

# SPECIAL SYMPOSIUM EDITION: LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM A HEROIC, IF "DIFFICULT" WOMAN: A TRIBUTE TO IDA B. WELLS

Winter, 2020

## Reporter

14 Tenn. J. L. & Pol'y 467 \*

**Length:** 18033 words

**Author:** Deborah L. Rhode \*

\* Ernest W. McFarland Professor of Law and Director of the Center on the Legal Profession. This essay is adapted from DEBORAH L. RHODE, Profiles in Character: The Pursuit of Social Justice, in CHARACTER: WHAT IT MEANS AND WHY IT MATTERS 213, 213-30 (Oxford Univ. Press 2019). The comments of Shirin Sinnar and Diane Chin are gratefully acknowledged.

## Text

---

[\*467] Ida Wells was, even by her own account, a "difficult woman."<sup>1</sup> It is not difficult to see why. As the nation's first prominent African American female journalist and the founder of the nation's anti-lynching movement in the late 19th century, she encountered virulent racial and gender bias; anyone with her identity [\*468] and commitments was bound to seem unacceptable to much of mainstream white society. But Wells, despite her moral heroism, also alienated many colleagues of color and fellow travelers in the civil rights and women's rights movements who shared her objectives. And it is that mixed legacy that holds lessons of leadership for contemporary social and political activists.

Laurel Ulrich's claim that "well-behaved women seldom make history" has become an organizing principle for many of today's feminists.<sup>2</sup> But a less palatable insight is that "badly" behaved women by conventional standards have often been burned at the stake, or the metaphorical equivalent.<sup>3</sup> This dual legacy reflects a variation of what I have elsewhere described as the leadership paradox. The qualities that propel individuals to positions of influence are not always what they need when they get there.<sup>4</sup> This was true of Wells. She rose to prominence in part because of her moral passion and defiance of social conventions. But her need for recognition and insensitivity to the concerns of potential allies kept her from forging necessary coalitions and winning the trust and collaboration of fellow activists.

This essay focuses on the experience of Ida Wells as a way of exploring challenges for leaders seeking social change. It proceeds in three parts. Part I provides a brief biographical overview of Wells and her anti-lynching and

---

<sup>1</sup> PAULA J. GIDDINGS, *IDA: A SWORD AMONG LIONS* 6 (2008).

<sup>2</sup> See generally LAUREL ULRICH, *WELL-BEHAVED WOMEN SELDOM MAKE HISTORY* (2007).

<sup>3</sup> For the gender bias encountered by women who appear overly assertive or abrasive, see DEBORAH L. RHODE, *WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP* 11, 80-81 (2017).

<sup>4</sup> For variations on this paradox, see DEBORAH L. RHODE, *LAWYERS AS LEADERS* 5 (Oxford Univ. Press 2013); Deborah L. Rhode, *Leadership in Law*, 69 STAN. L. REV. 1603, 1620-21 (2017).

civil rights accomplishments. Part II focuses on Wells' [\*469] leadership style--both its strengths and limitations. Part III summarizes Wells' legacy and the lessons it holds for contemporary leaders.

## I.

Ida Wells was born a slave in 1862, in Holly Springs, Mississippi, just two months before President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>5</sup> Her father was a carpenter, her mother a cook, and both continued to work at those jobs after the Civil War brought them freedom.<sup>6</sup> Wells' father was a man of principle who lost his job when he refused to vote the way his white employer dictated.<sup>7</sup> Both parents believed strongly in the value of education, and Wells attended school until she was sixteen, when her mother, father, and one of her seven siblings died of yellow fever.<sup>8</sup> Wells was visiting grandparents at the time, and on learning of the tragedy, she courageously insisted, against all medical advice, on immediately returning home.<sup>9</sup> Once there, her father's fellow Masons came up with a plan to divide and place the orphans among friends who would [\*470] take them.<sup>10</sup> Wells resisted.<sup>11</sup> Her mother had been separated from her family at auction, and both she and her husband, Wells believed, would "turn over in their graves to know their children had been scattered like that."<sup>12</sup> Wells agreed to care for them if the Masons would help her find work.<sup>13</sup> They did, and she got a job as a teacher in a country elementary school nearby.<sup>14</sup>

Her schedule was grueling. She spent the work week at the school, while her grandmother cared for the children at home.<sup>15</sup> Wells returned on the weekends to do the laundry, cleaning, and cooking for the next week.<sup>16</sup> During the summers, she studied at the local university until a quarrel with the administration led to her expulsion.<sup>17</sup> Although at the time, she was deeply resentful, she later acknowledged that her own "tempestuous, rebellious, hardheaded willfulness" was to blame.<sup>18</sup> Her unconventional domestic arrangements throughout this period also caused problems. Young women did not normally live without the protection of a father or husband. Rather

---

<sup>5</sup> JAMES WEST DAVIDSON, "THEY SAY": IDA B. WELLS AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF RACE 13 (2008); see also GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 10; LINDA O. MCMURRY, TO KEEP THE WATERS TROUBLED: THE LIFE OF IDA B. WELLS 4 (Oxford Univ. Press 1998).

