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“We Have Found a Moses”: Theodore Bilbo, Black Nationalism, and the Greater Liberia Bill of 1939

By MICHAEL W. FITZGERALD

HISTORIANS FREQUENTLY DEPICT BLACK OPINION DURING THE GREAT Depression in monolithic terms, as being sympathetic to the New Deal if impatient at its slow pace of change. When oppositional voices receive notice, they are generally those of the radical Left.¹ The often-studied progressive trend during the 1930s was real enough, but historians frequently overlook other currents—for example, black nationalism. When the topic is mentioned at all, phrases like “in decline” or at “an all-time low” are used to describe it.² Recently, however, a profusion of black nationalist movements at the local level have been noted.³ African “repatriation” became one focus of this sentiment, a goal

¹ Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue*. Vol. I: *The Depression Decade* (New York, 1978), Chap. 6; John B. Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era: Liberalism and Race* (Knoxville, 1980), Chap. 7; and Raymond Wolters, *Negroes and the Great Depression: The Problem of Economic Recovery* (Westport, Conn., 1970), xiv–xv and 383–84.

My interest in this subject grew out of my employment as an editorial assistant at the Garvey Papers project at UCLA. I would like to thank Robert A. Hill and Barbara Bair, the editors of the project, for their generous assistance. I would also like to thank Eric Arneson, Wilson Moses, Margaret Washington, Jill Watts, and my wife and colleague, Judy Kutulas. I am indebted to Jan Hilligas for research assistance. Finally, the manuscripts staff at the University of Southern Mississippi and the interlibrary loan staffs at the University of Minnesota and St. Olaf College facilitated my research a great deal.

² E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America* (Chicago and London, 1962), 48 (first quotation); Alphonso Pinkney, *Red, Black, and Green: Black Nationalism in the United States* (Cambridge, Eng., and other cities, 1976), 58 (second quotation); Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 252–53; Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (Princeton, 1983); John H. Bracey Jr., August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, eds., *Black Nationalism in America* (Indianapolis and New York, 1970), 370–400; and Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York, 1967), 143.

³ Ernest Allen Jr., “Satokata Takahashi and the Flowering of Black Messianic Nationalism,” *Black Scholar*, XXIV (Winter 1994), 23–46; and Allen, “Waiting for Tojo: The Pro-Japan Vigil of Black Missourians, 1932–1943,” *Gateway Heritage*, XV (Fall 1994), 16–33. Also see introduction to Robert A. Hill, comp. and ed., *The FBI’s RACON: Racial Conditions in the United States during World War II* (Boston, 1995).

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that dramatized opposition to the mainstream liberal and integrationist agenda.⁴ The “Back-to-Africa” movement propelled leaders committed to black nationalism into the limelight, for the only time in the decade. Supporters of emigration were derided as dupes because they enlisted segregationist allies, but a close examination reveals a more complex reality. The repatriation campaign tapped genuine popular mistrust of middle-class black leaders, even as it highlighted the “ambivalent legacy” for blacks of the New Deal itself.⁵ Still, the collapse of the repatriation effort, and its aftermath of wartime governmental repression, left black nationalists weakened and isolated. The “Back-to-Africa” episode thus had important ramifications as African Americans moved into the civil rights era.

The emigration idea had a long heritage, but the direct inspiration for the 1930s agitation was Marcus Garvey, the most prominent figure in the history of black nationalism worldwide.⁶ Garvey, a Jamaican, arrived in Harlem during World War I and gained notice for his fierce anticolonial rhetoric.⁷ He energized his followers with a message of race pride, militant separatism, and economic nationalism. His defiant espousal of self-defense subjected him to charges of subversion, but his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) galvanized a mass protest movement around the slogan “Back to Africa.” Initially identified with the political left, Garvey gradually acquired more conservative credentials, including a controversial meeting with the head of the Ku Klux Klan in 1922. His move to the right did not mollify the federal government, which investigated him for mail fraud growing out of a UNIA-sponsored steamship company. He was charged, tried, and imprisoned in 1925 and subsequently deported, and the UNIA entered a long twilight of organizational decline.⁸

⁴ The accuracy of referring to the “repatriation” of persons centuries removed from the African homeland is admittedly questionable. However, the term was widely used by its African American proponents, and I feel obliged to employ the same language.

⁵ Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era*, 218.

⁶ Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (Oxford and New York, 1978), 4 and 269–71.

⁷ Robert A. Hill, Barbara Bair, Deborah Forczek, et al., eds., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers* [1st Series] (7 vols.; Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1983–1990), I, 285–301 (hereinafter cited as *Garvey Papers*).

⁸ There exists a large literature on Garvey. Among the most significant works are E. David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison, 1955); Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Westport, Conn., and London, 1976); and Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge and London, 1986). Indispensable are the first seven volumes of Hill, Bair, Forczek, et al., eds., *Garvey Papers*.

Garvey nonetheless popularized the rhetoric of repatriation, and as his movement dissolved into regional fragments, rival leaders seized upon the issue. The outbreak of the Great Depression reinforced Back-to-Africa sentiments among committed nationalists, while simultaneously undermining race-based economic enterprise.

Mittie Maud Lena Gordon, a former Garveyite, emerged as the most prominent promoter of repatriation. A native of Louisiana, she had a traumatic interracial family background and had witnessed lynching firsthand.⁹ Mrs. Gordon combined anger at white injustice with the belief that repatriation could not succeed without government aid.¹⁰ This conviction projected her insular grassroots movement into the public sphere. She blended anti-Marxist sentiments with class resentment directed at the educated race "intellectuals." Her Chicago-based group, the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME), was her life's passion; the organization charged no dues, and she reportedly received no salary.¹¹ By all accounts the Peace Movement of Ethiopia recruited marginalized poor and working-class blacks. The group narrowly focused on emigration without the financial distractions and organizational bloat that had undermined Garvey's efforts. In 1933 the PME launched a petition drive in support of government funding for the repatriation of African Americans and within eight months claimed some 400,000 signatures. The petitions were submitted to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who consigned these and supplemental petitions to bureaucratic oblivion. The PME then lobbied southern legislatures, and in 1936 the Virginia legislature passed resolutions endorsing federal aid for repatriation.¹² The resolutions prompted a *Newsweek* reference to the "vast, new Back-to-Africa movement . . . growing in strength."¹³ Despite this modest success, Gordon became impatient at being so long ignored. She inquired privately after a "member of either House who is on the market," but

⁹ Ethel Wolfskill Hedlin, "Earnest Cox and Colonization: A White Racist's Response to Black Repatriation, 1923-1966" (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1974), 113-14.

¹⁰ On the subject of Gordon's sincerity see *ibid.*, 146.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 114; and Peace Movement of Ethiopia to President Roosevelt, November 14, 1933, quoted in *Congressional Record*, 75 Cong., 2 Sess., 1534 (February 7, 1938). The name of Gordon's organization mimics that of Father Divine's Peace Mission Movement, a religious sect that appealed to many former Garvey followers (Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.: The Father Divine Story* [Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford, 1992], 113-18).

¹² Earnest Sevier Cox, *Teutonic Unity* (Richmond, 1951), 216; *Cong. Rec.*, 75 Cong., 3 Sess., 1537 (February 7, 1938); and *Chicago Defender*, March 7, 1936.

¹³ *Newsweek*, March 14, 1936, p. 13.

bribery proved unnecessary.¹⁴ Help soon appeared in the person of Senator Theodore G. Bilbo.

In some respects, it would be difficult to imagine a less likely patron for any sort of black assertiveness or militancy. Bilbo is “remembered as the nation’s vilest purveyor of white-supremacy twaddle.”¹⁵ A former Baptist preacher, Bilbo had long been identified in Mississippi politics with the aspirations of lower-class rural whites. Twice elected governor, he supported expanded public services and was considered a progressive reformer by regional standards. His class rhetoric positioned him well when the Great Depression struck, and in 1934 he was elected to the U.S. Senate vowing to “out-Huey Huey Long.” He amassed a liberal voting record by supporting social security, the National Labor Relations Act, and even Roosevelt’s court-packing plan.¹⁶

Though Bilbo lauded the New Deal, he distanced himself from Franklin Roosevelt’s alleged racial egalitarianism, defending Mississippi’s racial mores in defiant terms. His letters bore ethnic salutations like “My dear Dago,” and Bilbo wrote one white correspondent that if he approved of interracial marriage he should be “hanged higher than Haman.”¹⁷ Bilbo also suggested that a rape suspect receive “proper attention in due and ancient form” from the “red-blooded Caucasians” of the vicinity. The Mississippi senator opposed federal antilynching legislation and in early 1938 joined the filibuster against the antilynching bill sponsored by Senators Robert F. Wagner and Frederick Van Nuys, vowing to continue for months.¹⁸ With his characteristic panache, Bilbo sought a dramatic counterstroke against the “damn Yankees.” He determined that “if they keep this lynching bill before the Senate much longer, I am going to succeed in getting the negroes

¹⁴ Gordon to Earnest S. Cox, June 23, 1937, quoted in Hedlin, “Earnest Sevier Cox and Colonization,” 127.

¹⁵ Chester M. Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge and London, 1985), 247.

¹⁶ *Newsweek*, June 6, 1938, p. 14.; and Morgan, *Redneck Liberal*, 161–85. On Bilbo’s previous political career see *ibid.*, Chaps. 1 and 2.

¹⁷ Marcantonio to Bilbo, July 24, 1945, in Annette T. Rubinstein, ed., *I Vote My Conscience: Debates, Speeches and Writings of Vito Marcantonio, 1935–1950* (New York, 1956), 203 (first quotation); and Bilbo to M. S. West, February 28, 1939, Box 1090, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers (Historical Manuscripts, William David McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg) (second quotation).

