

On Biden's posthumous pardon of Marcus Garvey, the "patron saint" of black separatism

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On the last day of his presidency, Joe Biden pardoned the controversial black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), among a handful of other last-minute pardons.

The Garvey pardon had long been pursued by members of the US Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) and supporters of black nationalism, who falsely claim that Garvey was indicted, convicted and exiled because of his leadership role in the fight for civil rights. As our previous historical retrospective detailed, Garvey was anything but a "civil rights leader." Garvey was a right-wing figure who advocated racial segregation and cooperated with the Ku Klux Klan.

At a time when the working class is facing the incoming fascist Trump government and urgently requires a unified struggle of its entire class—black, white, native-born and immigrant—Biden and the Democrats performed one last service to the ruling elites with this symbolic embrace of racial separatism.

Garvey is often presented as some sort of militant or oppositional figure. The widespread favorable media response to the pardon, instead, speaks to the enduring usefulness of Garvey's brand of identity politics to the powers that be.

The *New York Times* repeated the bogus claim that Garvey was a "civil rights leader," an assertion echoed by ABC News, Yahoo News and Reuters. The right-wing press was equally respectful, with Fox News describing Garvey as a "Black activist" and Britain's *Spectator* magazine opining, "Joe Biden was right to pardon Marcus Garvey," adding enthusiastically that Garvey was "one of the most famous black men on the planet [in the 1920s] ... a disrupter who delighted black people and terrified the authorities. ... Many of us assumed Garvey would be pardoned by Obama, but he disappointed. Instead, this week, Joe Biden was the one to pardon Garvey."

The immediate prompt for the measure was a December 20 letter written by the Jamaica-born Garvey promoter,

Congresswoman Yvette W. Clarke (D-NY 9th District). Clarke, who was raised in Brooklyn and represents the district, widely advertises her Caribbean history. In an earlier appeal to Biden for a pardon for Garvey she noted that she was raised in Jamaica where Garvey is hailed as the first National Hero. "I was raised under the teachings of Marcus Garvey and Pan-Africanism," Clarke declared.

The latest letter was signed by 10 members of the CBC and two other supporters, including Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), a member of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialist of America (DSA).

The letter sought Garvey's exoneration for his 1923 conviction for the "fraudulent use of mail." It hails Garvey's organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), as "one of the earliest Civil Rights movements in the Americas" and claims Garvey challenged "racial inequality and inspired millions worldwide as a tireless advocate for Black self-determination and economic independence."

Biden announced the pardons on January 19 at a black church in Charleston, South Carolina. Casting the measure as an act of redemption, he said, "We know how healing and restoration from harm is a pathway to the kind of communities we want to live in, where there's fairness, justice, accountability, where the people we love go through hard times, fall down, make mistakes," he stated. "But we're right there and helping get back up. We don't turn on each other. We lean into each other."

What a cynical and self-serving fraud! Why didn't Biden pardon the 2.3-3.6 million Dreamers, who now face deportation under Trump? He could have provided "second chances" to undocumented immigrants by issuing a blanket pardon. He left countless innocent men and women in prisons across the country, many of whom will face the expansion of the death penalty by the Trump regime. Biden merely commuted the sentence of the American Indian political prisoner, Leonard Peltier, condemning the ailing

octogenarian to house arrest for the rest of his life.

Biden's concentration in his final days was a flurry of unprecedented preemptive pardons that served primarily to shield members of his family, political allies of both parties, and even top military officers from incoming President Donald Trump, who has pledged to go after "the enemy within."

Under these circumstances, that Biden took the time to pardon Garvey is significant. The WSWS earlier pointed to the attempts to revitalize Garvey, hailed as the "patron saint" of black nationalism, in order to insist that race is the fundamental divide in our society. This effort dovetailed with the promotion of the *New York Times* 1619 Project, which attacked both the American Revolution of 1776 and the US Civil War as illegitimate. Author Nikole Hannah-Jones and her collaborators have been lavished with millions in grants and speaking fees for this reactionary project.

It has long been this black elite that has promoted Garvey, not black workers or youth. As early as 1987, former Congressman John Conyers (D-MI) held hearings on Garvey. Former Congressman Charles Rangel (D-NY) introduced a series of resolutions on Garvey in 2004.

These measures notably gained support from Donald Trump's fascist "fixer" Roger Stone who campaigned for Trump to pardon Garvey during his first term. Stone said Garvey was targeted for advocating on behalf of black capitalism. "He was railroaded by the FBI," stated Stone.

It is true that Garvey was targeted by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. Garvey was feared because, for a time, he had a wide audience among black workers who were emerging, a century ago, as a critical part of the American working class in the country's urban and industrial centers. At first, Garvey made rhetorical gestures toward socialism and even the Russian Revolution, which exerted significant influence among black intellectuals, artists and a layer of workers. But over the course of the 1920s, Garvey moved sharply to the right—his petty-bourgeois orientation and class pressures predominating.

Garvey lived during the tumultuous period of the growth of imperialism at the turn of the 20th century, the Great Migration, Jim Crow segregation, the First World War, and the mass upheavals and revolutionary struggles of the 20s and 30s. In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1917, Garvey took over the radical black Caribbean Liberty League, formerly run by socialist Hubert Harrison, and built his organization among impoverished blacks. Garvey initially attracted support by opposing the more establishment-oriented National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

In fact, Garvey was first arrested in 1919 during the anti-immigrant Palmer Raid period by the US government.

Garvey was called before a government committee after the editor of *Negro World*, Wilfred Domingo, a childhood friend, wrote an editorial saying blacks' only salvation was a socialist revolution. Garvey's reaction was to fire Domingo and profess his opposition to socialism. As a result, all charges were dropped.

In January 1922, Garvey was re-arrested. This time, he was charged with mail fraud. His lucrative money-raising scheme of selling shares in a fleet of rickety ships which he claimed could effect a "Back to Africa" migration was, by all accounts, a Ponzi scheme without a single seaworthy vessel. His own accountants reported the fraud, fearing they'd be held liable.

While awaiting trial, Garvey met with the second in command of the violent white supremacist Ku Klux Klan, Edward Clarke. Historians report that in these discussions, Clarke and Garvey agreed that America is a "white man's country" and that "the Negro should have a country of its own in Africa." Garvey described the KKK—which at the time was responsible for lynchings across the South—as the "best friends" of African Americans, hailing the organization's "honesty and fair play." Garvey said, "You may call me a Klansman if you will."

The record shows that far from being a promoter of civil rights, Garvey despised those who took a stand on social or even political equality, including labor leaders like A. Philip Randolph and the NAACP. He distanced himself from all the genuine fighters for civil rights, especially the socialists, and embraced racial separatism. His hope was to become rich in the process, not dissimilar to today's black racials. Garvey ended his life as a self-described fascist, embracing the virulent nationalism of the 1920s-1940s.

Purchase Marcus Garvey and the Reactionary Logic of Racialist Politics at Mehring Books.



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