<sup>6</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 10.

<sup>7</sup> IDA B. WELLS, CRUSADE FOR JUSTICE: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF IDA B. WELLS 8 (Alfreda M. Duster ed., 1970); see also MIA BAY, TO TELL THE TRUTH FREELY: THE LIFE OF IDA B. WELLS 20 (2009). For another biography of Wells, see EMILIE TOWNES, WOMANIST JUSTICE, WOMANIST HOPE (1992).

<sup>8</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 10.

<sup>9</sup> BAY, *supra* note 7, at 30.

<sup>10</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 10-11.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> See WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 13.

<sup>18</sup> MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 14; see also DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 50.

than give Wells credit for her efforts to keep the family together, some community members spread rumors that she wanted to live independently in order to have illicit relationships with white men. <sup>19</sup>

**[\*471]** After three years, Wells accepted an invitation to live with her aunt in Memphis, where she could earn higher wages, be close to other family members, and escape ugly unfounded rumors. <sup>20</sup>She took three of her youngest siblings with her; her brothers stayed behind as apprentice carpenters. <sup>21</sup>She found a job outside the city and commuted by train. In 1884, a railroad conductor ordered her to give up the first-class seat she had purchased for the ladies' car and demanded that she move to the crowded smoking car. <sup>22</sup>She refused and bit the conductor when he attempted to drag her from her seat. <sup>23</sup>When he finally succeeded, she got off the train, rather than sit in second class. <sup>24</sup>White passengers cheered derisively as she turned to walk back to Memphis. <sup>25</sup>

On her return, Wells hired a lawyer to sue the railroad. <sup>26</sup>She won in the lower court and refused to settle when the railroad appealed. <sup>27</sup>Although the law allowed trains to segregate by race, it required them to offer opportunities for first class accommodations to all passengers. <sup>28</sup>In finding for Wells, the Tennessee trial court noted that she was "a person of lady-like appearance and deportment, a school teacher, and one who might be expected to object to traveling in the company of rough or boisterous men . . . ." <sup>29</sup>The local **[\*472]** newspaper was less complimentary and ran a story under the headline "A Darky Damsel Obtains a Verdict for Damages . . . \$ 500." <sup>30</sup>The Tennessee Supreme Court reversed the verdict on the implausible ground that the two cars were in fact equal. <sup>31</sup>In the court's view, Wells' behavior on the train demonstrated that she was no "lad[y]" but merely a "mulatto passenger," whose purpose was "to harass with a view to this suit." <sup>32</sup>And she was held liable for court costs, a devastating blow, given her own substantial legal fees and financial struggles as a sole breadwinner with a minimal salary. <sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 17; MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 16.

<sup>20</sup> See WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 18.

<sup>21</sup> See *id.*

<sup>22</sup> See *id.*

<sup>23</sup> See *id.*

<sup>24</sup> See *id.* at 19.

<sup>25</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 6, at 18-19; see also BAY, *supra* note 7, at 48; MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 26.

<sup>26</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 6, at 19.

<sup>27</sup> BAY, *supra* note 7, at 53; WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 19-20.

<sup>28</sup> See BAY, *supra* note 7, at 55-57.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 52.

<sup>30</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 19 n.4.

<sup>31</sup> BAY, *supra* note 7, at 54.

<sup>32</sup> See *Chesapeake, O. & S. R. Co. v. Wells*, 4 S.W. 5, 6 (Tenn. 1887).

<sup>33</sup> DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 109 (quoting *Chesapeake, O. & S.R. Co.*, 4 S.W. at 5); WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 20; see also BAY, *supra* note 7, at 55.

That unhappy outcome did have one redeeming byproduct. The editor of a Black newspaper, *The Living Way*, asked her to write about the incident.<sup>34</sup>Wells had already been publishing columns as the editor of the Memphis Lyceum newspaper, and a few had been reprinted in *The Living Way*.<sup>35</sup>Unlike the vast majority of female journalists in that era, who confined their work to feminine subjects, Wells wrote on issues of general interest to the Black community.<sup>36</sup>Among her best work was criticism of racism by white officials and white-dominated political parties.<sup>37</sup>For example, one column documented racial bias in the criminal justice system: a [\*473] white city official who had stolen "six thousand dollars of taxpayers' money" was pardoned after a fifteen-month sentence, while a Black man who had stolen food, alcohol, and cigars worth about seven dollars was sentenced to eight years in prison.<sup>38</sup>Wells also underscored the responsibilities of Black leaders to give back to their communities. In one 1885 column, she asked, "What material benefit is a 'leader' if he does not, to some extent, devote his time, talent and wealth to the alleviation of the poverty and misery, and elevation of his people?"<sup>39</sup>However, she also wrote columns on the "Women's Mission," and "The Model Woman," in which, according to her diary, she tried to "suppress her 'unfeminine' anger."<sup>40</sup>