¹⁸ Bilbo to C. B. Snow, March 28, 1938, Box 343, Bilbo Papers (quotation); and *Cong. Rec.*, 75 Cong., 3 Sess., 874 and 883 (January 21, 1938).

deported to Africa.”¹⁹ Bilbo’s offbeat proposal invited national ridicule; even the southern press was lukewarm. However, defiance of polite opinion on racial matters had for years helped him get elected to public office.²⁰ Espousing repatriation demonstrated his independence of Roosevelt on racial issues; it also distinguished him from more patrician southern colleagues who found expelling the plantation labor force unattractive. Pure spite played a significant role too. Perhaps, as one biographer suggested, he was sincere about the resettlement effort and believed that it was the ultimate solution to America’s racial difficulties.²¹

Bilbo’s first reference to emigration was brief. During his filibuster of the antilynching bill on January 21, 1938, the senator recommended the “deportation or repatriation” of the African American population to Liberia. Bilbo thought repatriation a “more euphonious term than deportation,” but his references to “the entire Negro race” suggested involuntary removal.²² He may have been facetious, for he had earlier belittled the Back-to-Africa movement. Whatever the intent, his comments prompted letters from African American emigration supporters. These impressed him, and on February 17 he announced that he would present a repatriation amendment to the next public works appropriation. The senator had known of the existence of emigrationist organizations, but he had never previously considered seeking their support for legislation.²³

Gaining the united backing of these organizations would be no small task because friction existed between Garvey’s UNIA and Gordon’s Peace Movement, despite their ideological similarities—or perhaps because of them. Mittie Gordon had recently survived an attempt

¹⁹ Bilbo to Cecil F. Travis, February 11, 1938, Box 336, Bilbo Papers.

²⁰ Bilbo did receive some support from white newspapers in his home state and elsewhere in the South. The Biloxi *Daily Herald*, May 26, 1938, editorialized that Bilbo’s “benevolent plan” had been mischaracterized as deportation. Similarly Bilbo’s hometown paper, the Poplarville *Free Press*, provided the senator a platform to promote his bill. For other favorable or neutral references see *Meridian Star*, February 8, 1938, and May 16, 1939; *Clarksdale Daily Register*, June 2, 1939; *Booneville Banner*, June 15, 1939, and *Richmond (Va.) Times-Dispatch*, December 28, 1940.

²¹ Morgan, *Redneck Liberal*, 228; Johnpeter Horst Grill and Robert L. Jenkins, “The Nazis and the American South in the 1930s: A Mirror Image?” *Journal of Southern History*, LVIII (November 1992), 688; *Crisis*, XLV (May 1938), 147; A. Wigfall Green, *The Man Bilbo* (Baton Rouge, 1963), 124; and Theodore G. Bilbo, *Take Your Choice: Separation or Mongrelization* (Poplarville, Miss., 1947).

²² *Cong. Rec.*, 75 Cong., 3 Sess., 881–83 (January 21, 1938).

²³ Martin, *Race First*, 349; Morgan, *Redneck Liberal*, 227; *New York Times*, February 18, 1938, p. 11, col. 5; and *Cong. Rec.*, 75 Cong., 3 Sess., 883 (January 21, 1938).

by her former secretary, Ethel Waddell, to take over the Peace Movement by establishing a rival "Peace Movement of Ethiopia, Inc."²⁴ The dispute between the two had been taken to court, and Gordon won the case. She was furious that the dispute had arisen "when able statesmen are offering assistance," and she became increasingly vigilant, asking contacts to route all documents through her. Mittie Gordon ascribed the episode to a UNIA plot, probably correctly.²⁵ These tensions boded ill for later cooperation, for the two groups—the UNIA and the PME—were the legislation's main black sponsors.

Theodore Bilbo was ill-equipped to mediate aid for African Americans, but Earnest Sevier Cox of Virginia offered to help Bilbo in the cause. Colonel Cox was a racist ideologist who cultivated access to black nationalists. He had "worked with this type of Negro for years" and knew how "sincere they are and how deeply they appreciate the aid of white men."²⁶ In the 1920s he had collaborated with Garvey and even visited him in jail, while more recently he had advised the Peace Movement. "We are so ignorant of the proper formalities," Mittie Gordon assured him, "that we lean on you for support."²⁷ Cox had sent Bilbo an unsolicited copy of his book *White America*. Bilbo quoted it in his filibuster, and he telegraphed Cox requesting to see the manuscript of Cox's latest work. Bilbo wrote that he had almost decided "to specialize on the repatriation of the negro."²⁸ The delighted Cox renewed his contact with Garvey, announcing that the long-delayed white support for Negro nationalists had arrived.²⁹ He urged that Garvey rein in his followers' attack on Gordon.³⁰

²⁴ Charles Watkins to Bilbo, March 15, 1938, Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 822–23.

²⁵ Gordon to Cox, March 11, 1939, Earnest S. Cox Papers (Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University) (quotation); Garvey to Cox, October 6, 1938, Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 893; and Cox to Bilbo, March 20, 1938, Box 341, Bilbo Papers.

²⁶ Cox to Bilbo, February 16, 1938, Box 337, Bilbo Papers (quotation); Garvey to Cox, October 6, 1938, Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 893; and William A. Edwards, "Racial Purity in Black and White: The Case of Marcus Garvey and Earnest Cox," *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, XV (Spring 1987), 117–42.

²⁷ Gordon to Cox, May 3, 1938, Cox Papers.

²⁸ Earnest S. Cox, *White America* (2d ed.; Richmond, 1925); Bilbo to Cox, February 8, 1938, Cox Papers (quotation); and Bilbo to Cox, February 3, 1938, Box 338, and Cox to Bilbo, February 16, 1938, Box 337, Bilbo Papers.

²⁹ Cox to Garvey, February 17, 1938, h. 10, Box 16, United Negro Improvement Association, Central Division, New York Records, 1918–1959 (Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, microfilm) (hereinafter cited as UNIA Records).

³⁰ Garvey to Cox, March 19, 1938; and Gordon to Cox, April 6, 1938, Cox Papers.

The Peace Movement, UNIA, and the other supporters of repatriation did agree on some issues—or at least they had common aversions. They shared anti-Semitic sentiments, often expressed in anti-Communist terms, but the growing vogue of a multi-ethnic Left in the black community represented the unifying threat.³¹ Former Garveyites defected in large numbers to various Popular Front groups and to the CIO unions, and, as Robin D. G. Kelley contends, Communists incorporated racialist appeals into their class-based politics.³² Some black nationalists responded by contesting the ideological terrain, stressing racial solidarity as the main issue in community mobilizations. The “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaigns, in Harlem and elsewhere, had a strong nationalist presence as well as Left participation.³³ The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 also prompted a vigorous but eclectic response. One recent study discerns “nationalist passions” over the invasion as strong as those felt during Garvey’s heyday.³⁴ But Marcus Garvey insisted on the primacy of race over class consciousness as an organizing principle. When a subordinate, A. L. King, collaborated with Popular Fronters in support of Ethiopia, Garvey loyalists impeached King as leader of the New York UNIA division.³⁵ Garvey opposed the invasion of Ethiopia, but he was more apt to claim credit as one of the “first Fascists” than to mouth anti-fascist slogans against the Italian leader Benito Mussolini.³⁶ Garvey identified his movement with the nationalist currents that were ascendent worldwide.³⁷

The wholesale rejection of a Popular Front strategy distinguished the repatriationists from less single-minded black nationalists. By the late 1930s both Garvey and Gordon were emphatic anti-Communists, for the aggressive interracialism of the Left made it an obvious ideological foil.³⁸ In particular, Gordon thought the Communist party

³¹ For one example of these sentiments see Gordon to Cox, February 27, 1938, Cox Papers.

³² Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill and London, 1990), 207.

³³ Joseph E. Harris, *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia, 1936–1941* (Baton Rouge and London, 1994), 38–39 and 47–54; and Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (New York, 1983), 100 (quoted phrase) and 117–24.

³⁴ William R. Scott, *The Sons of Sheba’s Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1941* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1993), 212.

³⁵ Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 653–63.

³⁶ Martin, *Race First*, 60.

³⁷ Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, xlvii, 567, and 580–81; and Clarence E. Walker, *Deromanticizing Black History: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (Knoxville, 1991), 34–55.

³⁸ Garvey’s attitude toward the Communists varied over the years, but by the thirties it was thoroughly hostile. See Michael W. Fitzgerald, Michael Furmanovsky, and Robert A. Hill, “The Comintern and American Blacks, 1919–1943,” in Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, V, 841–54. For Garvey’s contemporary views see Robert A. Hill and Barbara Bair, eds., *Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons . . .* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1987), 296–99.

encouraged interracial sexual liaisons, observing that "since communism has established itself in this country it is quite common to see a white woman rocking black babies." Gordon assured Senator Bilbo that she, too, detested racial mixture. The mainstream civil rights forces symbolized by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) presented another obvious target for the repatriationists. Garvey had spent much of his career denouncing the NAACP as the tool of a mulatto elite bent on racial intermixture. Bilbo denounced such leaders as "supersensitive mongrels," and for once his invective was matched by that of his allies.³⁹ All of those allied with Bilbo in the black emigration effort loathed those whom Cox termed "American miscegenationists, white and black . . ." ⁴⁰

Bilbo realized that without his black colleagues there would "not be much chance" of success.⁴¹ They provided Bilbo his only respectable argument: if the Negroes wanted to go, then why not let them? Bilbo could hardly have harbored illusions about his prospects, but his upbeat predictions heartened his allies. As Mrs. Gordon wrote Cox, "we are inclined to believe we have found a Moses . . . and that our work will become an accomplished fact."⁴² The resulting African American advocacy for the bill legitimized the rest of Bilbo's racist agenda. Moreover, Cox thought that Bilbo should reward those who backed him during the antilynching filibuster, adding that "one of the ways to deal with the NAACP is to aid the Garvey movement."⁴³ Bilbo taunted the civil rights forces with his own black support, which cast doubt on their claim to speak for the entire race. As Bilbo stressed, "the Negroes are divided on the subject of repatriation. There is a right wing and there is a left wing."⁴⁴ The issue of repatriation vividly demonstrated the disunity of African Americans, but, paradoxically, the passage of legislation to fund it depended upon plausible evidence of support by blacks, especially the reported one million signatures on petitions stacked in Mrs. Gordon's apartment.⁴⁵

While Bilbo's primary reliance was upon Gordon's PME, he courted support elsewhere. The senator corresponded with an array of tiny

³⁹ Gordon et al. to Bilbo, February 2, 1938, in *Cong. Rec.*, 75 Cong., 3 Sess., 1533-34 (February 7, 1938) (first quotation) and 890 (January 21, 1938) (second quotation).

