A Black Odyssey

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The French at first believed that because of his color they could deal with Waller as they pleased. As one American businessman in Madagascar put it: "They thought he was a nigger, had no money, and that we white Americans, like Wetter and myself would not bother our heads about him." The French were badly mistaken. Despite the fact that a Democratic administration was in office and America's ambassador to France was a former Confederate brigadier and Louisiana plantation-owner, Washington labored frantically to secure the ex-consul's release, even at one point threatening an open break with France unless the Quai d'Orsay met American demands.

In taking an aggressive stance in the Waller affair, the Cleveland administration was reacting to pressure from a variety of groups who saw in the ex-consul's predicament a chance to advance their own interests. Of these, the most vocal was the black press. Whether imperialists or pacifists, nationalists or internationalists, black observers of foreign affairs implicitly or explicitly judged diplomatic developments on the basis of their anticipated impact on the plight of the Negro American. In no case was this truer than in the attitudes of the black press toward Waller's imprisonment. Negro journalists, perhaps at their most influential in the 1890s, saw in the incident an opportunity not only to help a fellow black in trouble but also a chance to draw attention to the plight of all Afro-Americans and to blunt the drive then being mounted by John T.
Morgan, Benjamin Tillman, and other outspoken racists to exclude the Negro from the mainstream of American life.

The Waller affair attracted the attention of many Negro editors in the United States simply because they were proud of the fact that an American Negro had become the center of a dispute between two great nations. The press repeatedly contended that the affair would rank in history with the other major diplomatic incidents of the nineteenth century. George Knox of the Indianapolis Freeman put Waller on a level with no less a figure than "that greatest of blacks, Toussaint l'Ouverture." Shortly before Waller's arrest in March, 1895, the American Citizen declared that the ex-consul had "become something of a potentate and bids fair to rival the triumphs of Cecil Rhodes."

The Waller affair was particularly tempting editorial fare for those who sought to draw America's attention to the condition of the domestic black community by underscoring the nation's tradition of anticolonialism and urging Washington to aid exploited, nonwhite peoples overseas. In analyzing the Cuban revolution, the Hawaiian imbroglio, and the Venezuelan boundary dispute, a large number of editors first assumed a community of racial identity with the native population and then voiced vigorous support for their efforts to fend off white colonialism. Emphasizing the fact that "97 percent of the Venezuelan population was Mulattoe, Indian, and Negro," the St. Louis American Eagle called upon the Cleveland administration in January, 1896, to do everything within its power to protect that embattled republic from British imperialism. The Broad Ax of Salt Lake City not only urged Washington to spread the mantle of the Monroe Doctrine around the Venezuelans but called upon the nation to lend all possible aid to Cuba, another black society fighting against colonialism and racism. Cuba, it asserted, "is engaged in a struggle today of republicanism and democracy against monarchy and plutocracy. . . . In many respects it is a similar struggle to our own Revolution, to escape the grinding heel of despotic power." The Malagasy, no less than the Cubans or Venezuelans, elicited widespread sympathy among American Negroes. The Cleveland Gazette, which frequently ran front-page portraits of the Hova queen, Ranavalona III, praised Madagascar as a "progressive, Christian nation," and in March, 1895, denounced the French assault on Madagascar as an uncivilized attack on a powerless nation of liberty-loving people. Waller's arrest provided black spokesmen with a double irony: John Waller, despite the racism he had encountered in his native land, was risking his life to bring the blessings of liberty and democracy to the beleaguered Hovas; he was a black man taking up the white man's burden. Proclaimed the Parsons
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Weekly Blade: "The French have no more right in Madagascar than a burglar has in a man's parlor. . . . They are attempting to force on the people of the island a protectorate that is of all things the most hateful and detestable. . . . he [Waller] is paying heavily for his sympathy with an outraged people."8

