

# Marched Out

## Can Farrakhan still make a million?

By Salim  
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**A**s a public spectacle and symbol of solidarity, the Million Man March of Oct. 16, 1995, was an enormous success. The event produced the largest public gathering ever of black Americans and spawned imitation "marches" for black women and youth. The Nation of Islam also is organizing a "Million Family March" to take place on Oct. 16, 2000.

Since the Million Man March was conceived and organized by NOI leader Minister Louis Farrakhan, its success represented a victory, of sorts, for the forces of conservative black nationalism. But as a tool for mobilization in the struggle for social justice, the event was less successful. Some analysts go further and argue that it not only was a strategic failure, but—because of its focus on religious traditionalism and psychological transformation—an actual barrier to effective social activism. Yet one effect of the march's symbolic success was to awaken the black radical tradition from more than two decades of torpor.

The founding of the Black Radical Congress in June 1998 was, in part, designed to contest the apparent nationalist victory. Organizers of the BRC argued the importance of inserting radical ideas into public discourse. Their strategy has had some effect. In recent months, an array of African-American groups, including the National Action Network, New Afrikan Movement, New Panther Vanguard Movement and National People's Democratic Uhuru Movement, have emerged pushing ideas that challenge the racial dogma and self-help nostrums of NOI-style nationalism. And Farrakhan's absence from public view—as he recovers from a bout with prostate cancer—has removed the NOI from the media limelight he attracts.

**T**hese developments have allowed critics of the march more media access and a popular consensus seems to have crystallized that assesses the 1995 event as an accidental success,



with no appreciable impact. Mainstream opinion devalued the march from the very beginning: The NOI leader had been so relentlessly demonized in corporate media that his role was too large a taint for the march to overcome.

But many black activists also were disquieted by Farrakhan's leadership, though they sensed his growing popularity within the African-American community and the enthusiastic response to his vision. Others understood that Farrakhan's upsurge in popularity fit an established pattern: Black nationalism and white conservatism are historical partners. The increasingly conservative political climate, exemplified by those "angry white men" who seized Congress for the GOP in 1994, fertilized the nationalist environment and added urgency to the upcoming march.

Farrakhan used this dynamic to boost interest in the event. In his first written appeal for participants, he began by noting that "there is an increasingly conservative and hostile climate growing in America toward the aspirations of black people and people of color for justice. The 'Contract with America' proposed by the Republicans and thus far agreed to by the Congress is turning back the hands of time, depriving the black community of many of the

gains made through the suffering and sacrifice of our fellow advocates of change during the '50s and '60s."

This focus served to soften criticisms of the march from the left. Except for a few bold souls, most left-leaning black activists offered just a tepid reproach. Radical forces in the black community already had been eclipsed by the nationalist ascension and many feared even further alienation had they criticized one of the most popular events in African-American history.

But Farrakhan's explicitly political pre-march rhetoric was de-emphasized during the event and his culminating speech was noteworthy more for its numerological mysticism, self-help nostrums and religious exhortations. "Why would you go to the master's house with no demands on the master?" asks Nathan Hare, CEO of the San Francisco-based Black Think Tank and co-founder of *The Black Scholar* magazine. "You don't need to go up there to talk about how we have sinned. The fundamental error with the march was that."

Some radical analysts have noted the similarities and ironies between Farrakhan's speech at the 1995 march and Booker T. Washington's speech at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895. In his speech, "Farrakhan announced a strategic retreat from sub-

## The Million Family March scheduled for October 2000 appears to be a harder sell.

stance to symbolism, from contestation to entrepreneurship, from transformative struggles to parallel development, and from demand to obligation," write Sundaite Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang in an essay that appeared in the Winter 1997 edition of *New Politics*. "Farrakhan's address came exactly 100 years and nearly one month after Booker T. Washington rose to national prominence pronouncing a similar shift in ideology, strategy and tactics."

Robert T. Starks compares the march to the 1920 convention of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, which startled America by drawing nearly 30,000 people to New York's Madison Square Garden. Starks is an associate professor of political science at Chicago's Northeastern Illinois University and author of a rigorous Million Man March manifesto that was widely supported by a variety of black nationalist organizations. "During the first years of the century, Garvey galvanized the attention of the black masses like nothing before," Starks says. "And, unfortunately, until the Million Man March near the end of the century, nothing since." He dismisses the mobilizations of the civil rights era as interracial affairs more concerned with opening access to middle-class integrationists rather than true movements of the black masses.