⁴⁰ Cox, *Teutonic Unity*, 215.

⁴¹ Bilbo to Clarence Thomas, January 9, 1939, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers (quotation); and Hill, Bair, Forczek, et al., eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 823.

⁴² Gordon to Cox, June 29, 1938, Cox Papers.

⁴³ Cox to Bilbo, May 11 and February 20 (quotation), 1938, Cox Papers.

⁴⁴ Theodore G. Bilbo, "An African Home for our Negroes," *Living Age* (June 1940), in *Cong. Rec.*, 76 Cong., 3 Sess., 3499 (June 3, 1940).

⁴⁵ *Time*, May 8, 1939, pp. 14-15.

Garveyite offshoots, including Ethel Waddell's rival PME, Inc., and the "followers of the martyred African Princess Laura Adorkor [Kofey]" in Jacksonville, Florida.⁴⁶ These diverse contacts diluted Bilbo's dependence upon Gordon's group. In particular, Garvey's organization was still "a formidable one with international membership," as Cox counseled Bilbo.⁴⁷ Though the UNIA had de-emphasized Back-to-Africa since its colonization project in Liberia had collapsed in 1924, Senator Bilbo's sponsorship forced a reappraisal. Thomas W. Harvey, the UNIA commissioner for New York, praised Bilbo's speeches in early February 1938, but his tone was rather arch. "For your information sir," he wrote, "there are hundreds of thousands of us who do not wish intermarriage with white people and who would much prefer to be to ourselves."⁴⁸ Bilbo's evident interest in repatriation, as well as his efforts to readmit Garvey to the country, overcame such misgivings among Harvey's colleagues.⁴⁹

In May 1938 Bilbo presented an amendment to House Joint Resolution 679, a work relief bill. The amendment would have repatriated African American volunteers under age forty to Liberia and provided them short-term support. Because Liberia was too small to absorb the whole African American population, Bilbo proposed that England and France cede to it their west African colonies and that in return the U.S. forgive their World War I debts. The senator saw no possibility of immediate enactment for this ambitious proposal. In order to attract publicity, he intended to propose the amendments, then withdraw them "with the announcement that I will urge their acceptance at the next session."⁵⁰

Bilbo's four-hour oration, delivered on May 24, did attract limited press attention, including a *Newsweek* column on the senator and his proposal.⁵¹ The speech otherwise created problems. In one passage, he observed that no nation could prosper while degraded by the blood of

⁴⁶ Missionary African Universal Church, Inc., to Bilbo, April 23, 1939, in *Cong. Rec.*, 76 Cong., 1 Sess., 4651 (April 24, 1939) (quotation). On Kofey's repatriationist movement and her apparent assassination by Garvey followers see Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VI, 594–95. See also Charles L. Harrison to Bilbo, May 2, 1938, quoted *ibid.*, VII, 141–42n1.

⁴⁷ Cox to Bilbo, September 12, 1938, Box 368, Bilbo Papers (quotation); and Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 823–24.

⁴⁸ Harvey to Bilbo, February 8, 1938, in Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 819.

⁴⁹ Bilbo to Frances Perkins, February 9, 1938, Box 336; Bilbo to James L. Houghteling, April 25, 1938, Box 353; Joseph W. Sanford to Bilbo, April 23, 1938, Box 353; and Bilbo to A. L. King, February 23, 1938, Box 338, Bilbo Papers; and Harvey to Bilbo, February 24, 1938, in Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 822n5.

⁵⁰ Bilbo to Cox, May 14, 1938, Box 352, Bilbo Papers.

⁵¹ *Newsweek*, June 6, 1938, p. 14.

inferior racial types. Avowing kinship, he noted that Hitler's "Germans appreciate the importance of race values," an accurate if understated observation. Bilbo claimed to speak for seven million African Americans who supported emigration, but his remarks were scarcely designed to elicit their sympathy. The senator termed the Negro by nature incapable of creative thought. African Americans of mixed ancestry he called "the saddest spectacle" on the planet, quoting a saying that "God created the whites. I know not who created the blacks. Surely a devil created the mongrels."⁵² The immediate impact of this "Unprovoked Attack on Negroes," as *Newsweek* headlined it, was to embarrass his black collaborators. After the speech the UNIA's Thomas Harvey refused to ask Bilbo's financial support for lobbying efforts, though a UNIA colleague of Harvey's asked for Bilbo's help behind his back.⁵³ The speech hurt the feelings of many "race-conscious but mixed blood people," Mittie Gordon observed, though she was unfazed by anything "Senator Bilbo says, or can say."⁵⁴

Colonel Cox warned Mrs. Gordon to expect more gaffes and then enlightened Bilbo about the damage he had done. Balancing praise with blame, he informed the senator that "you have become, and in a measure in which you are scarcely aware, a leader of the Negro nationalists."⁵⁵ He urged Bilbo to soften his racist statements, however valid, lest educated mulatto opponents "torment our allies with them." Attacks on racial "mongrels" represented a particular problem because Mittie Gordon was of mixed ancestry, which Bilbo initially may not have known.⁵⁶ Cox suggested that the printed version eliminate several offensive statements, and Bilbo agreed. The senator's future public statements on racial issues became more circumspect, and he was conspicuously polite in his letters to black allies.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the underlying difficulty remained: Bilbo was too dependent on his Mississippi constituency, and too racist personally, to treat his African American ideological allies with much respect.

Eventually the black repatriationists overcame their misgivings. At the Eighth International UNIA convention, held in Toronto in August 1938, Marcus Garvey proclaimed that Bilbo's measure must be judged separately from its sponsor. After some persuasion the convention

⁵² *Cong. Rec.*, 75 Cong., 3 Sess., 7361, 7365 and 7363 (May 24, 1938).

⁵³ *Newsweek*, June 6, 1938, p. 14; and Benjamin Jones to Bilbo, July 14, 1938, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.

⁵⁴ Gordon to Cox, June 19, 1938, Cox Papers.

⁵⁵ Cox to Bilbo, May 29, 1938, Box 354, Bilbo Papers.

⁵⁶ Cox to Bilbo, July 4, 1938, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.

⁵⁷ Bilbo to Cox, May 31, 1938, Box 355, Bilbo Papers; and Martin, *Race First*, 355.

unanimously endorsed the bill, authorizing representatives to attend its introduction in Washington.⁵⁸ In September, Garvey ordered the UNIA to circulate petitions in favor of the bill, directing that the signatures be sent to Senator Bilbo.⁵⁹ Mittie Gordon and her Peace Movement became active in a different direction. In late 1938, with the aid of a solicitation by Colonel Cox, Gordon received two thousand dollars from Henry Litchfield West of the venerable American Colonization Society. The money funded a delegation to Liberia, and two emissaries met with President Edwin J. Barclay in December. Barclay avoided a firm commitment to welcoming immigrants, but his letter to Mrs. Gordon did solicit "select immigration" from the United States.⁶⁰ Bilbo thought the ambiguous statement useful, and he requested a full report from the delegates as soon as they returned home.⁶¹

Meanwhile, the Peace Movement petition drive, originally begun in 1933, again gathered steam, especially among those uprooted by the Great Migration. "These petitioners," Bilbo later observed, "came from the North and not the South."⁶² Illinois, Indiana, and Missouri, according to Mrs. Gordon, contributed the most names. Bilbo's home state of Mississippi also added thousands of signatures, though emigrationist organizers were harassed in the South.⁶³ By January 1939 Gordon reported 1,952,200 signatures on her supplemental petitions, this in addition to the 400,000 gathered earlier.⁶⁴ Bilbo inflated Gordon's estimate to two and a half or even three million, but the actual number remains doubtful. Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* termed the count "probably a great exaggeration."⁶⁵ Ralph J. Bunche

⁵⁸ Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 851 and 854–55.

⁵⁹ Garvey to Bilbo, August 13, 1938, Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 883–84; Garvey to Cox, October 6, 1938, *ibid.*, 893; *New York Age*, December 17, 1938; and Cox to Bilbo, September 12, 1938, Box 368, Bilbo Papers.

⁶⁰ President Barclay to Gordon, January 3, 1939, file 882.5211 Negroes/69, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59 (National Archives). It should be noted that the official response of the American Colonization Society to Bilbo's efforts was lukewarm, that organization having deemphasized emigration in favor of promoting industrial education in Liberia. See West to George E. Teague, September 22, 1939, reel 245, [Paul Sleman] to Cox, 25 March 1939, reel 245, and West to J. E. Lewis, July 12, 1939, reel 244, Records of the American Colonization Society (Library of Congress) (microfilm).