In 1889, Wells became an editor and part owner of the *Free Speech and Headlight*, making her the first and only Black woman in the country to achieve that status at a major city newspaper.<sup>41</sup>Her editorial responsibilities made for a grueling schedule, when combined with her full-time work as a teacher.<sup>42</sup>However, that problem ended when the school district refused to renew her contract in retaliation for one of her columns.<sup>43</sup>It had criticized the crowded and dilapidated conditions in Black schools and the practice of board members of awarding teaching jobs in return for "illicit" sexual favors.<sup>44</sup>Although Wells was not earning enough from [\*474] journalism to afford losing her teaching position, she felt it was "right to strike a blow against a glaring evil and [she] did not regret it."<sup>45</sup>

To make up for her lost income, Wells concentrated on boosting her paper's sales. She began seeking invitations to speak in nearby cities, where she could find new audiences. As a result, the newspaper's circulation increased

---

<sup>34</sup> DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 100; SARAH L. SILKEY, BLACK WOMAN REFORMER: IDA B. WELLS, LYNCHING AND TRANSATLANTIC ACTIVISM 49-52 (2015).

<sup>35</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 75-76; WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 24.

<sup>36</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 78.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 81-83.

<sup>38</sup> MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 128.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 107.

<sup>40</sup> DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 103; GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 85-86.

<sup>41</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 85-86

<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 163.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.* at 167.

<sup>44</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 36; see DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 115, 118; GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 167; SILKEY, *supra* note 34, at 52.

<sup>45</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 37.

250%.<sup>46</sup>Her writing explored a wide range of issues until the 1892 murder of three Black businessmen in Memphis focused her attention on lynching.<sup>47</sup>

Although in contemporary usage "lynching" conjures up hanging, its original meaning was much broader.<sup>48</sup>The term originated during the Revolutionary War era, in a practice by a Virginia justice of the peace, Charles Lynch.<sup>49</sup>He ordered whippings of suspected Tories and horse thieves who supplied them, all without formal trial proceedings.<sup>50</sup>The term "lynch law" evolved to describe any act of vigilante justice, including hanging, shooting, and burning at the stake, done with broad public approval.<sup>51</sup>Motivations for lynching varied in different regions and time periods.<sup>52</sup>In the post-Reconstruction South, such violence was targeted at **[\*475]** Blacks and served, as Wells put it, to teach the "lesson of subordination."<sup>53</sup>

The 1892 lynching that changed Well's life involved one of her friends, Thomas Moss.<sup>54</sup>He was a polite and unassuming letter carrier who had used his savings to purchase the People's Grocery store in a Black neighborhood just outside of Memphis.<sup>55</sup>A white competitor, W. H. Barrett, was looking for an opportunity to destroy the business, and found one after a fight broke out near the store among a racially mixed group of boys playing marbles.<sup>56</sup>Barrett entered the store looking for a suspected participant and started another fight.<sup>57</sup>Moss and two employees were arrested.<sup>58</sup>

After Blacks held a meeting to strategize about responses, Barrett used rumors of unrest to persuade a judge to issue warrants for further arrests.<sup>59</sup>He also spread rumors in the Black community that a white mob was preparing to attack.<sup>60</sup>When a sheriff's posse not wearing uniforms came to the grocery to make arrests, Black neighbors mistook them for part of a mob and shot and wounded several officers.<sup>61</sup>That sparked outrage; whites lynched Moss and his employees and looted his store. W. H. Barrett bought what was left at a fraction of its value.<sup>62</sup>In covering the incident, white newspapers **[\*476]** caricatured Moss as a "turbulent,

---

<sup>46</sup> DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 122.

<sup>47</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 47.

<sup>48</sup> BAY, *supra* note 7, at 96.

<sup>49</sup> PHILIP DRAY, *AT THE HANDS OF PERSONS UNKNOWN: THE LYNCHING OF BLACK AMERICA* 21 (2003).

<sup>50</sup> *Id.*

<sup>51</sup> BAY, *supra* note 7, at 96.

<sup>52</sup> *See* MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 145.

<sup>53</sup> *Id.* at 161.

<sup>54</sup> MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 130-33.

<sup>55</sup> *See id.*

<sup>56</sup> *Id.*

<sup>57</sup> *See id.* at 131.