The same longing for social justice that caused many blacks to identify with nonwhite societies threatened by European imperialism also prompted them to rally around the flag whenever America faced an external threat. Just as Negroes had rallied during the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Civil War, a large segment of the black community rushed to defend the nation's prerogatives during the crises of the 1890s, hoping that the diplomatic incident in question, by unifying the nation and providing an opportunity for black Americans to prove their patriotism, would facilitate the drive for full citizenship.9 In the Waller affair, the black press perceived a twofold opportunity to turn American chauvinism to their advantage. First, by striking an aggressive pose toward France, blacks believed they could win the respect of the increasingly jingoistic white majority. In an outburst that would have done the New York World justice, the Parsons Weekly Blade exclaimed: "If war must come, let both England and France let loose their dogs of war at the same time and they will see how quick we can slap them into the long sleep which has no ending."10 Second, Negro spokesmen, by stressing Waller's American citizenship, sought to establish him as a symbol of the national sovereignty. In that way they might induce the white power structure to view all black Americans as full-fledged citizens deserving equal protection under the law. "Mr. Waller," the Cleveland Gazette averred, "is the exponent of our national existence, and the man outraged in his rights is as grave a matter as though the head of a nation had been arrested and imprisoned."11 Declaring that Waller was "an American citizen—period," the Kansas City Journal called for "the taking of whatever steps are demanded to preserve the dignity of the American name, to avenge this insult to American honor, and to right the wrong that has been done."12

A number of editors, particularly those who advocated racial self-help and solidarity, saw in the New Empire an unparalleled opportunity for blacks to make their personal fortune and in the process augment the power and influence of black America as a whole. For these men Waller was a model and, more, a harbinger of things to come. H. C. Smith of the Cleveland Gazette, who campaigned tirelessly in behalf of Waller's release, lauded the Kansan as "the first man who has identified himself with a large industrial interest outside the country," and he predicted
that “with better education and larger opportunities offered in America, the Afro-American will find employment for his increasing wealth in foreign enterprises.” Naturally, these black disciples of economic expansion were extremely desirous that the State Department show the same willingness to protect black entrepreneurs and their property as they had in looking after white businessmen and their interests overseas. Declaring that Waller’s imprisonment was the work of French trading companies “bent on thwarting a rival entrepreneur,” John Mitchell of the Richmond Planet demanded that Washington protect the ex-consul just as it would any other American businessman.

In diplomatic incidents involving black Americans, whether in an official or private capacity, the black press invariably viewed the posture of the federal government as a measure of the nation’s willingness to grant full and equal citizenship to the Negro American. This tendency to test the system and, when it failed, to confront the white power structure with evidence of its ingrained racism found an ample outlet in the Waller affair. Less than two weeks after Waller’s imprisonment, T. McCants Stewart, an influential black lawyer, editor, and politician, notified the administration that he and his brethren were watching carefully: “Afro-Americans throughout the country feel that the cause of American citizenship appeals through this case to our Government as well as to patriotic Americans everywhere, and we feel sure that this Government will allow no harm to be done to Mr. Waller, but will make clear that an American citizen is as safe to do business abroad as he is under the capitol at Washington.” Monroe Dorsey of the Parsons Weekly Blade also saw the incident as a test of the white power structure’s position toward full citizenship for blacks. According to this militant editor, the lines were clearly drawn. Waller was a black American citizen who had been wronged by another nation. Given the State Department’s past efforts to protect United States nationals in similar straits, his failure to obtain Waller’s release and indemnification would constitute irrefutable proof that blacks could never expect equal justice under American law.

As the months passed, with no apparent progress in the Franco-American negotiations, the black press proclaimed that Waller had become another casualty of the ever-present American caste system. Blacks could expect no more protection abroad than they received at home. In April, 1895, George L. Knox’s Indianapolis Freeman concluded bitterly, “The Greatest Republic on earth in the presence of a government of the first class, especially if the rights of a black American citizen abroad are to be looked into, is also the greatest flunky among the governments of
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the earth, and never deserved one drop of the sea of blood that has been
shed by the Negro in her defense."  17 In September W. Calvin Chase, the
outspoken editor of the Washington Bee, stated flatly: "Had Mr. Waller
been a white man the matter with France would have been settled long
ago."  18 The Cleveland World was willing to take the case against the
American color line one step further. It argued that institutionalized
racism was responsible not only for the State Department's mishandling
of the affair but for Waller's arrest as well: "The French government has
kept close watch upon the feeble and paltry behavior of this government
toward the Americans in Hawaii and naturally concluded that if it would
overlook the claims of those united in the dominant white population of
this country, the wrongs inflicted upon the representative of the colored
race—the consul to Madagascar—would be even more exposed to slights
and neglect."  19