⁶¹ Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 824; and Bilbo to Cox, January 25, 1939, Box 385; Bilbo to Cox, January 12, 1939, Box 383, Bilbo Papers.

⁶² Bilbo to Harold Kendricks, June 4, 1945, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.

⁶³ Celia Allen to Bilbo, June 9, 1938, Box 356; and Allen to Bilbo, April 29, 1939, Box 405, Bilbo Papers.

⁶⁴ Gordon to Cox, May 4, 1940; and Gordon to Cox, February 19, 1939, Cox Papers.

⁶⁵ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York and London, 1944), 806; *Chicago Defender*, April 22, 1939; and Cox to Bilbo, June 3, 1938, Box 356, Bilbo Papers.

agreed that "most informed Negroes seriously doubt the veracity" of Bilbo's claims.⁶⁶ One black reporter asked to check the names, or at least to look at the petitions, but Bilbo refused on various pretexts. Bilbo's behavior suggested that he had little confidence that the petitions would withstand scrutiny.⁶⁷

Bilbo exaggerated the count, and duplication of names seems likely, but the signatures on the PME petitions probably were not forged wholesale. The petitions, after all, called for aid to voluntary migrants—a proposal with some appeal. The *New York Age* observed there were "many shiftless Negroes who will sign most anything," and the prospective subsidy to immigrants "was evidently the bait that helped in securing the signatures."⁶⁸ Gordon's minute descriptions to Cox of the counting and recopying of the names lend the process a certain plausibility.⁶⁹ Furthermore, it would have been difficult to forge millions of signatures and then hide the fraud for years. Mrs. Gordon's UNIA rivals certainly took the petitions seriously, and they were thoroughly intimidated by the number. There are also nearly ninety black correspondents in the Bilbo papers from 1938 through 1945, many of whom reported significant enthusiasm for the signature drive. If the signed petitions were indeed genuine, their bulk suggests widespread discouragement with the New Deal, especially during the Roosevelt recession of the late 1930s.

The letters to Bilbo illuminate the motives of his grassroots correspondents, who were predominantly underemployed urban males, often middle-aged or older, and poorly educated.⁷⁰ Relief cutbacks and lack of jobs were the salient issues. One writer found that blacks were the last hired and first fired on Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects, while a Chicagoan complained he had lost his WPA job and

⁶⁶ Ralph J. Bunche, "The Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organizations," manuscript prepared for Carnegie-Myrdal Study, Vol. III, 430 (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library).

⁶⁷ Washington *Afro-American*, April 29 and May 13, 1939; and clipping entitled "Bilbo Says Three Million Negroes in Favor of his 'Back to Africa' Movement," Box 1091, Bilbo Papers. Bilbo's behavior may have had a legitimate explanation: Gordon's supporters had recopied all the signatures onto long sheets for the presentation, preserving the originals for later use. The signatures thus would appear to have been in the same handwriting, an apparently incriminating fact that Bilbo perhaps did not want to have to explain to the press.

⁶⁸ *New York Age*, August 9, 1941.

⁶⁹ Gordon to Cox, December 31, 1938, and January 7, 1939, Cox Papers.

⁷⁰ It should also be noted that many letters received during this period by the American Colonization Society were similar. This would suggest that Bilbo's contacts were representative of repatriation supporters more broadly. See Ishmael Sammons to Henry L. West, March 10, 1939, reel 244; George Teague to Henry L. West, October 9, 1939, reel 246; and William Derricks to Ex. Sec. ACS, June 1, 1939, reel 243, Records of the American Colonization Society.

did not know anyone who had been reassigned to another job with the WPA. An Illinois man stated that he would "rather be any place than here working on W.P.A. and starving to death."⁷¹ One letter noted declining job prospects for blacks, while another stated that technology eliminated the need for black labor. Many letters sounded urgent or expressed the willingness to leave immediately; one man was "hungry now" and "willing to mak[e] a change." A Philadelphia woman complained that her unemployed husband was discouraged, and she asked Bilbo *personally* to send passage money to her family.⁷² That African Americans could request such help from Theodore G. Bilbo testifies to their desperation.

Tales of hardship predominated in this correspondence, but familiar Garveyite self-help themes appeared too. One woman saw no future for her children in the United States and sought to emigrate in order for them to become free men and women.⁷³ The leader of a Kansas City civic association prayed that "some plan could be worked out where the Negro could work out his destiny," citing the all-black town of Mound Bayou, Mississippi, as a model.⁷⁴ Blacks were tired of "looking up to the white man for what we want," an anonymous correspondent observed, adding that "we want to go home whear we can take cear of ourselfves."⁷⁵ Many shared the vision of Africa as home. A Kansas woman wrote that she and her family had long wanted to return to their own country, while another correspondent thought that many blacks were homesick for their fatherland.⁷⁶ Several letter writers believed that removal would foster racial purity, a goal supported by several of the Peace Movement women. Celia Allen for one was tired of seeing "white women pushing half-negro babies" down the streets of her neighborhood.⁷⁷

Resentment toward the mixed-race integrationist cultural elite, long a feature of Garvey's message, found expression in various forms. One

⁷¹ "Africa American" to Bilbo, May 16, 1939, S. A. Davis to Bilbo, July 15, 1939, and G. E. Tiggs to Bilbo, May 25, 1939 (quotation), all three in Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.

⁷² Gus Ervin to Bilbo, February 22, 1938, Box 338, Bilbo Papers (quotation); Samuel Hunter to Bilbo, July 20, 1938, John Gray to Bilbo, May 5, 1939, and Mrs. Thomas Madison to Bilbo, June 5, 1938, all three in Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.

⁷³ Cora Lee Frazier to Bilbo, March 14, 1938, Box 340, Bilbo Papers.

⁷⁴ William Flewellyn to Bilbo, February 17, 1939, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.

⁷⁵ Anon. to Bilbo, February 12, 1939, Box 389, Bilbo Papers.

⁷⁶ Mrs. W. E. Freeman to Bilbo, February 20, 1939, and Rev. J. W. Nelson to Bilbo, February 18, 1939, both in Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.

⁷⁷ Celia Allen to Bilbo, June 9, 1938, Box 356; Cora Lee Frazier to Bilbo, March 14, 1938, Box 340; and Mrs. H. T. McNairy to Bilbo, March 2, 1939, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.

correspondent accused the mulattoes of being parasites.⁷⁸ A New York woman praised a repatriationist publication for "blasting the mulattoes."⁷⁹ Mrs. Gordon herself shunned that theme but played on resentment of educated blacks, recommending that Bilbo do the same.⁸⁰ One man urged Bilbo to ignore the criticism of NAACP leaders because they spoke for the so-called intelligentsia, not for the "rank and file or mass of Negro America."⁸¹ A few African American supporters actually praised Bilbo's antilynching filibuster, taking pleasure in the defeat of an NAACP initiative.⁸² Activists often expressed such hostility in graphic terms. S. A. Davis, a PME supporter in Chicago, remarked that "social equality seeking negroes" should remain behind in the U.S., otherwise the emigrants "would have to kill" them. He commended that task to white America.⁸³

Garvey's followers were well represented in Bilbo's mail, but the UNIA lagged far behind Gordon's operation in gathering signatures. The internal politics of the faction-ridden and destitute UNIA hampered the effort. For example, in the UNIA stronghold of New York, local leaders gave Carlos Cooks of Harlem's Advance Division the task of coordinating the effort. A rival Garvey Club refused him access to their printed petitions, provoking a furor "as to why some divisions had not printed them since it was Mr. Garvey's orders." Weeks of jurisdictional wrangling followed, and the head of the greater New York UNIA council, A. L. King, apparently abandoned the drive in frustration. Little progress followed despite prodding by his superiors.⁸⁴

These organizational weaknesses made Garvey's UNIA eager to secure the repatriationist concession, if only through eclipsing Mrs. Gordon's influence with Senator Bilbo. Benjamin Jones of Philadelphia asked that the UNIA be granted the sole right to select the emigrants. Jones disavowed selfish motives for this "precaution." He wrote to Bilbo that many emigration organizations were publicity-seeking frauds but the UNIA had "stood the test."⁸⁵ For her part, Mrs. Gordon

⁷⁸ J. Milton Batson to Bilbo, July 1, 1939, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.

⁷⁹ Louise Moore to Bilbo, September 29, 1941, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.

⁸⁰ Gordon to Cox, June 19, 1938, Cox Papers.

⁸¹ William Flewellyn to Bilbo, February 17, 1939, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.

⁸² London Simms to Bilbo, March 14, 1938, and E. H. Pointer to Bilbo, November 10, 1938, both in Box 1091; and Rev. Zebedee Brown to Bilbo, November 28, 1940, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.

⁸³ S. A. Davis to Bilbo, July 29, 1939, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.

⁸⁴ A. L. King to Thomas Harvey, December 15, 1938 (quotation), and November 22, 1938, and Harvey to King, December 8, 1938, and January 11, 1939, all in Box 9, d. 32, UNIA Records.

⁸⁵ Jones to Bilbo, April 8, 1938, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.

repeatedly urged that the name of Garvey and his UNIA "never come to the surface."⁸⁶ Gordon feared, in view of their past troubled relations, that the Liberians would balk if the UNIA was involved.⁸⁷ That history was indeed turbulent, but organizational rivalry encouraged her misgivings.

