Printed Resistance: The Black Press, White Media, and Marcus Garvey's Contested Legacy

Jeanette Calderon

Nearly a century has passed since Marcus Moziah Garvey's commutation and deportation, yet his case remains controversial. Similarly to a presidential pardon, a commutation allows the president to reduce a person's criminal sentence. Pardons forgive a crime, but commutation merely modifies a person's sentence. Garvey's commutation and subsequent deportation are still relevant today as scholars and relatives successfully advocated for a full pardon, which President Biden granted on January 19, 2025.[1]

In 1923, Garvey was convicted of mail fraud related to his shipping company, the Black Star Line, and sentenced to five years in federal prison. Garvey's sentence was commuted by President Calvin Coolidge in 1927, reducing the sentence to two years. Americans in the 1920s learned about Garvey's case through reading newspapers. Newspapers shaped public perception and influenced political narratives. The coverage of Marcus Garvey's case and commutation reflects the differing political views of Americans in the 1920s. Perspectives on Garvey's commutation varied widely as Americans viewed Coolidge's decision differently according to their background andpolitical beliefs. This article examines how White and Black newspapers covered Garvey's commutation and deportation. In addition, it contributes to existing scholarship by analyzing how these two events affected the African American community and Garvey's pan-African movement.

By examining the perspectives presented in various newspapers, this study explores the nuanced ways Garvey's legal challenges and deportation influenced the legacy of his movement and the community he sought to uplift.[2] The White American media's viewpoint is crucial to understanding racial divisions and politics in the United States in the late 1920s. The African American media's coverage is essential to understanding the community's response to Garvey's commutation and deportation. African American newspapers such as *The Chicago Defender*, *The Daily*

1 "Statement from President Joe Biden on Clemency Actions," The White House - Internet archive, January 19, 2025.

2 Roxanne Waston,"Marcus Garvey's Trial for Seditious Libel in Jamaica," *Journalism History* 33, no. 3: (2007): 173.



Figure 1: "Marcus Garvey," 1924. Library of Congress.

Gleaner, and *The New York Age* wrote about Garvey more than White news outlets like *The New York Times*. The press showcased the sentiments of each community around Garvey's commutation. Through analyzing these sentiments, this paper argues that Garvey's commutation was politically charged and highlighted the United States' racial tensions in the 1920s.

By 1920, slavery had been abolished for over half a century. Nevertheless, Jim Crow laws that had emerged after 1865 limited African Americans' rights by creating the idea of "separate but equal." Consequently, African Americans were oppressed and treated harshly in daily life.[3] Garvey was a political leader who inspired many African Americans to have pride in their identity and fight for their rights. He advocated for the freedom of all Africans in the Western World with his pan-African movement. He knew that Western capitalism and its global expansion negatively impacted Africa. During and after enslavement, capitalism was devastating to the African community as it prevented Africans from growing culturally, economically, and socially.

Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Jamaica in 1914 to fight this devastation. Two years later, in 1916, he moved to Harlem, New York. Garvey continued the UNIA in Harlem, inspiring many African Americans to participate in political activities. The purpose of the organization was to promote African Americans' pride in their identities and freedom.[4] Garvey created economic opportunities for the African American community by purchasing a shipping company, The Black Star Line (BSL). It was intended to create equal treatment and provide financial opportunities for people of African descent. Garvey hoped it would

3 Moloney and Lewis, "Social Equity, Intellectual History, Black Movement Leaders, and Marcus Garvey," *American Review of Public Administration,* no. 54: (2023): 215 -228.

4 Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 43.

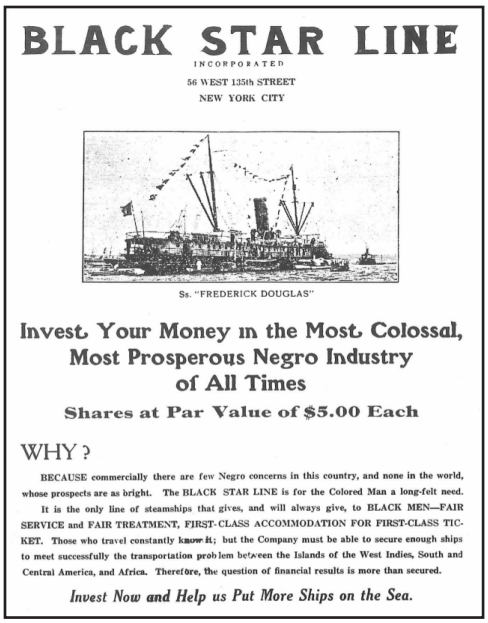


Figure 2: "Black Star Line," 1919. Smithsonian Library.

result in social, economic and political advancement. The BSL would give Black men the opportunity to seek promotions they would have otherwise not received under White employers.

