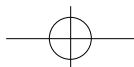
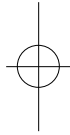
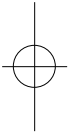
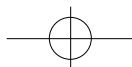
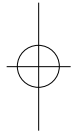
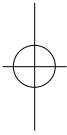


FIRE FROM THE SOUL





FIRE FROM THE SOUL
*A History of the
African-American
Struggle*

Donald Spivey

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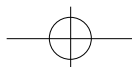
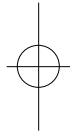
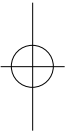
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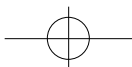
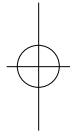
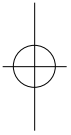
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In memory of
Richard O. Curry





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PROLOGUE

“We cannot escape history,” President Abraham Lincoln told the nation at the coming of the Civil War. He wisely understood that the rooted dynamics of conflicting interests would eventually surface, requiring either peaceful or painful resolution. A hundred years later Martin Luther King, Jr. was still warning the nation with the adage he often recited of William Cullen Bryant, “Truth crushed to earth will rise again.” The United States of America, however, is either unable or unwilling to resolve its worst endemic and systemic flaw: racism. Today’s America is rushing from its responsibilities and, with increasing frequency, espousing and implementing policies that reflect a denial or ignorance of the nation’s legacy of racism. Oppression and victimization are now four-letter words and affirmative action is labeled a euphemism for reverse discrimination. Meanwhile, racism remains a part of this nation’s core and is virtually pathological. It is America’s disgrace, its Achilles’ heel, its most glaring contradiction and inconsistency, a divisive wedge negating for millions the pledge of freedom, justice, and equality for all; life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. To solve the cancerous race problem is essential for the salvation of the nation. How can the race problem be solved if much of the public at large and the rising tide of political leadership are ignorant of the historic experience of African Americans? It cannot. Racism is a power relationship based on misinformation and ignorance. The belief in racial superiority, and conversely in racial inferiority, flourishes in an environment of exclusivity and lack of accurate information. It is infinitely easier to hate, despise, oppose, and misjudge a people and their problems and interests when you are unaware of their struggles, sacrifices, accomplishments, and contributions.¹

Make no mistake about it. Racism connotes something far more insidious than discrimination, prejudice, or bigotry. We all have prejudices. We all prefer some things over others. We discriminate routinely. In fact, we complement one another for having discriminating taste. The point is not that we like and dislike but what actions we take based upon our likes and dislikes. Frankly, it is of little importance to me if an individual dislikes me because of my height, weight, politics, where I am from, my ethnic background, my gender, or my color. What is important to me is when a company, an

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institution, a group, an individual, or a nation has the power to implement and institutionalize its preferences, and does so; the potential employer who rejects me because of those preferences, or the group or individual who assails me because of their preferences, or the country and its government that establish practices and laws preventing me from having the same rights and opportunities as others. When those actions are taken because of the color of your skin or the race to which you belong that, my friends, is racism. It is not a noun as categorized in most standard dictionaries. It is an action. A racist nation is one that provides or denies privileges based on race. Thus the United States of America easily qualifies as a racist society, having from its inception, bestowed advantages to those who possess white skin.

America's black population and its allies have waged war against this deeply rooted and vicious sickness for almost four hundred years without eradicating it. Within that struggle, however, are critical lessons and experiences from which we as a nation can and must learn. Today's problems did not start today nor have the efforts to combat them. Black folk have fought on numerous fronts and from a variety of perspectives and strategies against the *color line*. Understanding those battles, and the successes and failures, is to better grasp the extent and depths of the problem and the course of action or actions warranted. How can appropriate programs be implemented to combat racism if the roots of the dilemma are not understood? They cannot. A good physician explores a patient's medical history before rendering a diagnosis and prescribing treatment. History is the starting point for the accurate understanding of cause and effect in the relationship between individuals, groups, societies, and races. My goal in this work is to place the past before us and to draw lessons from the African-American historical record to help illuminate the present and future. Mine is an offering, to those interested and willing to confront America's gravest problem, of the unambiguous perspective of a member of the group whose American dream has been and continues to be a nightmarish encounter with the demon known as racism. The underlying philosophy of this book is that knowledge is power and that solutions flow from understanding history. The past is our source of enlightenment and wisdom. Indeed, our past, our history is the only thing we can know for certain. The present and the future are evolving, and the outcome is always uncertain. What we know for sure is that failure to embrace that past will yield a problematic outcome in the present and future.

The struggle of African Americans against racism is a story of

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tragedy. It is also a story of determination and hope. It is an American saga that cannot be erased. There is some confusion as to what people of African descent in America have been fighting for and against. African Americans and others have often defined the battle ground as encompassing a variety of issues such as freedom, intolerance, tolerance, segregation, desegregation, disfranchisement, franchisement, integration, inequality, equality, nationalism, political rights, civil rights, miseducation, education, economic development, access, multiculturalism, cultural awareness, ethnicity, class, sexism, diversity, and race. I contend that all of these are important factors but, I emphatically argue, for blacks the ultimate goal, whether articulated or not, has always been self-determination and empowerment, and the ultimate barrier that subsumes all others has been and is racism.