The Cleveland administration proved remarkably sensitive to black
opinion in the Waller affair because the president had been laboring
since the beginning of his second term to attract as many Negro votes as
possible.  20 Blacks were by the late 1880s becoming increasingly dissatis-
fied with the party of Lincoln. "There is a new generation of people
now ready to become a factor in politics," declared the Marquette Moni-
tor in 1888. "It is a generation of educated, intelligent colored American
citizens, with all the ambition and political instinct peculiar to Amer-
cicans. . . . They prefer to remain loyal to the party that gave their
fathers freedom but they justly expect a fair recognition for their con-
tinued allegiance to the party."  21 Shortly after Cleveland's first inaugu-
ration, W. Calvin Chase urged southern Negroes to be independent in
the body politic.  22 In 1890 T. Thomas Fortune of the New York Age
warned that if the Republicans did not produce for the Negro there
would be no support for them at the polls. Part of the problem, he
declared, was that the party had fallen into the hands of "autocrats and
bloated corporationists."  23

By 1895 Cleveland, through his willingness to appoint black office-
holders, had established a reputation for fairness within the black com-
munity. According to H. C. C. Astwood and George Downing, both
active black Democrats, Cleveland's decision to appoint Negroes to the
posts of minister to Haiti, minister to Liberia, recorder of deeds, and
consul at Santo Domingo, as well as a number of lesser posts, had swelled
the ranks of Afro-American independents and Democrats, and had badly
frightened black Republicans. This, plus growing black dissatisfaction
with the G.O.P. and the subtle efforts of Cleveland's political organizers,
resulted in the creation of a number of black Democratic organizations in
the late eighties and early nineties which worked assiduously in behalf of Cleveland's 1892 campaign. Among the best known were the National Colored Tariff Reform Association organized in Washington, D.C., in March, 1890, the Young Afro-American Democrats established in New York in 1891, and the John M. Palmer Democratic Club, founded by Jerome Riley in September, 1891. According to C. H. J. Taylor of Kansas, as of 1894, there were black Democratic organizations in seventeen states. By far the most important of these was the Negro National Democratic League, which included among its leaders H. C. C. Astwood of Louisiana, Peter H. Clark of Chicago, J. Milton Turner of Missouri, and Taylor.24

Although Cleveland named even more blacks to appointive office during his second term than he had during the first, his inability to obtain Senate approval for many of them threatened the president's hard-earned gains among black voters. Southern Democratic senators, led by the Louisiana delegation, rejected Cleveland's Negro nominees for diplomatic posts in Haiti, Madagascar, Santo Domingo, and Sierra Leone, and for the offices of register of the Land Office and fourth auditor, forcing him to name whites to these positions. Astwood, whose appointment as consul to Calais was also rejected by the Senate, wrote Cleveland on April 15, 1896: "I must deplore the meagre representation given to us from an administration that promised such large possibilities for us. . . . The Negro vote which was practically divided is becoming consolidated against the Democratic Party." Blacks held the political balance of power in many of the largest states, he warned, and time was running out.25 Undoubtedly, the mounting rebellion among black Democrats worked to Waller's advantage by forcing Cleveland and Olney to take as aggressive a position as possible.

As president of the Negro National Democratic League, recorder of deeds, and one of the few black Cleveland appointees to survive the Senate gauntlet, C. H. J. Taylor was in an ideal position to advise the president on how best to improve his standing among black voters. By the fall of 1895 he was warning the White House that if it did not act vigorously in the Waller matter everything the administration had done in the past to ease the Afro-American's suspicions of the Democratic party would have been for nothing.26

Black opinion was unusually important to the decision-making process within the administration as it related to the Waller affair because for once there was a community rather than a conflict of interest between the black and white press. To be sure, white Americans did not see in the Waller affair an opportunity to elevate the status of the Afro-
American; they were, however, willing for a variety of reasons to overlook the fact that Waller was black. Among the most important of these was the widespread popular conviction that America had a mission in world affairs to defend the weaker races against European colonialism and to ensure that all peoples had the opportunity to emulate the American example.