Garvey's goals threatened US values, as discrimination and segregation were almost universal. Thus, the Federal Government attempted to curtail his political activity and kept him under close surveillance. In 1923, Garvey was convicted of mail fraud in the US related to the BSL and sentenced to prison for five years. Those who opposed his radical views saw it as a victory. However, his incarceration became a rallying point for the African American community, particularly those within the UNIA. Many of Garvey's supporters wrote letters to President Coolidge asking to grant Garvey a full pardon.[5] After Garvey served two years of his sentence, Coolidge finally commuted it in 1925. Upon his release from prison, he was immediately deported to Jamaica, which significantly limited his influence in the US. African Americans opposed his deportation because it took away a strong political activist. Meanwhile, his return to Jamaica was initially met with mixed reactions. He was seen as a threat to the Jamaican authorities due to his significant influence. Even so, he supported better opportunities for all those of African descent. Following Garvey's deportation, the UNIA began to lose momentum, since he had been their central figure.

Due to Garvey's political influence, many scholars have discussed his role in broader African American politics. In the 1980s, they concentrated on his life in America and Jamaica and talked about his political activities. By the late 1990s, historians shifted to

5 "Garvey sails with Pledge to Fight On: Hundreds Plan to Join Him in Exile Jamaicans Celebrate," *The Chicago Defender*, December 10, 1927.

the impact of his political activism on Africans.[6] Garvey inspired other Black leaders, such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. However, few political scientists and legal scholars have focused on presidential pardons' usage throughout history and their impact on Americans, let alone the African American community.[7] Many White Americans viewed Garvey as a criminal and violent activist. On the other hand, African Americans saw Garvey as a leader who inspired pride in their identity and advocated for their freedom. Seen through newspapers, the different perspectives on Garvey's case help clarify the cultural and political divides within and across these racial communities.

Garvey's value as a symbol for the African community was apparent in Black newspaper coverage. *The Daily Gleaner*, published by a Jamaican, reporting on Garvey's conviction, described "In front of the court building a negro woman with a baby in her arms fell on her knees... cried out loud 'Dear God Christ died on the cross for the same thing they are punishing Sir Garvey.' " This quote demonstrates the symbolic significance Garvey held for his followers. The woman compared Garvey to Jesus Christ, suggesting that she saw his conviction as both a legal injustice and persecution. *The Daily Gleaner* article depicts African American reactions to Marcus Garvey's conviction, and demonstrates the deep emotional and spiritual connections his followers had with him. The imagery of a woman comparing Garvey to Jesus Christ highlights how Garvey was seen not just as a political leader, but as a messianic figure for African Americans who sought liberation from racial oppression.[8] This suggests that his commutation and punishment were viewed as not only unfair but also as symbolic persecution of Black leadership and resistance.

Garvey's commutation highlighted the division between White and Black Americans. *The Chicago Defender* describes Garvey as he stepped on the ship that took him back to Jamaica: "Garvey carried a silver head Malacca and came and wore a snappy tailored light brown checked suit. His followers held an umbrella over him as they crossed the wharf and boarded the ship." Garvey still had supporters and was full of pride as he journeyed back to Jamaica. The

6 Grant, *Negro with a Hat*, 16.

7 Thomas Lennon, "Lower Types of Cranks, Crooks and Racial Bigots'? The Universal Negro Improvement Association and Black Political Violence in the United States, 1918–1930," *Radical Americas* 5, no. 1 (2020): 120.

8 "Marcus Garvey Goes to Prison for 5 years," *The Gleaner*, June 29, 1923.

papers reported him saying, "I leave America fully as happy as when I came, in that relationship with my people was the most pleasant and inspiring, and I shall work forever on their behalf." It continued, "The report is current here that thousands of his followers through the country are preparing to follow Garvey into exile. According to the report, he is to be joined by an army of men and women physicians, skilled mechanics, and executives who will be recruited from New York and other American cities."[9] Garvey's deportation caused many African Americans to follow him, which emphasizes his influence and his followers' deep connection with him.