Bilbo dodged the complications resulting from the rivalry and successfully aligned much of the organized black nationalist following behind him.⁸⁸ By early 1939 Bilbo's proposed legislation had an African American constituency of some dimensions. In drafting the bill, the senator received the aid of Ramon A. Martinez, whom he praised as a "smart negro."⁸⁹ Martinez, a Puerto Rican-born lawyer, was president of the Negro Nationalist Society of America, a Detroit-based group. Martinez had devised a "rather titanic" proposal for the creation of Greater Liberia. He sent Bilbo a detailed draft, and Bilbo's subsequent bill follows that text closely, through five dense pages in the *Congressional Record*. "It is exactly the same bill which I drafted last spring," Martinez noted.⁹⁰

The Greater Liberia bill expanded Bilbo's previous proposals. It authorized negotiations with European powers for the cession of west African lands, in addition to whatever lands Liberia might provide. The American military would govern the cession for up to two years, setting up a civil administration that could then govern for up to four more years. The territory would then gain "complete autonomy" as a commonwealth of the U.S., but the bill maintained for U.S. officials the option of either seeking inclusion for the commonwealth in the state of Liberia or granting it full independence. Americans between

⁸⁶ Gordon to Cox, September 14, 1938, and Cox to Gordon, September 5, 1938, both in Cox Papers.

⁸⁷ Gordon to Cox, February 8, 1938, cited in Hedlin, "Earnest Cox and Colonization," 131; Gordon to Bilbo, January 27, 1939, Box 369, Bilbo Papers; and Richard West, *Back to Africa: A History of Sierra Leone and Liberia* (New York, 1970), 271–73.

⁸⁸ The PME and the UNIA were probably the two largest national bodies espousing Garveyism at the time, though membership figures are vague. They were certainly two of the most visible groups by the late Depression years. Another body, the clandestine and pro-Japanese Pacific Movement of the Eastern World, apparently held aloof from the Bilbo campaign. The group had initially backed Gordon's petition drive and had favored Back-to-Africa at mid-decade, but by 1938, according to one PME organizer, they were "telling the poor people that they dont have to go no place[,] stay here and fight for their rights." Celia J. Allen to Bilbo, May 23, 1938, Box 353, Bilbo Papers. On the Pacific Movement of the Eastern World's interest in Africa, see Harris, *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia*, 17; and Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 506–7n1 and 717.

⁸⁹ Bilbo to Cox, April 28, 1939, Box 403, Bilbo Papers.

⁹⁰ Martinez to Bilbo, March 11, 1939, Box 394, Bilbo Papers (both quotations); and Russell Gore, "Plan to Settle United States Negroes in Africa Linked with War Debts . . .," in *Detroit News*, in *Cong. Rec.*, 75 Cong., 3 Sess., 1346 (April 6, 1938).

twenty-one and fifty could seek removal, but only those eligible for Liberian citizenship, that is, those of African descent. Settlers would receive land grants of fifty acres and grants-in-aid until their farms or businesses were self-sustaining. The bill set a one billion dollar initial maximum for federal expenditures.⁹¹ More could be appropriated, and Bilbo eventually envisioned a commitment of fifteen to twenty billion dollars over the next forty years.⁹²

At an abstract level, the senator realized that he needed "the support of the Negro organizations interested in this program," but in practice he took them for granted.⁹³ Thus, in March 1939, when he circulated a draft of the bill to his black allies, they expressed reservations. Garveyite leaders complained they had been ill-informed during its incubation and unable to respond to rumors of its content. A. L. King reported "we are undergoing severe fire in New York" over its terms, his word choice suggesting that he thought the objections had merit. The sudden appearance of a detailed proposal also disconcerted UNIA members, for they feared Bilbo had something up his sleeve. Some thought that removal might not be voluntary or that whites would dominate the proposed settlement. Others wanted to see the final bill before they signed petitions, fearing that it would be amended unfavorably.⁹⁴

Mittie Gordon's Peace Movement proved especially skeptical, with members denouncing the proposal in meetings. The bill's references to blacks as American citizens contradicted the core of the PME creed: their status as aliens. Gordon's followers disliked the prospect of American occupation, fearing that white soldiers would be responsible for further miscegenation. Omission of a specific ban on white settlement seemed ominous. The legalistic complexity of the plan bothered Gordon, for she feared that the unlettered emigrants would become bogged down in American-style bureaucracy. She also thought the dependence on European land cessions unwise, because she wanted resettlement in Liberia to begin immediately. Bilbo thought her objections frivolous but responded to them in a lengthy letter. He also urged Cox to intercede, noting "how difficult it would be to travel without her endorsement, and also how difficult it would be to revise the measure so as to conform to the views she now entertains."⁹⁵ Mrs. Gordon

⁹¹ *Cong. Rec.*, 76 Cong., 1 Sess., 4671-76 (April 24, 1939).

⁹² *Ibid.*, 77 Cong., 2 Sess., 8957 (November 19, 1942).

⁹³ Bilbo to Cox, September 18, 1938, Box 369, Bilbo Papers.

⁹⁴ A. L. King to Thomas W. Harvey, February 1, 1939 (quotation), and Benjamin Jones to Bilbo, April 15, 1939, both in Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 904.

⁹⁵ Bilbo to Cox, March 11, 1939, Box 394, Bilbo Papers (quotation); Gordon to Bilbo, March 7, 1939, Cox Papers; and Hedlin, "Earnest Cox and Colonization," 140.

found Bilbo's explanations sufficient but regretted that she had not been informed about the bill's details. She told Bilbo to proceed but informed Cox of her intention to seek amendments by Congress.⁹⁶

Stung by the criticism, Bilbo counteracted the wilder rumors through the black press. Bilbo highlighted "*free and voluntary resettlement*" as his goal. He distributed over 300 copies of the bill to the press and acquainted "many Negro leaders with his scheme," according to one reporter. The reporter remained unconvinced about the merits of the bill, but his *New York Age* readers could draw their own conclusions. One letter to the editor placed Bilbo on "the higher plane of human greatness" with Lincoln and Garvey.⁹⁷ Most such letters in major black newspapers opposed the bill, but the margin was not overwhelming.⁹⁸ Editorials were hostile, but fortunately for Bilbo the *Chicago Defender* gave him neutral front page coverage, which somewhat legitimized his bill to its national audience. Afterwards he received increased mail, with several of the letters citing the *Defender* article.⁹⁹ One New Yorker volunteered that he "seartnley will go at the word—I and my whole famley."¹⁰⁰

Bilbo's efforts reassured his repatriationist allies, but Mrs. Gordon continued to be a demanding, difficult ally. She insisted on being acknowledged. As Cox informed Bilbo, "Mrs. Gordon wants to come to Washington for your speech at the introduction of your bill, but she would like for you to invite her." Bilbo complied, asking her, as well as the UNIA, to bring thousands of supporters along.¹⁰¹ The invitation presented difficulties for Gordon, because "not a half dozen people in Chicago among the race conscious group" had the round-trip train fare.¹⁰² She hurriedly mobilized a twenty-two vehicle caravan from Chicago. Breakdowns stranded scores along the way, but approximately 500 supporters arrived for the press conference. They occupied half the Senate gallery for Bilbo's speech.¹⁰³

⁹⁶ Gordon to Cox, March 15, 1939, Cox Papers.

⁹⁷ Bilbo to Gordon, April 10, 1939, Box 400, Bilbo Papers (first quotation); and *New York Age*, May 13, 1939 (second quotation), and May 6, 1939 (third quotation).

⁹⁸ The *Washington Afro-American* for the period April 29 through June 24, 1939, has thirteen hostile and six favorable letters to the editor. This proportion appears to have been typical of other prominent papers.

⁹⁹ *Chicago Defender*, April 22, 1939; and Bilbo to E. I. Jones, April 19, 1939, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.

¹⁰⁰ Mack C. Royal to Bilbo, April 23, 1939, quoted in *Cong. Rec.*, 76 Cong., 1 Sess., 4651 (April 24, 1939).

¹⁰¹ Cox to Bilbo, March 23, 1939, Box 396 (quotation); and Bilbo to Gordon, March 26, 1939, Box 397, Bilbo Papers.

¹⁰² Gordon to Cox, April 1, 1939, Cox Papers.

¹⁰³ *Washington Afro-American*, April 29, 1939; *Chicago Defender*, April 29, 1939; and *New York Times*, April 25, 1939, p. 16, col. 4.

When Bilbo introduced his bill to Congress on April 24, 1939, Gordon and her PME gained public exposure. Both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* briefly reported the presentation of the petitions at a press conference, mentioning the Peace Movement of Ethiopia by name.¹⁰⁴ *Time* magazine featured the "portly mulatto from Chicago" and her followers, who were "mostly . . . on Relief (as is she) . . ."¹⁰⁵ Gordon used her moment in the spotlight to explain her racial views, manifesting her differences from her senatorial sponsor. Gordon bitterly denounced white racism, observing that her followers were "sick of America and the relief." She also stated that "the white people are responsible" for miscegenation and that it was one reason why she was "anxious to get out of this country."¹⁰⁶ Gordon's belated rebuttal to Bilbo's tirade the previous year, at the first presentation of the repatriation amendment, visibly upset him, and he reportedly refused to have his picture taken with her.¹⁰⁷ Bilbo's speech to the Senate was more cautious: he outlined the history of the colonization idea, tracing its support among statesmen like Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln.¹⁰⁸ Utilizing creative arithmetic, Bilbo claimed the bill had the support of "75 percent, or 8,000,000 of the 12,000,000 Negroes in America." In general, Bilbo toned down the racist excesses that had marred his performance the previous year. With an eye to the galleries, he admitted discrimination was "practiced constantly" and even expressed guarded sympathy for the plight of African Americans.¹⁰⁹

Most of Bilbo's black allies were pleased with the public presentation, but Mrs. Gordon's UNIA rivals found her prominence as troublesome as Bilbo did. The UNIA leaders had tried but failed to mobilize their followers for the event. Securing *any* UNIA representation was difficult because the organization did not have money for travel. Thomas Harvey was distressed to receive only twenty dollars from Garvey to defray his expenses.¹¹⁰ A. L. King raised the last fifty dollars of his travel money the day before the speech.¹¹¹ Three UNIA

¹⁰⁴ *New York Times*, April 25, 1939, p. 16, col. 4; and *Washington Post*, April 25, 1939, p. 2, col. 2. The press coverage was inconsistent. Among the papers that seem to have ignored the introduction of the bill and the press conference are the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Daily News*, and the *Atlanta Constitution*. Even the Communist *Daily Worker* failed to mention the events.