Indeed, sympathy for the Malagasies and a tendency to see Waller as their protector were no less widespread among the whites than among blacks. "It is a thousand pities that so brave and patriotic a nation as the Malagasy should be despoiled of its rights and its country as it surely will be by the French," editorialized the Chicago Tribune in June, 1895. The New York Times was more outspoken. When the Hova capital fell to the French in October, 1895, the Times proclaimed, "A more flagrant, unjustified, and outrageous project of national robbery and spoliation is not recorded in history." Many believed that the Hovas, like the Cubans, were innately liberty-loving, that they were deliberately seeking to duplicate America's experience, and that it was the government's duty to come to their rescue. An aged New Englander named Charles Booth wrote to the State Department in late April urging immediate action to secure Waller's release and forestall French annexation of Madagascar: "I have witnessed the wonderful growth of our country," he declared, "and in my day we have passed into the most influential people in the world . . . . I cannot but think we have a right and duty to discharge toward peoples struggling to follow our example." The Reverend James M. Whiton fully agreed. Writing in Outlook in September, 1895, he called on Washington to put an end to the "unrighteous war of conquest" then raging in Madagascar. "American interests," he advised his readers, "are those of an unprejudiced sympathy with the oppressed and wronged the world over." Whiton, Booth, and the editorial pages of newspapers as diverse as the New York Herald-Tribune, New York Sun, New Orleans Times-Picayune, Chicago Tribune, and New York Times had no problem in viewing Waller, despite his color, as a legitimate agent of American civilization. Had he not challenged French hegemony in the exequatur matter, and was not his concession the occasion for French invasion? In fact, those who believed in America's mission abroad were willing not only to grant Waller full citizenship but to convert him into a symbol of the national sovereignty. There is no indication, however, that as a result they became willing to accord Waller's black brethren in the United States those rights guaranteed to all citizens in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.
Undoubtedly, the most important factor behind white concern for Waller was the public's determination to see that the "rights" of American citizens living abroad were respected. For a number of reasons, the nation's feeling of inadequacy and desire for respect were reaching a peak in 1895. Because of America's inferiority complex in regard to Europe, the question of the protection of individual rights often proved more compelling than did European violation of the Monroe Doctrine and acquisition of foreign territory. Whether imperialists or antiimperialists, virtually all Americans could agree that the nation must protect the life and property of its citizens in foreign lands. It was a matter of honor. "If they [the French] persist in refusing to accord to a citizen of our Government that protection, which they themselves are so careful in exacting," wrote W. A. Tetruck to Secretary of State Richard Olney in behalf of the 2,200 residents of Kingman, Kansas, "we demand that it be secured if it takes every Gun-boat, Gatling gun, torpedo, and sword in this country to do it . . . . The Honorable Mr. Waller is an American Citizen, and as such is entitled to the protection of our flag." Pointing up the importance of nationalism in shaping white attitudes on the Waller affair was the fact that to American whites the question of Waller's guilt or innocence was less important than France's refusal to meet the State Department's demands to see the evidence by which the ex-consul had been convicted. When France declined to allow American diplomats to examine the Waller letters, the Memphis Commercial- Appeal wrote: "Whether or not Waller did actually conspire against the French is one thing, but the practical refusal of the French to permit . . . United States Government to inspect the record is quite another. . . . the American people cannot endure the idea that their ministers at foreign capitals must kneel and beg that they may obtain the most ordinary consideration." Whitelaw Reid's New York Tribune was convinced that America's lack of vigor in the Waller case was a sure sign of moral decay. "Americanism meant something grand with 3,000,000 honest hearts back of it," said the paper in an editorial; "with 70,000,000 it appears to be a synonym for sycophancy and National cowardice."