Although he concedes that some opportunities were lost in the march's aftermath, Starks disputes those who argue that little was accomplished by the march. "There were substantial increases of black men voting as a result of the march and there was an increase in black adoptions. Many national organizations also reported a bump in their membership," he says.

As a black nationalist activist, Starks is more supportive of the march's motivations than his more radical counterparts. But even nationalists like Starks were critical of Farrakhan's

complete "white out" of African issues in his speech. The first plank of the manifesto he crafted contained a commitment to "development of the African continent and the rest of the African World Community parallel with the development of Black America. Farrakhan's subsequent "World Friendship Tours" failed to appease many of these pan-Africanist advocates because of his embrace of questionable dictators and his refusal to condemn the excesses of Islamic zealots.

**T**he Million Family March so far has failed to attract Starks' interest, and many other activists also are taking a wait-and-see attitude about the planned event. The family gathering is scheduled to take place in Washington on the fifth anniversary of the Million Man March. Benjamin F. Muhammad—the fired executive director of the NAACP formerly known as Benjamin Chavis—is national director of the 2000 march, like he was in 1995. "The purpose of the Million Family March quite simply is to strengthen the black family, which has been decimated by an overdependence on government programs and the philanthropy of the oppressor," Muhammad explained in a recent interview.

The widespread lack of interest in the event is in stark contrast to the fevered anticipation that surrounded the Million Man March. "I think many black people are Million Marched out," says Clarence Lusane, author of several books focusing on black America and a professor at American University in Washington. Lusane argues that the focus on mobilizing large numbers of black people for symbolic events is, in fact, detrimental to the struggle for social justice. "It's an enormous expenditure of energy and logistical wherewithal for very questionable benefits," he says. Moreover, he notes, the failure to exploit the energy of such gatherings tends to disillusion those idealistic participants who had such high expectations.

Despite the misgivings of the African-American left and much of the black intelligentsia, the Million Man March was a landmark event with effects that still reverberate today. It has become fashionable on the left to devalue the gathering as an assemblage of middle-class patriarchs bemoaning their loss of authority. But this caricature is not only faulty, it also helps reinforce the notion that the black left is out of touch with the African-American community.

There have been few quantifiable changes wrought by the march. The increase in black male voting totals in the 1996 election is one and an increase in black adoptions cited by the National Association of Black Social Workers is another. Some march supporters claim that falling crime and teenage pregnancy rates should also be attributed to the march, though those numbers began declining before 1995. As the Million Youth Marches and the Million Woman March show, it's at least clear that Farrakhan's canny nomenclature has caught on.

But the scheduled Million Family March, which, incidentally, is not limited to African-American families, appears to be a harder sell. Radical black organizations are not as intimidated by Farrakhan's success and increasingly will challenge the NOI's ideas for the direction of the black freedom struggle. Questions concerning what constitutes a family and other socially explosive issues are likely to become significant bones of contention.

The expected debate should enliven black political discourse in ways not seen since the early '70s. ■

# Dreaming in Red

By Julie Greene

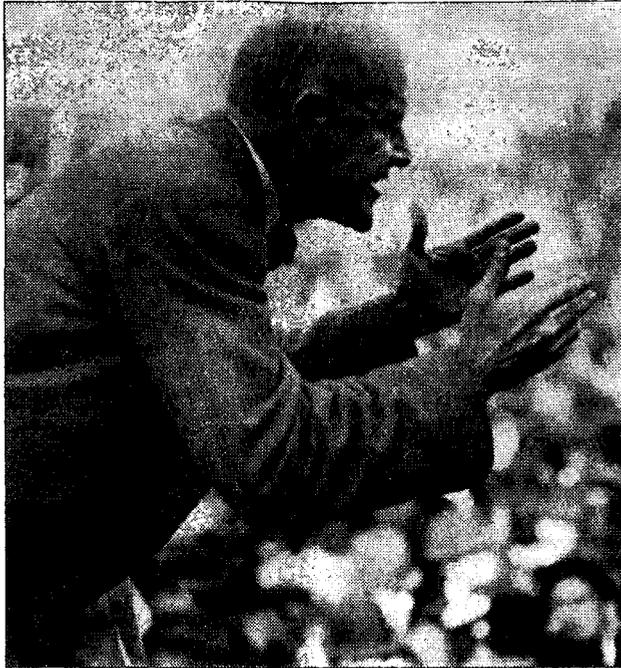
Two different personalities haunt the typical biography: the author and the subject. Currently national attention focuses on Edmund Morris, who turned himself into a fictional character in his biography of Ronald Reagan so that he could imagine, as a first-hand witness, key moments in Reagan's early life. But biographers have long been present as characters in their biographies. The real issue is how artfully and honestly the biographer manages that presence.