¹⁰⁵ *Time*, May 8, 1939, p. 14.

¹⁰⁶ *Chicago Defender*, April 29, 1939 (first quotation); and *Washington Afro-American*, April 29, 1939 (second and third quotations).

¹⁰⁷ Hedlin, "Earnest Cox and Colonization," 143–45.

¹⁰⁸ *Cong. Rec.*, 76 Cong., 1 Sess., 4650–76 (April 24, 1939).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 4671 (first quotation) and 4657 (second quotation) (April 24, 1939).

¹¹⁰ Benjamin Jones to Bilbo, April 15, 1939, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.

¹¹¹ Leaflet entitled "Group Captains' Special Rally Call," dated April 23, 1939, f. 22, Box 14, UNIA Records; and Harvey to King, February 7, 1939, in Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 911.

delegates did "hurry down to Washington" and were surprised to be "ushered into Senator Bilbo's office."¹¹² The delegates told Bilbo that social intimidation by black opponents limited the number of signatures, but to themselves they admitted the truth. In A. L. King's words, "from the entire national organization, we only submitted Fifty Thousand signatures which w[ere] completely pygmied"¹¹³ Thomas Harvey thought that "we have only ourself to blame for the PME is getting ready to dominate the country."¹¹⁴

Spurred by a new sense of urgency, Garvey's followers energetically promoted the Liberia bill in the summer of 1939, holding several mass meetings in New York City alone.¹¹⁵ One leader was "giving speeches on the streets every night unless it rains," and he found people eager for copies of the bill. Harlem's Advance Division reported a flood of membership applications, and UNIA activists described similar enthusiasm elsewhere.¹¹⁶ In Philadelphia people were "simply clamoring" for copies of the bill, while in Ohio canvassers were going door to door and collecting many signatures.¹¹⁷ Thomas Harvey reported "very exciting and enthusiastic meetings in the middle west, which means that the spirit of the people [in the east] is sky high."¹¹⁸ The publicity accorded to the Liberia bill broadened the base of interest in repatriation, and the PME claimed hundreds of thousands of fresh signatures for its petitions.¹¹⁹ Even the staid American Colonization Society received "a great many letters" about Bilbo's legislation.¹²⁰ Emigrationists suddenly perceived passage of the Liberia legislation as a real possibility.

Senator Bilbo was impressed with the upsurge in interest, especially when he received a two-thousand-dollar contribution from a wealthy acquaintance of Colonel Cox. "I am now ready to play ball," Bilbo announced, as he printed one hundred thousand pamphlets of his speech

¹¹² Interview with Thomas W. Harvey, in Jeannette Smith-Irvin, *Footsoldiers of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (Their Own Words)* (Trenton, N.J., 1989), 25.

¹¹³ A. L. King to Garvey, April 28, 1939, in Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 913; and Thomas W. Harvey to Bilbo, April 17, 1939, *Garvey Papers*, VII, 911.

¹¹⁴ Minutes of City Council, Greater New York UNIA, May 5, 1939, Box 16, h. 5, UNIA Records.

¹¹⁵ Meeting handbills dated May 7, June 18, July 23, 1939, f. 19, Box 14, UNIA Records.

¹¹⁶ G. E. Harris to Bilbo, June 10, 1939, Box 410, Bilbo Papers.

¹¹⁷ Benjamin Jones to Bilbo, July 20, 1939, Box 415, Bilbo Papers (quotation); James Stewart to Bilbo, October 9, 1939, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers; and James R. Stewart to Marcus Garvey, October 21, 1939, Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 927.

¹¹⁸ Thomas W. Harvey to A. L. King, August 31, 1939, Box 9, d. 32, UNIA Records.

¹¹⁹ Gordon to Cox, August 24, 1940, cited in Hedlin, "Earnest Cox and Colonization," 149.

¹²⁰ Henry L. West to Bilbo, September 23, 1939, reel 246, Records of the American Colonization Society.

and franked them across the country.¹²¹ This was just the beginning; he envisioned a Washington office, a repatriationist conference, and perhaps a publication: "We are getting ready to project a Nation-wide organization and our goal is ten million signatures by next January. We are trying to work out a scheme to finance the organization that we will set-up here in Washington. I am planning to organize and coordinate the efforts of all negro clubs throughout the country" ¹²² Bilbo's confidant Martinez estimated that it would cost up to one million dollars to fund a nationwide Negro Nationalist Movement, money that would be forthcoming from racist white contributors.¹²³

If such financial projections were unrealistic, Bilbo's expectations of influence were even more so. The senator wanted to handpick the leadership and edge Mittie Gordon toward the sidelines. Both Cox and Bilbo realized that they needed the Peace Movement's cooperation, but, as Cox delicately phrased it, none of the established leaders perhaps was appropriate "as director of the movement. It may be that Mrs. Gordon's genius is limited to the method and the single purpose of her organization" ¹²⁴ Gordon relied on denunciations of white injustice in order to inspire her grassroots following, and after her defiant public speech in Washington, she wondered if her frankness had irritated her white allies.¹²⁵ Indeed, Bilbo did take offense; the political point of repatriation was to demonstrate his soundness on white supremacy, and he knew that such talk as Gordon's speech could backfire with his constituents. Bilbo did not want an independent black movement led by this woman; he apparently preferred a wholly-owned subsidiary. To that end, he turned his efforts toward the unlikely goal of direct control, heedless of the potential damage to the repatriation movement's credibility.

As Bilbo searched for alternatives to the leadership of Mrs. Gordon, he approached the UNIA and proposed a coalition.¹²⁶ The three UNIA representatives, who had witnessed Gordon's legions in Washington, were enthusiastic about eclipsing her organization. Furthermore, the prospect of financial subsidy for their impoverished organization looked inviting. A. L. King endorsed the "co-ordinating committee"

¹²¹ Bilbo to Cox, May 4, 1939, Box 404, Bilbo Papers.

¹²² Bilbo to W. P. Draper, May 4, 1939, *ibid.*

¹²³ Martinez to Cox, May 6 and 15, 1939, Cox Papers.

¹²⁴ Cox to Bilbo, May 18, 1939, Box 407, Bilbo Papers.

¹²⁵ Gordon to Cox, May 6, 1939, Cox Papers.

¹²⁶ Before the April 24 speech, Bilbo had envisioned giving Mrs. Gordon the "greatest recognition" in any coalition. Bilbo to Martinez, April 18, 1939, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.

and offered to attend the inaugural meetings. He thought that, properly managed and aided, the UNIA should be able to secure five million signatures.¹²⁷ The UNIA representatives, however, misread their absentee leader, who proved downright hostile to Bilbo's coalition proposal. Marcus Garvey reproached his subordinates sharply, informing them that Bilbo's bill was "only one phase of the movement of the U.N.I.A." and that the group's broader interests should not "be superseded by any outside individual influence"¹²⁸ Garvey's American lieutenants were reluctant to drop the idea, but Garvey's opposition to any wider coalition presented a real obstacle.

An additional barrier to Bilbo's plan for control was Mrs. Gordon herself, whose life's work was at stake. She discerned that something was afoot and had no intention of being dislodged. In early May she wrote that she had "received a letter from the Senator stating that he is working out a plan for our national campaign. When he is ready I will go there [Washington] and establish a national headquarters."¹²⁹ Reconsidering this, she concluded that the whole idea of a national office should be scrapped. Bilbo's favorites, specifically Martinez, were "interested in nothing but money."¹³⁰ She expressed skepticism toward soliciting white funding and urged instead that the movement remain independent. Gordon peppered her correspondence with criticisms of the plan, and she threatened to return to Washington to confront the senator in person.

Faced with obstruction from both of his major black organizational contacts, Bilbo's coalition was effectively stymied. He pondered a more decentralized umbrella organization, perhaps under Cox's direction, but this idea was not pursued because even Cox thought it unrealistic. Instead, Bilbo opted for direct influence over individual protégés, especially within Garvey's factionalized UNIA. Infighting among the New York divisions provided the opportunity. Upon returning from Washington, A. L. King concluded that "differences must be thrust aside," and Harlem's Advance Division, led by Carlos Cooks, proved apt at streetcorner solicitation of funds and signatures.¹³¹ However, reports that copies of the bill were being sold by Cooks raised

¹²⁷ A. L. King to Garvey, April 28, 1939, in Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 913.

¹²⁸ Garvey to Harvey, August 30, 1939, *ibid.*, 924.

¹²⁹ Gordon to Cox, May 6, 1939, Cox Papers.

