

A WORD OR 2

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09-03-07

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“Black Nationalism is the only real solution for Black People in the United States.”

Harriet Tubman

In the 1850s, John Brown devised a plan to attack Harper’s Ferry, a federal weapons arsenal in West Virginia. John Brown’s plan was to take weapons from the arsenal, retreat to the mountains and wage a guerilla war against slavery. John Brown asked Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman to help him carry out the plan. Frederick Douglass said the plan was doomed to fail and had no chance of succeeding, and he refused to participate. Harriet Tubman told John Brown she would be there with him and the other freedom fighters.

At that time Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass were known throughout the country. John Brown knew their presence would reassure the Blacks in the area. As it turned out, Harriet Tubman lost consciousness due to a previous injury; by the time she regained consciousness it was too late for her to participate. So, John Brown had to do without Harriet and Frederick, and it might have cost him dearly.

When John Brown and his followers arrived at Harpers Ferry, they caught the authorities by complete surprise and could have taken control of the arsenal long enough to do what they wanted to do. However, a scared slave saw what was happening, ran to the whites and warned them of the attack. From that point, things headed downhill. If Frederick Douglass had been there with John Brown, that scared slave might have recognized him and held his tongue. What a difference that might have made.

But that point is speculative. The more important point is that Harriet Tubman had agreed to participate while Frederick Douglass had refused to participate. What was the difference between the perspectives of Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass?

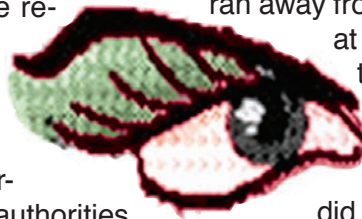
One difference is that Harriet Tubman’s perspective was much broader than that of Frederick Douglass. Even though she could not read or write, Harriet Tubman was smarter and more intelligent than Frederick Douglass. Harriet saw beyond that specific act, recognizing that it might be years before anyone would know if the attack were successful or not. Secondly, Harriet

Tubman was a person of words and action, whereas Frederick Douglass was a man of words only. Actually getting things done had provided Harriet with a level of vision, understanding and audacity that Frederick Douglass lacked. While Harriet was open to considering whatever means necessary, Douglass was too much under the influence of white “laws.” And a third difference is that Harriet Tubman did not see the fight against slavery through selfish or fear filled eyes. Frederick Douglass did.

When Frederick Douglass ran away from slavery, his primary objective had been accomplished. He had freed himself, and he was not going to risk his freedom trying to free other slaves. By contrast, when Harriet Tubman ran away from slavery, she put her freedom on the line at least 19 other times by returning to slave territory and helping other slaves make their way to freedom. Harriet Tubman valued her life and freedom just as much as Frederick Douglass did, but Frederick Douglass did not value the fight against slavery as much as Harriet Tubman did. As a consequence, Harriet Tubman fought with the heart of a revolutionary warrior, while Frederick Douglass fought with the heart of a reactionary scared person.

In the 1950s, Fidel Castro and 100 other college students with no military training decided to attack Cuba’s main army garrison. The plan went bad almost from the getgo, and a massacre of the students ensued. If those students had asked someone like Frederick Douglass to participate in the attack, he would have refused to do so. If they had asked someone like Harriet Tubman to participate, she would have said, “I’ll be there.”

Harriet would have been able to see beyond that particular event. Yes, the attack resulted in a massacre, but it was also the spark that woke up the Cuban people and started the Cuban Revolution. The student attack on that army garrison was a grand success.



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