Consider the case of Marguerite Young and her posthumously published biography, *Harp Song for a Radical: The Life and Times of Eugene Victor Debs*. This sprawling and occasionally enchanting book introduces us evocatively to the mind and personality of Marguerite Young. She graces every page with a keen wit and a complex sense of

**Harp Song for a Radical: The Life and Times of Eugene Victor Debs**  
By Marguerite Young  
Knopf  
599 pages, \$35

American history. Yet the book arguably provides a richer sense of her consciousness than that of Eugene Debs, and there lies its main quandary.

Young was born in 1908 in Indiana; after growing up there and attending Butler University, she headed off to Chicago for graduate study. In 1944, she moved to New York City and remained there for 47 years, teaching creative writing at Columbia, among other places. Living in Greenwich Village, she became, as Charles Ruas writes in the book's introduction, "the living representative of its heyday as a literary center." Along the way, she published two books of poetry, a nonfiction study of failed utopias, and then, in 1965, her masterpiece: the novel *Miss Macintosh, My Darling*. Upon its publication, critics hailed Young as one of the most promis-



Marguerite Young spent 25 years working on her unfinished biography of Eugene Debs.

Altgeld, Susan B. Anthony, James Whitcomb Riley, George Pullman and James MacNeill Whistler.

As in her novel, Young's method seeks to capture the innermost consciousness of her subjects; she writes a rambling prose, in which observations and facts and sentiments pile gradually upon one another. The result reads like a dream of American history. Readers who loved John Dos Passos' USA trilogy likely will be charmed by Young's treatment. Those looking for a less dreamy style, on the other hand, may feel

perplexed. For example, Young discusses at length the Molly Maguires, that legendary stealth group of violently disgruntled Irish miners in Pennsylvania. After Pinkerton detective James McParlan infiltrated their group, his testimony led to the conviction and execution of 20 miners:

Some years after completing her path-breaking novel, Young began writing an essay on Debs and his years in Indiana. The project quickly expanded, filling her imagination with ideas about social reform and utopian visions in 19th century America and Europe. It became her focus for the next 25 years, and remained unfinished upon her death in 1995. It was left to Ruas, her longtime friend, to prepare the large manuscript for publication.

The resulting book is really a biography only in the loosest sense. Almost the first 200 pages examine social and utopian thinking in the early to mid-19th century. Young explores such figures as Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx and, above all, German Socialist Wilhelm Weitling, who moved to America and influenced labor struggles and radicalism. Even after she turns to her charismatic subject, Young remains as interested in the people, places and general zeitgeist as in Debs himself. The book is filled with lengthy and richly realized portraits of people like Allan Pinkerton, John

perplexed. For example, Young discusses at length the Molly Maguires, that legendary stealth group of violently disgruntled Irish miners in Pennsylvania. After Pinkerton detective James McParlan infiltrated their group, his testimony led to the conviction and execution of 20 miners:

That day in June when had occurred the transportation of the Molly Maguires by the one-way ticket which had been punched for their free passage across the River Styx at its high flood by the coal and railroad powers with the help of Gowen and his staff—greatly to the triumph of the many-clawed Allan Pinkerton, who, keeping himself remote, had sent not only McParlan but others to this Pennsylvania coal country as spies against the labor-union men whom he had accused of traitorism to old king coal and of being revolutionary communists and who had evoked no memory in him of the raggedy ex-jailbird Charney for whom the Chartist movement had seemed as provincial as one small patch of red earth in comparison with the red revolution which was to come—took place under the coldly falling rain, the dark storm clouds.

At times Young's book transports the reader away to the consciousness and