¹³⁰ Gordon to Cox, May 13, 1939, *ibid.*

¹³¹ Central Division Minutes, May 10, 1939, c. 5, Box 5, UNIA Records.

the "imp[ression] that org[anization] is racketeering."¹³² A. L. King and his colleagues disavowed Cooks's actions, and, afterwards, one of Cooks's lieutenants physically assaulted King.¹³³ Having burned their bridges within the UNIA, the leaders of the Advance Division approached Bilbo directly. Carlos Cooks effused about Bilbo's "kind and liberal personality" and his sincerity of purpose toward the black race. In September, Cooks and three associates met with the senator, and they agreed that Bilbo would fund a nationwide speakers' program and a motorcade to Washington. Bilbo dismissed them with the revealing words: "I think you have what I want. I will get you boys started as soon as Congress is over."¹³⁴

This was more the kind of leadership Bilbo had in mind, and he remained optimistic into the fall, crediting the emigrationists with a vast following. "Confidentially," he wrote, "I would like to see a million negroes come to Washington to stay until the bill passes."¹³⁵ Bilbo appropriated this idea, like many others, from his black colleagues.¹³⁶ If a Bilbo-directed March on Washington were not ambitious enough, he also harnessed the political potential of the repatriationist following. He had routinely urged correspondents to write their congressmen, and he began to offer occasional suggestions as to how they might vote. He advised one Peace Movement member to "tell the whole world in Chicago that if they want to catch 'Hell' put the Republicans back in power and the money power will take away everything." This was striking advice from a thorough opponent of black suffrage back home in Mississippi.¹³⁷

The fate of Bilbo's initiative, had outside events not intervened, is difficult to evaluate. The Greater Liberia Bill's prospects for passage were considered negligible by observers. The NAACP ignored it publicly and paid it scant attention privately, and, if their letters and diaries are any indication, few public figures thought Bilbo's effort worthy of

¹³² Minutes of the City Council of Greater NY, May 10, 1939, h. 5, *ibid.*

¹³³ Notice from A. L. King, dated June 13, 1939, d. 42; King to Ethel Collins, October 12, 1939, d. 10; and Finding by Thomas W. Harvey, July 29, 1940, d. 10, all in Box 8, *ibid.*

¹³⁴ Cooks to Bilbo, October 3, 1939, Box 425, Bilbo Papers (first quotation); second quotation is Charles Eugene Smith, "Story Account of the Trip to Washington," quoted in Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 926n3.

¹³⁵ Bilbo to James R. Stewart, October 11, 1939, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.

¹³⁶ At the time of the presentation of the Liberia bill, the Reverend H. H. Embræe of the National Union of People of African Descent discussed the idea in an interview (*Washington Post*, April 25, 1939); Mittie Maud Gordon and her followers had been talking about it for years. Gordon to Cox, March 7, April 4, and June 2, 1937, Cox Papers.

¹³⁷ Bilbo to S. A. Davis, July 15, 1939, Box 415, Bilbo Papers. On the other hand, Bilbo later became notorious for his public advice "to get out and see that no nigger votes" during his 1946 reelection campaign. *New York Times*, August 22, 1947, p. 10, col. 5.

notice.¹³⁸ The national press demonstrated vigorous hostility, and one southern newspaper thought that Bilbo had been “born a century too late.”¹³⁹ The minister and civil rights activist Adam Clayton Powell Jr. nominated the Mississippi senator for national crackpot, and whatever consideration the proposal received from the black press was laced with irony.¹⁴⁰ The columnist George Schuyler welcomed the departure of the “noisy and increasingly influential segregationists . . . within our group.”¹⁴¹ As for Bilbo’s attempts to influence black opinion, success seemed unlikely: his contacts within the black organizations had unrealistic expectations of financial aid, and Bilbo himself lived “in a tangle of debts.”¹⁴² More crucially, the repatriationists were already rumored to be “merely the paid agents of Senator Bilbo.”¹⁴³

Even so, one hesitates to be too critical of his allies, given the limited options available to the remnants of the Garvey movement. One newspaper concluded that the Garveyites were cynically using Senator Bilbo, rather than the reverse.¹⁴⁴ Activists saw the bill as “a springing board for the fulfillment of the Race’s highest aims and objects.”¹⁴⁵ Bilbo’s support allowed them to regain the public eye, at least briefly, with their uncompromising rejection of the leftward current of African American opinion. Black nationalism has remained a powerful force in American life, and even in the context of the depression, Garveyism had some resonance. A reporter, interviewing Mrs. Gordon’s supporters, was a bit surprised to find them normal, working-class people with understandable arguments. One housewife asked him, “What if the Nazi influence spreads to America, where will the race be then?”¹⁴⁶ Only a generation before, widespread racial militancy found

¹³⁸ Among the sources that do not mention the episode are Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (New York, 1948); W. E. B. Du Bois, *Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois . . .* (New York, 1968); *Complete Presidential Press Conferences of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (25 vols. in 12; New York, 1972), XI, 433–37, and XIII, 330–37; Frances Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew* (New York, 1946); *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes* (3 vols.; New York, 1954); and James A. Farley, *Jim Farley’s Story: The Roosevelt Years* (New York and Toronto, 1948). An examination of the indexes to the NAACP papers yielded few references. Walter White, for example, curtly dismissed the proposal as “thoroughly impractical” (White to M. O. Fesler, March 30, 1938, Series A, Part 11, roll 15, frame 105, in John H. Bracey Jr., and August Meier, eds., *Papers of the NAACP* [microfilm; Frederick, Maryland, 1986–]).

¹³⁹ Winston-Salem *Journal* quoted in *Crisis*, XLV (May 1938), 147.

¹⁴⁰ New York *Amsterdam News*, December 29, 1939.

¹⁴¹ Pittsburgh *Courier*, May 6, 1939.

¹⁴² Raymond Gram Swing, *Forerunners of American Fascism* (New York, 1935; rpt.; Freeport, N.Y., 1965), 118.

¹⁴³ Bunche, “Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organizations,” III, 428.

¹⁴⁴ Norfolk (Va.) *Journal and Guide*, June 4, 1938.

¹⁴⁵ Central Division Minutes, April 19, 1939, c. 5, Box 5, UNIA Records.

¹⁴⁶ Washington *Afro-American*, April 29, 1939.

expression in Back-to-Africa rhetoric. Had the international situation permitted, it might have happened again. As Ralph Bunche admitted, it was "conceivable that conditions might become so intolerable . . . that the black man would seek refuge on other shores."¹⁴⁷

The outbreak of World War II in September 1939 foreclosed that possibility. The Greater Liberia bill envisioned the participation of England and France, which became unlikely after Germany invaded Poland. The movement's few funding sources abruptly dried up. In September, Bilbo wrote Cox that Congress was dealing with nothing but the war, and in October he informed UNIA leaders that the crisis might delay the consummation of the proposal.¹⁴⁸ Cox agreed that, under the circumstances, the legislation would not pass.¹⁴⁹ By early 1940 Bilbo had turned his attention to his re-election campaign, and American involvement in World War II caused him to abandon the Liberia project altogether. "During a war," he concluded, "is not the time to bring the question up."¹⁵⁰ This counsel of political realism, however, looked like abandonment to Bilbo's black allies.

The prospect of conflict made emigration more urgent if less feasible. Even Father Divine, the sect leader, many of whose followers were former Garveyites, suddenly evinced interest in emigration.¹⁵¹ Garveyism as a mass movement had emerged out of black disaffection with World War I, and Mrs. Gordon for one wanted no part of "another white man's war." But Gordon's millennial rhetoric now returned to torment her. In Chicago, Gordon's followers "revolted" after hearing from the senator of the bill's delay. Mrs. Gordon faced hundreds demanding that they "go to Washington in September [1940]; and either get some consideration, or get killed." An observer feared a riot, and Gordon reported an assassination plot directed against her. The

¹⁴⁷ Bunche, "Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organizations," III, 431. One might also point out that similar ideas were being taken seriously in other contexts: at the time that Bilbo's proposal for repatriation was being presented, President Roosevelt considered the idea of allowing German Jews to refugee to a "United States of Africa" under American protection. See Roosevelt to Bernard M. Baruch, April 18, 1939, in Elliot Roosevelt, ed., *F.D.R.: His Personal Letters, 1928-1945* (2 vols.; New York, 1950), II, 879-80; and Bernard M. Baruch, *Baruch: The Public Years* (New York, 1960), 274.

¹⁴⁸ Bilbo to Cox, September 29, 1939, Box 424, and Bilbo to James R. Stewart, October 11, 1939, Box 1090, both in Bilbo Papers. See also Bilbo to G. E. Harris, January 7, 1940, *ibid.*; and Myrdal, *American Dilemma*, 806.

¹⁴⁹ Cox to W. P. Draper, November 15, 1939, Cox Papers.

¹⁵⁰ *Cong. Rec.*, 77 Cong., 2 Sess., 8957 (November 19, 1942).