<sup>58</sup> *See id.*

<sup>59</sup> *See id.*

<sup>60</sup> *Id.*

<sup>61</sup> *See id.* at 131-32.

unruly negro;" he and his employees were presented as "desperados," motivated by "vicious and venomous rancor," part of a "nest of vipers" intent on slaying innocent whites. <sup>63</sup>The lynching was described as "one of the most orderly of its kind ever conducted . . . There was no whooping, not even loud talking, not cursing, in fact nothing boisterous. Everything was done decently and in order." <sup>64</sup>

Wells was incensed. That incident, she later explained, "opened my eyes to what lynching really was. An excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized . . ." <sup>65</sup>Her first column after the lynching claimed that

There is therefore only one thing left that we can do; save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives and property, nor give us a fair trial in the courts but [will] take[] us out and murder[] us in cold blood when accused by white persons. <sup>66</sup>

Some 4000 to 6000 Black residents agreed and left Memphis. <sup>67</sup>

Wells then channeled her outrage into investigative journalism. She became the first American to research the causes of lynching and debunk conventional wisdom. <sup>68</sup>White-owned newspapers often claimed that interracial rapes were rising, and that **[\*477]** lynchings were a response to the "brutal passion of the Negro." <sup>69</sup>Even the *New York Times* declared in 1892 that the offense of rape was "one to which the African race was particularly prone." <sup>70</sup>But after compiling statistics from white-owned newspapers, Wells found that that allegations of rape were present in only one-third of all reported lynchings, and in some of those cases, the relationships were consensual. <sup>71</sup>In one notorious example, an Arkansas mob insisted that a white woman claim that her Black lover had raped her and that she light the bonfire that burned him to death. <sup>72</sup>Shortly after Moss's murder, Wells responded to a local newspaper's account of an interracial rape with an editorial claiming that:

---

<sup>62</sup> DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 148. For coverage of the incident, see also BAY, *supra* note 7, at 82-85; MCMURRY, *supra* note 7, at 130-35.

<sup>63</sup> BAY, *supra* note 7, at 85; DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 138; *see also* MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 132.

<sup>64</sup> DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 134; MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 134 (internal citations omitted).

<sup>65</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 64.

<sup>66</sup> *Id.* at 52.

<sup>67</sup> Jonathan P. Baird, *Don't Know Much About Ida B. Wells? That's a Shame*, CONCORD MONITOR (Feb. 25, 2018 12:10 AM), <https://www.concordmonitor.com/Ida-B-Wells-unknown-heroine-15660382> [<https://perma.cc/32LS-LA5P?type=image>].

<sup>68</sup> BAY, *supra* note 7, at 103.

<sup>69</sup> DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 154 (internal citations omitted)

<sup>70</sup> *Mob Law in Arkansas*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 23, 1892, at 4.

<sup>71</sup> MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 143-46.

<sup>72</sup> DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 162.

Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will over-reach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women. <sup>73</sup>

Wells's implication that white women were sexually attracted to Black men infuriated local whites. A local newspaper suggested that the "black wretch" who had authored such a "foul lie should be . . . burned at a stake."<sup>74</sup>A mob organized by local businessmen trashed her newspaper's office and threatened any future **[\*478]** publisher with death. <sup>75</sup>Wells had the foresight to be out of town at a conference when the story broke. <sup>76</sup>Her co-owner, however, received threats of castration and hanging, and was forced to flee the city; the paper's former owner was pistol whipped. <sup>77</sup>When white leaders vowed to kill Wells if she dared to return and posted sentinels at the train station, she decided not to test their resolve. <sup>78</sup>

Wells relocated to New York, where her experience with mob violence gained widespread publicity. The editor of the *New York Age* hired her to write weekly articles and gave her partial ownership in return for the subscription list of the gutted Memphis paper. <sup>79</sup>In 1892, she published the first statistical study of lynching, later republished as a pamphlet, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All its Phases*. <sup>80</sup>Wells found that most victims were Blacks who had run for political office, competed with whites in business, failed to pay debts, or were too "sassy."<sup>81</sup>The pamphlet also noted that rapes of Black women by white men were rarely punished; mob retribution had more to do with race than sexual **[\*479]** assault. <sup>82</sup>To combat lynching, Wells called for new strategies including self-defense and civil disobedience. Train and trolley car boycotts were also necessary because the "appeal to the white man's pocket has ever been more effectual than all the appeals ever made to his conscience."<sup>83</sup>By the time of *Southern Horrors*, the number of African Americans lynched across the nation exceeded that of whites, even though Blacks constituted less than twelve percent of the population. <sup>84</sup>Somebody "must show that the Afro-American race is more sinned against than sinning," wrote Wells, "and it

---

<sup>73</sup> MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 146-47. For other inflammatory critiques, see TOWNES, *supra* note 7, at 116.

<sup>74</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 66.

<sup>75</sup> *Id.*

<sup>76</sup> MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 148.

<sup>77</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 1; *see also* MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 148.

<sup>78</sup> IDA B. WELLS, *The Offence, in UNITED STATES ATROCITIES: LYNCH LAW 1, 1-3 (1892) [hereinafter UNITED STATES ATROCITIES]; see also* MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 146-49; WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 62-63.

<sup>79</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 63; DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 160.

<sup>80</sup> IDA B. WELLS, SOUTHERN HORRORS: LYNCH LAW IN ALL ITS PHASES, *reprinted in* THE SELECTED WORKS OF IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT 14 (Trudier Harris ed., 1991) [hereinafter SOUTHERN HORRORS].