The new *Critical Race Theorists*, as some call them, are contemporary black intellectuals offering poignant assessments of America and who conclude that the race problem is the single most important ill facing the nation. Theirs are, in my opinion, familiar cries in the tradition of earlier activists whom we proudly recognized as *Race Men and Women* and who dedicated themselves to working to uplift people of African descent in the United States and throughout the world. Those early scholar-activists saw racism as the most horrendous problem facing people of color. Out of that spirit the movement for African-American history emerged in the nineteenth century. The movement met obstacles of all sorts, clandestine and otherwise, but the activist historians fought the good fight with a commitment to getting the facts out about black folk and combating the prevailing misinformation and wrong assumptions that existed in that era. The battle continued through the centuries. Today's Eurocentrics—or anti Critical Race Theorists—I find, like those of the past, avow the supremacy of the European past and white versions of American history, and vehemently reject the importance of the African contribution and the idea that racism is a major problem. They oppose the demands for academic diversity, and likewise oppose strong civil rights measures and affirmative action programs. In this book I pull no punches in my criticisms of them. I discuss how their writings contribute to misunderstanding and also fuel the fire of contemporary racism and the reactionary political agenda that grips the nation. My position is that knowledge of Africa provides more than what the detractors label as “feel good history.” It is essential to the development and progress of African Americans and crucial to the fostering of self-worth which aids empowerment. It is also a bold challenge to the faulty pillars of racism and, thus, impor-

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tant to the intellectual liberation of whites as well as blacks.

The relationship between blacks and whites in the United States is built on the enslavement of African people. Therein lies the genesis of control, disrespect, and an unlikely basis for a lasting friendship or the development of a race-free and color-blind society. Brought by force to the Americas, people of African descent were the fodder and prize of a European dream of wealth. Profit was the catalyst and racism the building blocks for the inhumane wrenching of millions of blacks from their families and African homeland to a life of forced labor and degradation in the New World. Whether in Latin America, South or Central America, the Caribbean, Haiti, Brazil, Cuba, or the colonies of North America, the Africans were relegated to the bottom of society and branded as less than human beings by virtue of their color. Blacks were at odds physically, spiritually, mentally, and culturally with the United States of America and its constitutional and moral claim of being “the land of the free.” From this country’s inception, Africans in America were perceived and defined as a “problem” in the making of the new nation. The treatment of blacks in Connecticut, “The Constitution State” as it is called, is illustrative. In this venerable of the early New England colonies, that exemplified America’s character, Africans were viewed and treated as a major element of discord. Life for blacks under the yoke of slavery, whether in Connecticut or the cotton South, was a horrific contest for survival. That slaves found ways to somehow endure the ordeal is an affirmation of human courage, ingenuity, and strength drawn from a connectedness that transcended oceans and time back to mother Africa. Today’s African Americans, and the nation, are products of their heritage including the legacy of slavery and need to substantively come to terms with that fact.

The force used to maintain the institution of slavery, and the violence required to overcome it, tell us much about America’s split personality. John Brown’s admonishment of slavery was also a warning to the country of continuous violence unless and until equality and justice ruled supreme for all people. Brown left a legacy from which the full spectrum of future generations of civil rights activists and black leaders drew. Brown understood the role that violence played in his day, a role and relationship that continues in contemporary society. What he and some abolitionists grasped was the full weight of America’s racial divide. He understood that the nation’s economic interests were so deeply invested in the institution of slavery that only violence could sever the relationship. John Brown’s warning came to fruition with the Civil War. He did not attempt to foretell what might occur in slavery’s aftermath, but other abolition-

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ists did. They predicted a grisly future of struggle for blacks as racial outcasts never to be accepted in America.

What happened to black folk in the years immediately following the Civil War foretold the dismal future of race relations in America. There were substantive signs before the war ended that the lot for people of African descent would remain precarious and barrier-ridden even if the North won the war. How often historians miss the crucial aspect of the question as to whether Reconstruction was a success or failure. They have focused on the politics of radicals versus moderates, and Republicans versus Democrats, rather than on the important issue of whether racism was addressed. As blacks attempted to empower themselves after “emancipation,” they were thwarted and victimized. It was difficult for them to know which whites were their friends. Yankees who came South marching to the bugles and drums of liberty did not support black autonomy. The Freedmen’s Bureau failed to protect blacks or help them to build and sustain their communities. The bureau in practice reflected the movement toward reconciliation between the North and South that was premised on white nationalism and black subordination.