The New York Age published a story titled "Marcus Garvey Sentence Commuted; Deported to Jamaica at New Orleans as New York Followers Wait in Vain," on December 3, 1927. The writer examines the departure of Marcus Garvey and his supporters' response. It states, "But much to the disappointment of a host of Garveyites in New York City, the release of their leader, following a commutation, did not come to pass, as Garvey was immediately turned over to the immigration officials under an order of deportation which had been issued by the Department of Labor because of his being an alien convicted of a crime." This highlights that many Garveyites were disappointed with Garvey's forced departure. It shows that after he was imprisoned for almost three years, his supporters still followed him despite the United States trying to link exile to criminality. In addition, it demonstrates that he was irreplaceable and that few African Americans were leading similar movements that were as successful. The newspaper states, "This unexpected move on the part of governmental officials put an effectual stop to tentative plans which are alleged to have been brewing in New York for a big demonstration by his followers, in connection with his expected arrival in this city for deportation… But all of these plans were knocked out by the action of immigration officials in selecting New Orleans as the port of deportation for Garvey." The news explains that Garvey's supporters were planning to gather for the occasion of his departure. However, their plan did not succeed as the federal government unexpectedly took him to New Orleans. The papers stated, "The time is drawing near the entire West Coast of Africa, which will be consolidated into one great nation of colored people, with its own steamship lines for commerce, its own industries, and art. Garvey's conviction has not

9 "Garvey Sails with Pledge to Fight on: Hundreds Plan to Join Him in Exile Jamaicans Celebrate," *The Chicago Defender*, December 10, 1927.



Figure 3: "President Calvin Coolidge," 1923. The White House.

shaken the faith of his followers."[10] This illustrates that hope remained among his followers even after he was deported. This mirrors the sentiment many African Americans held on to, that Garvey's movement would remain active no matter where he resided.

White newspapers like *The New York Times* reflected the bias of the White community regarding Garvey's case. This is seen in the article "Marcus Garvey on Trial; Negro Promoter and 3 Associates Charged with Mail Frauds" of May 19, 1923. The report was written when the case was ongoing. The newspaper acknowledges Garvey's leadership role as President of the UNIA and BSL. It discusses Federal Prosecutor Maxwell Mattuck informing the jury that Garvey influenced 30,000 to 40,000 African Americans to purchase a million dollars of stock in the line. The prosecutor states that these investments were worthless as the company lost value. Furthermore, Mattuck explains that Garvey connected the UNIA, Liberian Construction Loan, African Legion, and Black Cross Nurses to the shipping company and Negro Factories Corporation.[11] The prosecutor and the reporter framed Garvey's interrelated businesses in such a way that he was not only the leader but also a business owner. This framing could be interpreted as an attempt to strengthen the prosecution's case by portraying Garvey as orchestrating a grand scheme that resulted in significant financial losses for his supporters. However, it also reveals the challenges Garvey faced in defending his movement against allegations of fraud and mismanagement. Nevertheless, the newspaper did not provide a platform for Garvey to voice his opinions. It only covers his actions and does not give him credit

10 "Marcus Garvey Sentence Commuted; Deported to Jamaica at New Orleans as New York Followers Wait In Vain," *The New York Age*, December 3, 1927.

11 "Marcus Garvey on Trial; Negro Promoter and 3 Associates Charged with Mail Frauds," *The New York Times*, May 19, 1923.

for being a leader in the African American community.

The New York Times reflected White Americans' perception of Garvey's criminality. As seen through the paper's portrayal, they generally reacted negatively to Garvey's political actions. It reported on Garvey's legal troubles, fraud allegations, and the violent clashes of his movement, thus depicting him as a criminal whose release was undesirable. Therefore, many White Americans likely supported Coolidge's decision to deport him. The *New York Times* article, "Will Be Deported Soon; Garvey to be Freed for Deportation," reported on Garvey's commutation and represents him as a violent leader. It states, "Police were on various occasions called to maintain order when colored friends and enemies of Garvey clashed during heated arguments." The writer reports that Garvey was surrounded by violent citizens. They also claim that he defrauded his race and used the movement as a shield for his true intention, which was to scam African Americans.[12] The newspaper uses words to describe Garvey such as "undesirable alien" and "a threat." The term "undesirable alien" reflects immigrants' othering and mistreatment. The newspaper also highlights Garvey's profits, which made his efforts at improving the African American community economically and politically disingenuous. The newspaper does not give credit to or discuss Garvey's contributions to the African American community. This made his deportation appear positive. In addition, *The New York Times* ignores Garvey's voice, as the reporter does not quote him at all. It overlooks the significance of his movement and the profound loss many African Americans would feel without his leadership to inspire and guide them toward achieving social and economic progress.