<sup>81</sup> DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 161; SOUTHERN HORRORS, *supra* note 80, at 29.

<sup>82</sup> SOUTHERN HORRORS, *supra* note 80, at 26-28 (detailing stories of white men who were not punished for perpetrating violence against Black women).

<sup>83</sup> *Id.* at 42.

<sup>84</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 2-3. For the percentage of Blacks in the population, see Campbell Gibson & Kay Jung, *Population Division: Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States*, 19 tbl.1 (U.S. Census Bureau, Working Paper No. 56, 2002), <https://census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2002/demo/POP-twps0056.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/X5HR-HXJD>].

seems to have fallen on me to do so." <sup>85</sup>At a time when few women were willing even to use the term "rape" in polite company, Wells' willingness to discuss its dynamics earned her a reputation as "dauntless." <sup>86</sup>

Wells' expose was a bombshell. She began to lecture widely, at a time when female lecturers were rare and Black female lecturers were rarer still. <sup>87</sup>Wells also published a follow-up pamphlet, *United States Atrocities: Lynch Law*, which situated the crime in a broader [\*480] discussion of discrimination and debunked the romanticized view of frontier justice. <sup>88</sup>Wells cited cases like a Louisiana lynching in which the victims were the children of the man whom the mob really sought but had been unable to catch. <sup>89</sup>She also described the pressure on white women in biracial relationships to fabricate claims of rape, and challenged the myth that lynchings were necessary to secure justice. <sup>90</sup>As Wells noted, "With judges, juries and prosecuting attorneys all Southern white men," Blacks were unlikely to escape punishment for consensual relationships with white women. <sup>91</sup>

In 1893 and 1894, Wells took her anti-lynching campaign abroad, while serving as America's only paid Black correspondent for a daily paper. <sup>92</sup>In Great Britain, she gave over a hundred lectures and occasionally addressed crowds of more than a thousand. There was widespread press coverage, which Wells made sure was mailed to prominent American politicians, newspapers, and clergy. <sup>93</sup>Not all the accounts were favorable, however. Some white newspapers denounced her as a "wench," "strumpet," "courtesan," and "notorious woman of ill repute," who was "raising money for her own personal use" in the anti-lynching campaign. <sup>94</sup>At a time before professional civil rights advocates routinely appealed for financial support, the *New York Times* questioned whether her purpose in fund-raising "may plausibly be supposed to have been an income rather [\*481] than an outcome." <sup>95</sup>Even some Black leaders criticized her for "sowing scandal" and "polluting the minds of the innocent and pure." <sup>96</sup>When condemned for her allegedly salacious coverage of lynchings, Wells responded:

I see the *Memphis Daily Commercial* pays me the complement of calling me a "Negro Adventuress." If I am become an adventuress for simply stating facts, by what name must be characterized those who furnish these facts? However revolting these lynchings, I did not perform a single one of them, nor could the wildest effort of

---

<sup>85</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 229.

<sup>86</sup> *Id.*

<sup>87</sup> BAY, *supra* note 7, at 110; *see also* MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 169.

<sup>88</sup> *See generally* UNITED STATES ATROCITIES, *supra* note 78.

<sup>89</sup> *See id.* at 20.

<sup>90</sup> UNITED STATES ATROCITIES, *supra* note 78, at 8-13,19-21.

<sup>91</sup> *Id.* at 19.

<sup>92</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 125.

<sup>93</sup> DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 164-66.

<sup>94</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 245; MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 214; SILKEY, *supra* note 34, at 106.

<sup>95</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 315-16.

<sup>96</sup> MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 154-55 (quoting MEMPHIS APPEAL-AVALANCHE, June 8, 1892)).

my imagination . . . equal the reality. If the same zeal to excuse and conceal the facts were exercised to put a stop to these lynchings, there would be no need for me to relate . . . these tales of barbarity. <sup>97</sup>

Wells' efforts abroad had a significant impact. A widely-publicized British Anti-Lynching Committee took up the cause and helped shame some American states into passing anti-lynching legislation. <sup>98</sup>The trip also gained her considerable public recognition in the United States, though much of it was critical. In commenting on her first public lecture after returning from Great Britain, the *New York Times* reported a recent incident in which a "negro had made an assault upon a white woman for purposes of lust and plunder." <sup>99</sup>The paper hoped that "the circumstances of this fiendish crime may serve to convince the mulatress missionary . . . just how [\*482] her theory of negro outrages is, to say the least of it, inopportune." <sup>100</sup>Wells, however, remained unconvinced. In her lecture, she noted that "black women have had to suffer far more at the hands of white men than white women at the hands of black men. Every single report [of rape] which is published should be investigated . . . ." <sup>101</sup>The *Times* responded that she was "slanderous and dirty-minded," that no "decent" colored woman had been raped by a white man, and that no "reputable or respectable negro" had ever been lynched. <sup>102</sup>

