a professional nigger-breaker whose job—and he was good at it—was to destroy the spirits of tough black men. The nigger-breaker was named Edward Covey, and with whip in hand he worked over his victim for several days. Finally, Douglass, now truly "crazy," rebelled. The two men struggled, and in the shock of being physically assaulted by a slave, the nigger-breaker walked off and never touched Douglass again.

When he remembered that incident years later, Douglass would write, "A man without force is without the essential dignity of humanity. Human nature is so constituted that it cannot honor a helpless man, although it can pity him; and even this it cannot do for long if the signs

Continued on Next Page
of power do not arise. He only can understand the effect of this combat on my spirit who has himself incurred something, hazarded something, in repelling the unjust and cruel aggressions of a tyrant... I reached the point, at which I was not afraid to die. This spirit made me a free man in fact, while I remained a slave in form. When a slave cannot be flogged, he is more than half free."

DOUGLASS reached the zenith of his power and fame during the abolitionist movement in which over 100,000 slaves, "crazy niggers" all, risked their lives to escape to Canada through the Underground Railroad. After the brave hopes of outlawing slavery were realized during the Civil War, and the braver hopes of a better life for blacks collapsed after the Reconstruction era, Douglass, always the warrior, continued his fight for human freedom—this time battling for black economic power. His death in 1895 left a void that was filled—some would say rather dubiously—by the leading black man of the day, Booker T. Washington, head of Tuskegee Institute.

By the turn of the century, America's racial disease, advancing unchecked, was hastening the decline of a sense of purpose and the deterioration of an already shattered sense of self among black men. A psychological vacuum was being created, and Marcus Garvey, sensing its emptiness, moved to fill it.

Du Bois spoke essentially to black men's sense of reason, but "crazy nigger" Garvey spoke to their hearts and, ultimately, to that more vulnerable, softer part, their pride.

"When Europe was inhabited by a race of cannibals, a race of savages, naked men, heathens and pagans," Garvey said nearly 40 years before Malcolm X preached a similar sermon, "Africa was peopled with a race of cultured black men, who were masters in art, science and literature; men who, it is said, were like gods... Why then should we lose hope? Black men, you were once great; you shall be great again. Lose not courage, lose not faith, go forward..."

Garvey's message of racial pride, together with his doctrine of black nationalism and his audacious challenge to the colonizing whites at home and abroad, galvanized urban black America in the '20s. During a ten-year span, he organized the largest black mass movement in the United States, and for one brief, beautiful moment the urban poor thought of themselves as belonging at last—to something or to some
one thing.

"The Negroes of the world say, 'We are striking homewards towards Africa to make the big black republic. And in the making of Africa a big black republic, what is the barrier? The barrier is the white man; and we say to the white man who now dominates Africa that it is to his interest to clear out of Africa now, because we are coming not as in the time of Father Abraham, 200,000 strong, but we are coming 400 million strong. . . . We are out to get what has belonged to us politically, socially, economically, and in every way."

In 1925, however, the little Jamaican, who had come to lead black America out of the land of Pharaoh, was convicted of fraud for using the mails in a complex scheme to finance the Black Star Line, his Back-to-Africa steamship company. He went to prison, and his movement slowly collapsed and lay dormant until the black protest movements of the '60s revived his message of racial pride.

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SANE Garvey, other "crazy niggers" have come—and gone: Adam Clayton Powell, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, all completely different men who spoke, and still speak, to the different, complex needs of modern times—Powell raging and hammering at the unresponsive government and skillfully using his political clout to force a reluctant U.S. Congress to change; King employing appeals to conscience—boycotts, sit-ins, marches, or using his body as a weapon of passive resistance against injustice; and Malcolm X using the power of words to brand the white man "the devil" and to declare that economic power equals freedom, that freedom equals manhood, and black manhood resides in love and respect for the blackness of one's skin.

The history of black America's voyage in this country is a history of such men, a history of unparalleled oppression coupled with a courage which can also be described as unparalleled in the brief, unhappy life of these United States. Embodying the in-exhaustible voice of protest, the "crazy niggers" of black history emerge as the real heroes of American history, for they were, and still remain, the unhyphenated, uncompromised, true believers in independence.

The faith of these believers has always been strong enough to move others to such faith. Thus Douglass' passionate commitment helped to give birth to the involvement of Du Bois, and Garvey's thunderous exhortations encouraged the rise of the formidable, fiery Malcolm X.

And Malcolm and Martin and the entire weight of the '60s
As a slave, Frederick Douglass had become so "crazy" a "nigger" that he physically attacked his own "nigger-breaker." After he escaped slavery, Douglass rose to become one of the great abolitionists of 19th century. His protests laid foundation for today's black protest movement.

spawned strains of "craziness" in men who would follow, brash younger men such as Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, George Jackson, Jonathan Jackson, Fred Hampton; or others such as Muhammad Ali willing to give up his heavyweight title for principles in which he believed, Dick Gregory willing to sacrifice a lucrative career in order to dramatize many forms of injustice, or James Meredith willing to brave the physical dangers of becoming the first black to integrate the University of Mississippi. All were, and are, defiant, daring black men, as different from each other as Du Bois was from Nat Turner, or Marcus Garvey from Frederick Douglass, but their common denominator can be found in their willingness to say No!, and in their insistence in declaring to those who would have rather not heard it: "I am a man!"

They were "crazy niggers"—the pillars which have always supported the black man and helped him to endure.

Battling injustices aimed at him and others inside prison walls, George Jackson became one of the most articulate spokesmen for black prisoners everywhere in the United States. He authored two books, Soledad Brother and Blood in My Eye, both of which described life of black men behind bars. He was killed last year in an alleged escape attempt from California's San Quentin Prison.