After the deportation, Garvey remained politically active and worked with the UNIA in Jamaica, giving speeches and gathering support. Garvey stated, "I shall make a fight to bring to the attention of the people of this great country the evil methods used to railroad me to prison, to rob me of my name, to destroy my work." This quote indicates that his intention was to fight the United States legal system for the damage it had inflicted on his movement. Garvey's condemnation of the judicial process and the White public is important as it was a strategy to maintain his connection with his

12 "Garvey to be Freed for Deportation; President Commutes Sentence of Negro 'Potentate,' Convicted of Defrauding his Race will be sent to Jamaica Warrant for Deportation Ready Since," *New York Times*, November 24, 1927.

supporters. In addition, it shows his opposition to the motivations of US authorities. White American newspapers did not quote him as they did not want to support his attempts to retain connections with the African American community.[13] In 1935 Garvey moved to London, here he made efforts to continue his movement. Five years later he suffered several heart attacks and died there.

For decades after Garvey's trial and death, the media continued discussing him. *The New York Times* covered his case again, which shows Garvey's continuing significance. The article "Marcus Garvey, 60, Negro Ex-Leader," published in 1940, differs significantly from the original 1927 coverage, describing Garvey as "a short, stout, ebony-colored firebrand who styled himself a 'world-famous orator.'" The reporter depicted Garvey as self-made, explaining "he organized the Black Star Steamship Line and the Black Star Steamship Company to establish a world trade shipping firm staffed wholly by Negroes." The quote demonstrates that the relationship between White and Black Americans became more conciliatory. Thus, important news outlets like *The New York Times*, which were dominated by White voices in the 1920s, began to revisit the stories of figures such as Marcus Garvey in the 1940s. Nevertheless, *The New York Times* revisited Garvey's story much later than its Black peers. The language of the paper also shifted away from using terms such as "undesirable alien." It states, "In February 1925, three years after he had been arrested on a charge using the mails to defraud in soliciting funds for one of his ship companies, Garvey went to Atlanta penitentiary where he stayed until 1927 when his sentence was commuted."[14] This newspaper section avoids using derogatory language, reflecting the changing sentiments around race in the United States at the time.

African American newspapers like the *New York Age* and *Chicago Defender* largely portrayed Garvey as a revered leader whose commutation was bittersweet. They focused on Garvey's farewell to his followers, his continued influence despite legal troubles, and the injustice he faced as a prominent figure in the fight for African

13 DeSantis, Alan D., "Under Fire: A Rhetorical Analysis of Marcus Garvey's Apologia," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 17, no. 2 (1993): 7.

14 "Marcus Garvey, 60, Negro Ex-Leader: Harlem's 'Emperor of Africa' Who Sold Thousand of Idea of Own Nation, Dies in London, Urged OVERSEAS EXODUS, Established Two Ship Lines Staffed by Negros - Raised Funds by Stock Sale," *The New York Times*, June 12, 1940.

American rights and self-determination. *The Daily Gleaner* describes Garvey's absence as crucial because many people within the African American community saw him as a source of inspiration rather than violence. African American news outlets like it also focused on Garvey's last moments with his followers, thanking them for their support. This was significant because it underscored the values and image that Garvey had established for himself, which was that of a caring person.[15] In contrast, *The New York Times* portrayed Garvey as a dangerous man who incited violence, focusing more on the legal case rather than his departure or its emotional significance. Thus, Garvey's depiction in the two communities' papers reflected how they differed in their perception of his influence and legacy.

These varying portrayals reveal the broader societal divisions of the time. While African American outlets celebrated Garvey's character and contributions, White American media fixated on his criminality and potential threats, shaping a narrative that justified his commutation without granting him a full pardon. *The Daily Gleaner*'s focus on his inspirational role further illustrates how Garvey's impact extended beyond American borders, resonating deeply within the African Diaspora. Jamaican outlets like the *Daily Gleaner* highlighted Garvey's importance as a global figure of inspiration for Africans, lamenting his absence as a loss for the movement. The coverage often portrayed Garvey as a victim of racial and political oppression in the United States, drawing attention to his roots in Jamaica and his broader Pan-African legacy.[16] Their responses underscored Jamaica's pride in Garvey while critiquing the racial injustices he faced abroad. These differing narratives also reflect the biases of their respective audiences and the enduring complexities surrounding Garvey's legacy. Lastly, the African American newspapers focused on the community reaction and then the case.