The attacks took a toll. Some Black as well as white Americans shied away from association with Wells. Many were also put off by her assertions about consensual relationships between white women and Black men, which could exacerbate racial tensions. <sup>103</sup>But, unfazed by criticism, Wells returned to Chicago where she helped set up an Anti-Lynching Committee and fielded speaking invitations from around the country. <sup>104</sup>In 1895, she published *The Red Record*, a one-hundred-page pamphlet describing lynching in the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation. <sup>105</sup>By her estimate, more lynchings were occurring each year than lawful executions. <sup>106</sup>The pamphlet included several graphic photographs, as well as descriptions of [\*483] particularly brutal incidents involving torture and mutilation. <sup>107</sup>Wells' efforts met with some success. More states passed anti-lynching legislation, and such crimes began to decline after 1892, the year that she started her campaign. <sup>108</sup>But failures to obtain adequate legal prohibitions in the South or at the national level gave continued urgency to her activism.

---

<sup>97</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 187.

<sup>98</sup> BAY, *supra* note 7, at 6, 192, 198.

<sup>99</sup> N.Y. TIMES, July 27, 1894.

<sup>100</sup> *Id.*

<sup>101</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 317.

<sup>102</sup> *Id.* at 318; *see also* BAY, *supra* note 7, at 199; *British Anti-Lynchers*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 2, 1894, at 4.

<sup>103</sup> SILKEY, *supra* note 34, at 117; WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 220-23.

<sup>104</sup> *See* WELLS, *supra* note 7, at xix.

<sup>105</sup> *See generally* IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT, THE RED RECORD: TABULATED STATISTICS AND ALLEGED CAUSES OF LYNCHING IN THE UNITED STATES, Project Gutenberg (1895, reprinted Feb. 8, 2005), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14977/14977-h/14977-h.htm> [<https://perma.cc/C4N8-C5KW>].

<sup>106</sup> *Id.*

<sup>107</sup> *See id.* at 157-71.

<sup>108</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 348.

In 1895, Wells married and began a difficult decade of balancing work and family responsibilities. She had been in no rush to find a husband and wrote in her diary after moving to Memphis, "I am an anomaly to my self as well as to others. I do not wish to be married but I do wish for the society of gentlemen."<sup>109</sup> She seemed, however, to have found an ideal partner in Ferdinand Barnett, a Black lawyer and founder of Chicago's first Black newspaper, *The Conservator*.<sup>110</sup> Wells had worked with Barnett on race-related issues, and he had advised her on a potential libel suit against a white-owned newspaper for calling her a "black harlot" and the mistress of her Memphis coeditor.<sup>111</sup> Just before the marriage, Wells bought *The Conservator* from Barnett because he was about to become Illinois' first Black assistant state's attorney and needed to avoid conflicts of interest.<sup>112</sup> And, in another decision that was highly unusual at the time and signaled her feminist [\*484] commitments, she chose to hyphenate her name.<sup>113</sup> In commenting on this unconventional start to domestic life, one journalist noted that Wells-Barnett's "determination to marry a man while still married to a cause" was sure to be a topic of national interest.<sup>114</sup>

Barnett had two sons from a previous marriage and lived with his mother, so his wife immediately inherited significant family responsibilities.<sup>115</sup> This caused some tension, and when the couple began having children of their own, the two teenage boys and their grandmother took up a separate residence.<sup>116</sup> Wells-Barnett had ambivalent feelings toward domesticity. Although in a column on the "Model Girl," she had endorsed housekeeping as among women's "best accomplishments," she had little taste for it herself; her husband did much of the cooking, another highly unconventional arrangement in that era.<sup>117</sup> In her autobiography, Wells-Barnett speculated that her "early entrance into public life . . . had something to do with smothering the mother instinct."<sup>118</sup> Or perhaps her early experience of caring for her brothers and sisters left her feeling somewhat "entitled to the vacation from [her] days as nurse . . . ."<sup>119</sup> After the birth of her first child, she confessed that "although I tried to do my duty as mother toward my firstborn and refused the suggestion not to nurse him, I looked forward to the time when I should have completely discharged my duty in that [\*485] respect."<sup>120</sup> When her son was five months old, Wells-Barnett took him with her to a conference of an organization that became the National Association of Colored Women.<sup>121</sup> It was such an unusual decision that the group dubbed him the "Baby of the Federation."<sup>122</sup> Shortly afterward, when organizers asked her to help campaign for a woman seeking

---

<sup>109</sup> BAY, *supra* note 7, at 59 (quoting IDA. B. WELLS, THE MEMPHIS DIARY OF IDA B. WELLS 80 (Miriam DeCosta-Willis ed., 1995) [hereinafter THE MEMPHIS DIARY]); MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 56 (internal citation omitted).

<sup>110</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 345-46.

<sup>111</sup> BAY, *supra* note 7, at 138-40; *see also* MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 183, 238.

<sup>112</sup> *Id.* at 217.

<sup>113</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 353, 355, 358.

