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# “End the Autocracy of Color”: African Americans and Global Visions of Freedom

Keisha N. Blain  
*University of Iowa*

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# “End the Autocracy of Color”: African Americans and Global Visions of Freedom

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**Keisha N. Blain\***

*University of Iowa*

Historically, black men and women in the United States frequently linked national and geopolitical concerns. Recognizing that the condition of black people in the United States was [“but a local phase of a world problem,”](#) black activists articulated global visions of freedom and employed a range of strategies intent on shaping foreign policies and influencing world events.



JOHN Q. ADAMS

During the early twentieth century, John Q. Adams, an African American journalist, called on people of African descent to link their experiences and concerns with those of people of color in other parts of the globe. Born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1848, [Adams moved to St. Paul, Minnesota in 1886](#), where he became associate editor, and subsequent owner, of the *Appeal* newspaper. The paper’s debut coincided with key historical developments of the period including the hardening of U.S. Jim Crow segregation laws, the rising tide of anti-immigration sentiment, and the rapid growth of American imperial expansion overseas.

Amidst the sociopolitical upheavals of the early twentieth century, Adams utilized the *Appeal* as a public platform from which to denounce global white supremacy and advocate for the liberation of people of color. These ideas gained increasing currency during World War I, [a watershed moment in the history of black internationalist](#)

[politics](#). The millions of black people who served the War effort—in the United States and in colonial territories in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean—demanded the immediate end of discrimination, racism, colonialism, and imperialism.

Against this internationalist backdrop, Adams wrote a passionate letter to President Woodrow Wilson in 1918, which Adams then published in the *Appeal* in January 1919. Reminiscent of W.E.B. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), which underscored the global nature of racial inequality, Adams's letter to President Wilson condemned the global color line, the racial hierarchy which placed people of color at the bottom and whites at the top.

In no uncertain terms, Adams called for an end to the “autocracy of color,” demanding the rights and recognition of people of color in the United States and other parts of the globe. “Through the centuries,” Adams argued, “the colored races of the globe have been subjected to the most unjust and inhuman[e] treatment by the so-called white peoples.” Echoing the rhetoric of self-determination, a central principle in mainstream political discourse of the period, Adams called on President Wilson to uphold global justice and democracy—especially in relation to people of color.

## **END AUTOCRACY OF COLOR**

**Asks Editor of THE APPEAL in an Appeal Wired to  
President Wilson on the Eve of His  
Departure for Peace Table.**

**Calls Color Line Greater Menace to Permanent World  
Peace Than Hun Militarism Just Overthrown.**

**Asks President to Aid the Oppressed of All Nations,  
Races, Colors, Creeds and Sex in Realizing  
Liberty, Fraternity and Equality.**

*JOHN Q. ADAMS, “END AUTOCRACY OF COLOR,” THE APPEAL, 4 JANUARY 1919.*

Along these lines, Adams not only appealed to President Wilson to support political self-determination in India and “all colonies which desire it,” he also brought attention to some of the unique challenges facing people of Asian descent in the United States. He openly criticized “anti-oriental” immigration policies in the United States and called for the United States to acknowledge the “rights of Japanese and Chinese and Malays to become citizens.” Adams went on to demand the “repeal [of] all laws of the United States, or of any state, in which the words colored, African, Afro-American, Negro, Mulatto, Indian, Japanese or Chinese are used for the purpose [of] making discriminations against the people of any race, nationality, class or creed.”

The ideas expressed by John Q. Adams capture the [black internationalist](#) fervor of the period. In January 1919, when his letter to President Wilson was published in the *Appeal*, [leaders of the International League of Darker Peoples \(ILDP\) organized a meeting with Japanese editor S. Kurowia](#). One of the earliest organized efforts to advance [Afro-Asian solidarity](#) during the twentieth century, the ILDP was established in 1919 by [Madame C. J. Walker](#), the first African American female millionaire, along with several other black leaders including [Jamaican black nationalist Marcus Garvey](#) and [labor leader and civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph](#). In their meeting with Kurowia, ILDP leaders articulated their unwavering commitment to ending racial prejudice in the United States and abroad.



*MADAME C. J. WALKER*

Like Adams, Walker and other ILDP leaders maintained a black internationalist vision—rooted in the belief that the struggle against white supremacy in the United States could not be divorced from the struggle against global imperialism. These ideas were echoed by race leaders at the Paris Peace Conference, which convened in Paris on January 18, 1919. The Conference, which brought together more than thirty nations for the purpose of establishing peace terms following the end of World War I, provided a venue for black intellectuals and activists to challenge global white supremacy and to ensure that the interests of colonized subjects would not be overlooked.

From his base in St. Paul, Minnesota, Adams supported the efforts of race leaders at the Paris Peace Conference. Linking national concerns to global ones, Adams fought to bring pressure on President Wilson to address the conditions of people of color in the United States as well as colonized people in Africa and other parts of the globe. Adams's newspaper, which circulated throughout black communities in the United States, became a crucial public platform for endorsing black internationalist politics.

Like W.E.B. Du Bois, Madame C.J. Walker, Marcus Garvey, A. Philip Randolph, and many other race leaders of the period, John Q. Adams agitated for the rights of all people of color, wherever they resided. Until his death in 1922, Adams used his newspaper as the primary vehicle to articulate global visions of freedom, reflecting an internationalist tradition firmly rooted in black political thought and praxis.

**\*[Keisha N. Blain](#) is an assistant professor of History at the University of Iowa. She specializes in twentieth century U.S. History, African American History and the modern African Diaspora. Follow her on Twitter [@KeishaBlain](#)**