In the 2020s, President Coolidge is rarely remembered favorably. More commonly, he is mocked for wearing a Lakota headdress during a visit to South Dakota in 1927. Few would associate him with the kind of leader who would commute the prison sentence of a prominent Black activist.[17] His decision to shorten Garvey's sentence and then deport him to Jamaica brought a sharp split in opinion between White and Black newspapers. This division provides a

15 "Marcus Garvey Goes to Prison."

16 "Marcus Garvey Goes to Prison."

17 Dr. Patricia Limerick, "Review Frameworks for Professor Limerick," HIST 4900, California State University, Los Angeles, October 8, 2024.

revealing glimpse into the era's racial attitudes. Therefore, one clear meaning cannot be ascribed to Coolidge's pardon of Garvey. Some even say that it was the duty of President Barack Obama, a Black American, to give Garvey a full pardon.[18]

Garvey is still relevant in the twenty-first century as his relatives pushed President Biden for a posthumous pardon. *The Washington Post* reports that his relatives argued that Garvey's pardon would correct the wrongdoings of the justice system.[19] Garvey's son Julius stated that this would facilitate the empowerment of the African American community. *The Gleaner*, meanwhile, reported that Jamaican American congresswoman Yvette D. Clarke and Georgia Congressman Hank Johnson argued that Garvey's case should be reevaluated.[20] The two Jamaican political leaders in the United States Congress said that Garvey continued to be admired by many African Americans. Therefore, they called on the Biden administration to bring justice to the Garvey case and recognize his impact in the United States on a national level. A full pardon would demonstrate that Garvey was targeted for his political activity and not because he was a criminal.

On the last day of his presidency, January 19, 2025, President Biden granted Marcus Garvey a posthumous pardon. Yet many activists continue to push for an exoneration, since a pardon includes an admission of guilt. Representative Yvette D. Clarke, alongside twenty other members of Congress, argued that Garvey was innocent and wrongfully convicted. Therefore, his full exoneration is still a long overdue act of justice. Clarke and other advocates argue, "The evidence paints an abundantly clear narrative that the charges against Mr. Garvey were not only fabricated but also targeted to criminalize, discredit, and silence him as a civil rights leader." Clarke pushed for Garvey's pardon for justice as his sentence was unjust. He also wanted Garvey's work publicly honored.[21] Clarke and other

18 "Jamaican-American Congresswoman Introduces Resolution Calling for Exoneration of Marcus Garvey," *Jamaica Gleaner*, February 18, 2023.
19 "The inside Story of the Pardon of Marcus Garvey," *The Washington Post*, Feb 1, 2025, www.washingtonpost.com/history/2025/02/01/marcus-garvey-biden-pardon/.
20 "Jamaican-American Congresswoman Yvette Clarke elected chair of Congressional Black Caucus," *The Gleaner,* December 6, 2024, https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20241206/jamaican-american-congresswoman-yvette-clarke-elected-chair-congressional.
21 Dan Kalmowitz, "Clarke Leads Letter to President Biden Urging the Exoneration of Marcus Garvey," Congresswoman Yvette Clarke,

advocates will continue to push for Garvey's exoneration to clear his name completely for, what was in their view, a politically motivated charge.

Biden's pardon reflects the deeper systemic issues of how the United States chooses to deal with historical injustices toward the African American community. The posthumous pardon is a symbolic gesture without acknowledging that the evidence in Garvey's case was manufactured by corrupt authorities to silence him. Representative Yvette Clarke and other African Americans continue to advocate for cases like Marcus Garvey's to address the harm the United States has inflicted on their communities and to obtain racial justice. Garvey's posthumous pardon, much like his 1927 commutation, was not merely a legal act but a politically charged decision. Just as the newspapers in the 1920s reflected divided perspectives on Garvey's case, the modern debate to grant him an exoneration reveals how historical injustices continue to shape conversations on racial injustices from the past.

December 23, 2024, https://clarke.house.gov/clarke-leads-letter-to-president-biden-urging-the-exoneration-of-marcus-garvey/.