<sup>114</sup> *Id.* at 358.

<sup>115</sup> BAY, *supra* note 7, at 217-18.

<sup>116</sup> *Id.* at 218.

<sup>117</sup> BAY, *supra* note 7, at 72, 218; MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 239.

<sup>118</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 251.

<sup>119</sup> *Id.* at 251.

<sup>120</sup> *Id.* at 248-49.

<sup>121</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 372, 375-76.

statewide office, she agreed if they would arrange for childcare. <sup>123</sup>In remarking on the arrangement, Wells-Barnett observed, "I honestly believe that I am the only woman in the United States who ever traveled throughout the country with a nursing baby to make political speeches." <sup>124</sup>

Over the next two decades, she continued to juggle personal and professional activities. In 1897, Wells-Barnett responded to an editorial in the *Chicago Times-Herald* claiming that one reason citizens resorted to lynching was because justice was delayed through legal technicalities. <sup>125</sup>She countered with a letter to the editor pointing out the absence of evidence to back up that claim. Who benefitted from delays, she asked rhetorically. "Poor men, criminals who are ignorant, penniless and friendless? Certainly not . . . Appeals cost money, and plenty of it . . . Let it be confessed with sorrow that many an innocent man has gone to prison or to his death because poverty stood between him and substantial justice." <sup>126</sup>Wells-Barnett also remained active in local civic activities. On her trip to Great Britain, she had been impressed with English women's organizations, and after her return, she helped establish [\*486] several similar organizations, including one that bore her name. <sup>127</sup>The Ida B. Wells Club focused on racial conditions in Chicago, and in 1897, established the city's first Black kindergarten. <sup>128</sup>Childcare was an issue of particular importance "for blacks whose families had a high proportion of working mothers." <sup>129</sup>The kindergarten initiative was controversial and time-consuming, which may have contributed to her announcement after the birth of her second child that she was giving up public life. <sup>130</sup>She resigned as editor of the *Conservator*, and as president of the Ida B. Wells Club in order to remain at home with her children. <sup>131</sup>

Her resolve lasted three months. Then, in 1898, a particularly brutal lynching occurred in South Carolina. <sup>132</sup>The victim, the first African-American postmaster in a small city, had refused to give up his position even after whites boycotted the post office and then burned it to the ground. <sup>133</sup>Finally, a mob set his house on fire and shot and killed him and his one-year-old infant. <sup>134</sup>His other children were badly injured by bullet wounds but survived. <sup>135</sup>Although some members of the mob were ultimately indicted, they were all acquitted. <sup>136</sup>Black protestors around the country demanded federal action and persuaded Wells-Barnett to join lobbying

---

<sup>122</sup> *Id.*

<sup>123</sup> *Id.* at 376-77.

<sup>124</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 244-45.

<sup>125</sup> See Letter to the Editor, CHI. TIMES HERALD (Nov. 21, 1897).

<sup>126</sup> *Id.*

<sup>127</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at xix.

<sup>128</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 384.

<sup>129</sup> *Id.* at 383.

<sup>130</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 385.

<sup>131</sup> *Id.* at 384.

<sup>132</sup> *Id.* at 385.

<sup>133</sup> *Id.* at 385.

<sup>134</sup> *Id.*

<sup>135</sup> *Id.*

<sup>136</sup> *Id.* at 413.

efforts in the capital. As she explained in her autobiography, it "seems that the needs of the work [\*487] were so great that again I had to venture forth."<sup>137</sup> She spent five weeks in Washington, making speeches, raising money, and lobbying Congress.

Later that year, she visited Susan B. Anthony, who gave her some unsolicited advice.<sup>138</sup> Anthony, who was unmarried, told Wells-Barnett that domesticity was not for "women like [her] who had a special call for special work."<sup>139</sup> Motherhood gave her a "divided duty."<sup>140</sup> The exchange helped convince Wells-Barnett to reenter public life, but the challenges that she confronted there continued to present tensions for her marriage. On one occasion, her political activity so alienated the Illinois governor that it almost cost her husband his job as assistant state's attorney.<sup>141</sup> She also believed that her reputation was partly responsible for her husband's inability to attain his dream of becoming the city's first Black municipal judge.<sup>142</sup> It did not help when newspapers suggested that Ida wore the "trousers" in the family or identified Ferdinand simply as the "husband of the brilliant Ida B. Wells-Barnett."<sup>143</sup> The couple had two more children, and the demands of raising a family of four limited her professional activities.<sup>144</sup> She avoided further significant work outside the home until her youngest child was eight.<sup>145</sup>

When her family obligations eased, Wells-Barnett became more fully engaged in racial justice causes. She [\*488] helped to found a number of national and local organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), and the Chicago Negro Fellowship League.<sup>146</sup> The League helped provide poor Black men with employment, food, temporary housing, and back wages; Wells-Barnett supported its activities from her salary as the city's first Black probation officer.<sup>147</sup> She fought segregation in the schools and in public transportation, campaigned for women's suffrage, and organized responses to race riots.<sup>148</sup> For example, in 1922, she traveled to Little Rock, Arkansas following riots triggered by Blacks' refusal to sell cotton at the reduced prices that white businessmen demanded.<sup>149</sup> Twelve Blacks were arrested, beaten, tortured, and sentenced to death after what Wells-Barnett labeled a "mockery of a trial."<sup>150</sup> She met with the prisoners, helped organize protests, raised money

---

<sup>137</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 252.