The precious few signs of possible white-black unity on terms approaching mutual respect and cooperation around common interests could not take hold and survive in the poisonous race baiting that escalated through the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The detractors invoked white superiority and racist pride to chastise and brow beat those who dared suggest that poor whites and blacks have economic interests in common and that the two sides should find a way to work together. The emerging New South was a very old one to African Americans where the four “D’s” ruled supreme: discrimination, disfranchisement, demonization, and death. Constitutional provisions making the freed Africans citizens and granting the males among them the right to vote were completely negated in Dixieland. In law and in practice, blacks had no rights that a white person was required to respect. The media, in all of its forms, negatively stereotyped African Americans. Demonized, powerless, and unprotected by law, it was open season on blacks to every race hater. Victimization is not a figment of the African-American imagination. Lynchings and rapes were perpetrated against blacks daily, a trend that continued well into the twentieth century. In addition, the nation embraced ideas and concepts about what it meant to be an American that were used to define blacks as unworthy and responsible for their own predicament. African-American leadership that emerged in this setting varied from conciliatory and moderate to progressive and hostile. For some blacks, separation from whites

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seemed the only solution. The founding of the all-black town of Langston, Oklahoma was one such result. For others, they made due with the situation in the rural South as best as possible. Still others migrated to the cities of the South and more to the urban North where their voices joined in a chorus of a new consciousness for race building and self-assertion.

Their marching feet were not simply a rejection of the rural, agricultural way of life, but a refusal to accept second-class citizenship and a willingness to fight in an articulate and organized fashion against racism. Conflicts arose in the new settings where blacks and whites met. Sometimes these conflicts became violent. Nothing, however, was going to halt the black quest for person-hood. African Americans were developing their voice and making clear and ardent demands for reform. They fended for themselves and found strength, direction, and purpose in the knowledge of self that they demonstrated through their cultural creativity. Expressions came in every form from art, literature, music, theater, religion, and politics, to organized protest from every perspective, including socialist, labor, nationalist, integrationist, and separatist.

The forward momentum, stiffly challenged under the added burden of the economic crisis of the 1930s, did not stop. The desperate economic and racial times took a devastating toll on the black family. African-American women especially rose to the occasion shouldering a great many additional responsibilities including literally placing themselves in domestic servitude for the family to survive. The black population, for the first time in its voting history, began to rethink its political allegiance to the Republican Party. They began shopping around as independent-minded voters; realigning themselves during this period with the Democratic Party and the presidential administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt. The result was access to the corridors of power for black Americans for the first time. Talk today about the need for African-American voter independence and non-political alignment is to convey an old concept that proved itself sixty years ago.

World War II ushered in a new set of challenges to African Americans in their quest to transform the racial landscape. Blacks fought in all of America's wars. They put their lives on the line and they paid dearly. The motivation behind their sacrifices was quite simple. They thought it their obligation as Americans to do their part and fight for the nation's interests, believing that these contributions would earn them the rights and privileges of full citizenship. They did much to contribute to the victories abroad. Yet the recognition they hoped for, of complete citizenship and acceptance in America

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as equals, was denied. For African Americans the war took place on several fronts, both foreign and domestic. It was during this period that black political consciousness expanded to include a heightened international awareness and commitment to work for the liberation of the African continent and its people. Whether focusing on the domestic scene or the international arena, black folk understood that racism was the paramount problem. Organizations that did not share that assessment, such as the Communist Party and the American Labor Movement, touted class lines or labor solidarity as primary and were only marginally successful in winning the support of the African-American community. Racism, as blacks were aware, was the major problem everywhere in America, and they attacked it in all of its settings.

Sport is an institution in which the contradiction, the inconsistency, and incompatibility of racism and discrimination with American democratic principles are most glaring and flagrant since the sanctum of athletics is premised on such doctrines as equality of opportunity, sportsmanship, and fair play. Athletics are a perfect arena for exposing and examining the dual nature of American society with its paradoxical blending of democracy and inequality, but it is often overlooked or given only scant mention in the history of the black protest movement. In sports, African-American athletes fought against racism using a variety of approaches. The protests of these athletes were profound. They generated a substantial social and political impact at the domestic and international levels and affirmed the link between sport and politics and the modern Civil Rights Movement.

The hard-won legal enactments and legislative and programmatic gains of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s were a hopeful start toward eradicating the racial divide in the United States. Unfortunately all were, historically speaking, short-lived. America is an impatient nation, and a fickle one, on the question of race and equality. After President Lyndon Baines Johnson left office, the succeeding administrations began the path to the systematic dismantling of the Great Society Programs and the civil rights and affirmative action agendas. The assault intensified in the 1980s and 1990s. By any measure, the new America is anti African Americans. The historic struggle of black folk tells us that the country is in peril. The racial eruptions and conflicts in the nation that we experienced most recently have deep causal roots. The question is whether the intelligence, the foresight based on hindsight, and the national will can be summoned to eradicate racism. Given the diminished moral authority of the Presidency, the reactionary majority in Congress,

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and the intensifying racial intolerance and hostility to any form of diversity, the prognosis, I am sorry to say, is not good for people of color and the nation as a whole. The historical barometer is a stern warning of perilous waters ahead.

This book is, in part, an exploration of the many warnings and messages from the African-American past. It is a work of original research and makes wide utilization of published sources. It is not, however, intended as a synthesis. It is a reinterpretation and re-assessment of the African-American experience within the context of what I contend is the single most pernicious and ever-present challenge to black advancement and how African Americans have dealt with it. In the following treatise I offer you a perspective, hard-hitting and meant to be, on a nation that desperately needs to make a major course adjustment for advancement in the twenty-first century.