¹⁵¹ Gordon to Cox, April 13, 1940, cited in Hedlin, "Earnest Cox and Colonization," 147. By the late 1930s, Father Divine's movement was in crisis due to federal prosecution over alleged financial improprieties, which may have motivated his sudden interest in the repatriation idea. See Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.: The Father Divine Story*, Chap. 8.

factionalism over the issue culminated in violence. After Joseph Rockmore led a secession from the Peace Movement, he was gunned down by one of Gordon's loyalists. Mrs. Gordon was arrested but her involvement never proved. The collapse of the repatriation drive clearly disrupted the Peace Movement of Ethiopia.¹⁵²

As Americans sensed that the U.S. was moving toward war, the external political climate chilled. Black nationalists were suspected of disloyalty and of pro-Japanese sentiments; indeed, Garveyites had long sympathized with Japan, which they identified as the leading non-European power. Among Bilbo's bereft allies such sympathies had a special logic: if racial injustice could not be redressed by repatriation, then perhaps an apocalyptic Japanese victory was necessary. One repatriationist offshoot, the Pacific Movement of the Eastern World, openly promoted Japan as the potential liberator of Africa.¹⁵³ Elijah Muhammad, the black Muslim leader, and scores of his followers were jailed for draft resistance.¹⁵⁴ Mrs. Gordon had ties to both organizations: she had prior involvement with the pro-Japanese group, and she had numbers of militant Muslim supporters in Chicago.¹⁵⁵ The Federal Bureau of Investigation monitored these ties closely, and Gordon thus became a prime subject of surveillance, even without her forthright utterances on behalf of conscientious objectors.¹⁵⁶ According to FBI reports, her pro-Japanese statements were unequivocal. Cox wrote that Gordon made such statements because she had "become distraught when she learned that the Greater Liberia Bill would not be brought forward because of impending war."¹⁵⁷ But grassroots pressure, rather than mental imbalance, probably explained her antiwar vehemence. In 1942 Gordon, her husband, and several of her followers were indicted and tried for sedition. Mrs. Gordon was convicted and sentenced to a two-year prison sentence, most of which she served.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵² Gordon to Cox, December 31, 1940, quoted in Hedlin, "Earnest Cox and Colonization," 149 (first quotation); Gordon to Bilbo, July 16, 1940, (second quotation), P. J. Fitzsimmons to Bilbo, April 23, 1940, and Gordon to Bilbo, March 2, 1940, all three in Cox Papers; and Joseph Rockmore to Bilbo, January 11, 1940, S. A. Davis to Rockmore, April 30, 1941, and newspaper clipping, "Back-to-Africa Chief Slain, Others Shot," all three in box 1091, Bilbo Papers.

¹⁵³ Roi Ottley, *"New World A-Coming": Inside Black America* (Boston, 1943), Chap. 22.

¹⁵⁴ Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 67.

¹⁵⁵ P. J. Fitzsimmons to Bilbo, April 23, 1940, Cox Papers; and Hill, comp. and ed., *The FBI's RACON*, 525.

¹⁵⁶ Hill, comp. and ed., *The FBI's RACON*, 523–30.

¹⁵⁷ Cox, *Teutonic Unity*, 219.

¹⁵⁸ Hedlin, "Earnest Cox and Colonization," 150–56.

Other of Bilbo's repatriationist allies also fared badly at the hands of the government. One was tried and received a two-year sentence after the FBI confiscated a book manuscript expressing pro-Japanese sympathies.¹⁵⁹ In Harlem, Bilbo's associate Carlos Cooks faced particular difficulties. In October 1939 he wrote that "our speaking staff is anxious, eager, and ready to swing into action." They were only awaiting financial support, he added. In November, Cooks complained of delay, noting "we had a common understanding that after the 'Neutrality Bill' was settled that you would have us start on a speaking tour of the country."¹⁶⁰ Bilbo tried to procure funds, but the logic of the situation was plain. Carlos Cooks nonetheless continued his insistent courtship of Bilbo. On one occasion, without Bilbo's authorization, Cooks announced that the senator would address a Harlem rally. Bilbo declined to speak, which enabled NAACP pickets to claim that they had deterred his appearance.¹⁶¹ The cancellation embarrassed Cooks and perhaps induced his final departure from the UNIA. He founded the African Nationalist Pioneering Movement, and his pro-Hitler speeches attracted the attention of the authorities. Cooks too was jailed early in the war, as were other emigrationist street speakers in Harlem.¹⁶² The collapse of the Liberia campaign opened the political space for even more radical nationalist voices whose antiwar rhetoric invited repression.¹⁶³

The UNIA leaders had always been calculating in their approach to repatriation, so they took the defeat of the Liberia bill with relative stoicism. James R. Stewart, Marcus Garvey's successor as the head of UNIA, actually admitted the international situation foreclosed the venture.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, Garvey's death in June 1940 removed a spokesman for the measure and diverted the organization to internal power struggles. Stewart faced intelligence accusations that he and the UNIA had Japanese sympathies, but he managed to avoid arrest.¹⁶⁵ With rival groups under ban, the wartime "tide of black nationalist feeling"

¹⁵⁹ John K. Larrimore to Bilbo, November 25, 1944, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers; and Hill, comp. and ed., *The FBI's RACON*, 387-88.

¹⁶⁰ C. Cooks to Bilbo, October 3, 1939, Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 925; and Cooks and George V. Wilshire to Bilbo, November 9, 1939, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.

¹⁶¹ Cooks to Bilbo, July 18 and August 1 and 13, 1941; newspaper clipping, "Marcus Garvey Movement Gains New Impetus," all in Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.

¹⁶² Ottley, "New World A-Coming," 129 and 334.

¹⁶³ Hill, comp. and ed., *The FBI's RACON*, 185-87.

¹⁶⁴ Bilbo to Cooks, December 6, 1939, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers; and Stewart to "My Dear Co-Worker," January 8, 1940, UNIA Records.

¹⁶⁵ Hill, Bair, Forczek, *et al.*, eds., *Garvey Papers*, VII, 957-58n1.

temporarily revived the UNIA.¹⁶⁶ Still, the UNIA's expectations of financial subsidy from Bilbo were not fulfilled, and internal struggles over the senator and his bill sped the organization's disintegration.

Senator Bilbo did nothing for his former allies because they had become a political liability. He stood aside in Mrs. Gordon's case and "let the mills of justice grind," explaining to Cox that they would "take what is left when the war is over" and go on.¹⁶⁷ When World War II was over, Bilbo did resurrect his proposal, but his African American support had diminished. His organizational contacts had withered, and postwar black optimism on civil rights changed the political context. Bilbo's reversion to a "crude and savage defense of southern racial customs" made him anathema by the time of his death in 1947.¹⁶⁸ The long tradition of African American interest in mass repatriation thus essentially concluded with the war.

Historians have generally dismissed the Greater Liberia bill as a curiosity, highlighting Bilbo's eccentricity.¹⁶⁹ Despite this neglect, the repatriation episode was significant in the evolution of black nationalism, a major current in African American thought. Racial solidarity animated other mobilizations across the political spectrum, but repatriation was distinctive. It was the Great Depression's most uncompromising articulation of race consciousness, and it gained a national visibility that defined black nationalism for the wider public. Repatriation, as an emphatic protest against white injustice, had appeal beyond the fragments of the organized Garvey following. While interracial and left-leaning politics came into vogue in the thirties, a countercurrent of frustration emerged late in the decade. Grassroots discontent with New Deal liberalism was real, even if Bilbo's allies overstated its virulence.

The repatriation campaign paralleled, and perhaps encouraged, other expressions of racial assertiveness late in the depression. Mrs. Gordon reported pressure for a demonstration of black discontent, preferably at the seat of power. She wrote that African Americans were joining by the thousands "to go to Washington to make a strong appeal to the government to take notice [of] this forgotten man."¹⁷⁰ Talk of "the march to Washington" circulated among Peace Movement members for years, but the demands grew emphatic once the European

¹⁶⁶ Hill, comp. and ed., *The FBI's RACON*, 33.

¹⁶⁷ Bilbo to Cox, October 2, 1942, quoted in Hedlin, "Earnest Cox and Colonization," 153.

¹⁶⁸ Morgan, *Redneck Liberal*, 249.

¹⁶⁹ Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 117–18.

¹⁷⁰ Gordon to Cox, July 31, 1940, Cox Papers.

war started.¹⁷¹ These developments anticipated A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington movement, with its admixture of racial nationalist and anti-Communist themes.¹⁷² Randolph noted the resemblance with discomfort, denying that his all-black group was "akin to so-called 'Back to Africa Movements.'"¹⁷³ One repatriationist leader actually suggested that Randolph had taken the idea from press accounts of his own speeches.¹⁷⁴ Whether or not the influence on Randolph was direct, similar grievances clearly spurred both episodes. Advocates of both African repatriation and the March on Washington were convinced of the enduring depth of American racism.

The emigrationist episode nonetheless helped marginalize black nationalism. The desperate resort to Senator Bilbo reflected the circumscribed options available. Bilbo provided publicity to the "Negro Nationalists," but his support encumbered them with a distasteful sponsor and an easily mocked program. Expectations of an imminent redress of racial grievances were dashed with the onset of war. These reverses fed the pervasive pro-Japanese sentiment among the repatriationist following. Growing militancy drew the unfavorable notice of federal authorities, who responded with forthright repression. The movement was thenceforth tainted by sympathy for the Axis powers, and it was poorly situated to negotiate the postwar wave of patriotic antiracism. Organized black nationalism turned inward, surviving the war only in the form of small neo-Garveyite local groups. The Nation of Islam eventually emerged as the most significant of these, but it long shunned the limelight.¹⁷⁵ Opposition to the dominant civil rights strain within the African American community thus went almost unnoticed for decades. That ideological impulse would reassert itself with Malcolm X and Black Power, but under very different political auspices. Theodore Bilbo was no Moses, and his allies wandered in the wilderness for a long while.

¹⁷¹ Gordon to Cox, August 14, 1940, Cox Papers.

¹⁷² So far as I can determine, these references are well before any public mention of the idea by Randolph. See Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (rpt.; Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1986), 247–49; and Paula F. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge and London, 1990), 47.

¹⁷³ Bracey, Meier, and Rudwick, *Black Nationalism in America*, 395–96. One of Bilbo's black contacts, Wyatt Dougherty, actually claimed to have introduced the march on Washington idea to the press. He complained that nothing had come of his plan, "except it has been taken over exempting my program by one Philip Randolph." Wyatt Dougherty to Bilbo, May 11, 1941, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.

¹⁷⁴ Wyatt Dougherty to Bilbo, May 4, 1941, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.

¹⁷⁵ Pinkney, *Red, Black, and Green*, 58; see also Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 60.