There was more than simple nationalism or sympathy for a downtrodden people in the widespread show of support for Waller among whites. Quite a number viewed the Kansan as a legitimate entrepreneur and, more importantly, as a symbol of the "open door" in east Africa. Those preoccupied with United States economic expansion were well aware that, under the United States–Malagasy treaties of 1867 and 1881, the right of American citizens to apply for and receive concessions had been clearly stated. Convinced that the French had arrested and im-
prisoned Waller at the behest of French concessionaires jealous of the Kansan's good fortune, white exponents of commercial empire were fearful that, if the United States gave in, American investors and traders would be gradually squeezed out of foreign markets around the world. After extolling the economic potential of Madagascar, the Chicago Tribune observed in March, 1895, that "the right of the Hovas to make concessions of this kind [Wallerland] has never before been questioned and as the French protectorate over Madagascar is limited to the regulation of foreign intercourse, it will . . . be the duty of Secretary [of State Walter] Gresham to make a vigorous protest." Americans interested in the Malagasy rubber trade wrote to the State Department urging that it take whatever measures were necessary to preserve Waller's civil and property rights. As time wore on, some observers displayed greater concern over the fate of Waller's concession than over his imprisonment. By late August the New York Tribune—Whitlaw Reid was an aggressive proponent of United States economic penetration of underdeveloped areas—was insisting that the Cleveland administration protect Waller and his concession at all costs. If all else failed, the State Department could invoke sanctity of contract.

Finally, Grover Cleveland's political enemies, who were legion by 1895, saw in the Waller affair another chance to attack the president. Despite the efforts of C. H. J. Taylor and other black Democrats, a large majority of black citizens in the 1890s were convinced that the Republican party still offered the best hope for implementing the pledges made to the freedmen during the Civil War and Reconstruction. A number of editors saw in the Waller incident an opportunity to damage the Democrats in general and the Cleveland administration in particular. The Cleveland Gazette wasted no time in utilizing the State Department's inability to secure the Kansan's release to make unflattering comparisons: "When there was a misunderstanding between the United States and Chile, Mr. [James G.] Blaine demanded that our terms be met within the next twenty-four hours, but this Democratic administration has been juggling with Mr. Waller's case for over a year and are no nearer a settlement now than when it was beginning . . . . Mr. Cleveland could send troops to Chicago to protect the interests of George B. Pullman, but he is too busy catching fish and rocking babies to give this matter the attention it deserves." The staunchly Republican Leavenworth Herald asserted that "the actions of the Cleveland administration in regards to the Monroe Doctrine, the firing upon American ships, the imprisonment of American citizens, are enough to make every citizen of this republic, regardless of politics, blush with shame." Edward Wetter proved an
especially tempting target for black Republicans. "Georgia Democrats as a rule," observed Robert Porter of the Cleveland World, "are apter at tearing down the flag as [William] Blount did at Honolulu than unfurling it to the breeze when the rights of American citizens are in danger."43

White Republicans eagerly joined in this partisan tirade. The Waller case was an ideal issue because it allowed Republican spokesmen to attack the Democrats on two of their most vulnerable points: a passive foreign policy, and proscription of the Negro's civil rights.44 Only a week after Waller's arrest, Reid's New York Tribune charged the administration with gross neglect and attributed its apathy to racism: "Aversion to act in this case is due to the fact that Waller, although an ex-Consul of the United States, is only a Negro."45 According to the highly partisan Republican Kansas City Journal, cowardice rather than Negrophobia was the guiding force behind Cleveland's "inactivity": "This is the crowning act of an Administration which has been distinguished for its abject submission to foreign insult . . . . Every American ought to blush for shame at the spectacle."46

By the summer of 1895 Americans representing various segments of public opinion saw in Waller's predicament an opportunity for advancing their respective interests. Blacks, reflecting a persistent inclination to judge foreign policy in terms of its implications for Afro-Americans, viewed the incident as a means of forcing the white majority to recognize the inconsistency between the nation's treatment of its black and white citizens. Waller was touted as a symbol of national sovereignty and American capitalism who just happened to be black. As a Negro Republican, he was portrayed as the victim of a white Democratic administration that sacrificed national honor and interest on the altar of racism. In these ways, it was hoped, Waller's predicament could be used to combat the rising tide of violence and discrimination threatening black Americans at home.

Support for the ex-consul was not limited to Negroes. White nationalists saw in the incident a chance to force the State Department to take a more active role in world affairs, to assert the nation's prerogatives as a great power. In addition, commercial expansionists, fearful that the markets of the world were being closed to the United States just as American businessmen were poised to take advantage of them, demanded that Washington protect Waller and his concession in order that all nations might understand that the United States intended to keep the door open. And white Republicans utilized the Waller case to attack the Democrats on their two most vulnerable points—passivity in the international arena, and racism in the domestic sphere.