<sup>138</sup> *Id.* at 255.

<sup>139</sup> *Id.*

<sup>140</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 255.

<sup>141</sup> See GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 396.

<sup>142</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 621.

<sup>143</sup> MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 239; see also GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 396.

<sup>144</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at xxiii.

<sup>145</sup> *Id.*

<sup>146</sup> *Id.* at 327; DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 168.

<sup>147</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 297-306, 327, 333, 410; see also BAY, *supra* note 7, at 288-89; MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 293-98.

<sup>148</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 274-78, 345, 383-404; see also BAY, *supra* note 7, at 293, 300-01; DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 168; GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 444-45, 562-63; MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 303-04.

<sup>149</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 398-401.

for their defense, and threatened to launch an exodus of Black laborers if the men were executed. <sup>151</sup>After a new trial, the defendants were acquitted. <sup>152</sup>

**[\*489] II.**

Not all of Wells-Barnett's efforts ended so happily. During the latter part of her life, she suffered a long series of slights and thwarted ambitions in Black organizations, partly attributable to her own limitations as a leader. <sup>153</sup>She also lost an election for the Illinois state legislature. <sup>154</sup>Her contributions were even omitted in some histories of lynching and profiles of notable Black activists. <sup>155</sup>According to a leading biography by Paula Giddings, part of the reason for this marginalization was Wells-Barnett's reputation as a "difficult woman." <sup>156</sup>She was, as Giddings adds, certainly that "even when taking into account the double standard applied to assertive independent women." <sup>157</sup>"One of her chronic difficulties was that her domineering style often resulted in her being the issue rather than the principle she was trying to impart." <sup>158</sup>Other accounts similarly note that her "militancy," "dominating" approach, and lack of "diplomatic skills" cost her allies. <sup>159</sup>

Another biographer chronicles how Wells-Barnett's "prickly personality," "uncompromising self-righteousness," and "need to be the leader of movements in which she participated" often sabotaged her efforts. <sup>160</sup>She did not "mince words or spare the feelings of those **[\*490]** whom she decided were 'do-nothings.'" <sup>161</sup>Nor did she hesitate to offend potential donors, other civil rights leaders, or women whom she considered to have a "petty outlook on life." <sup>162</sup>Even she acknowledged these shortcomings. In her diary, she entreated God "help me to better to control my temper." <sup>163</sup>Her autobiography notes that "temper . . . has always been [her] besetting

---

<sup>150</sup> *Id.* at 399.

<sup>151</sup> *Id.* at 398-404.

<sup>152</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 404. It is, however, not clear how much credit goes to Wells-Barnett as opposed to the NAACP, which was responsible for the men's defense. See BAY, *supra* note 7, at 313.

<sup>153</sup> See BAY, *supra* note 7, at 223, 228, 265, 273, 321, 327; DAVIDSON, *supra* note 5, at 169; WELLS, *supra* note 7, at xxix.

<sup>154</sup> BAY, *supra* note 7, at 327.

<sup>155</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 7, 301.

<sup>156</sup> *Id.* at 6.

<sup>157</sup> *Id.*

<sup>158</sup> *Id.* at 534.

<sup>159</sup> Richard Lingeman, *O Pioneer!: Ida Wells-Barnett Led the Fight Against Lynching*, N.Y. TIMES SUNDAY BOOK REV., May 18, 2008, at 25; see also BAY, *supra* note 7, at 230.

<sup>160</sup> MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 243, 329.

<sup>161</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at xxvii.

<sup>162</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 509; MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 289, 307 (quoting WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 230) (noting that Wells-Barnett made the "petty outlook" comment to Susan B. Anthony when explaining why she did not think women's suffrage would accomplish what supporters hoped).

<sup>163</sup> MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 69 (internal citation omitted).

sin" and chronicles multiple examples. <sup>164</sup>The same anger that inspired her crusades for justice also compromised her effectiveness as an organizational leader in those efforts. <sup>165</sup>

Further problems arose from her assertedly outsized ego and need to dominate every organization in which she played a significant role. One Black newspaper editor claimed that she had "delegated to herself the care and keeping of the entire colored population of the United States," and that the Black press should "resent this egotistic self-appointed" spokesperson. <sup>166</sup>In explaining her exclusion from top positions at the NAACP, one of the association's officers noted that she was a "great fighter, but . . . she had to play a lone hand." <sup>167</sup>Another NAACP officer complained that after the Chicago riots in 1919, Wells-Barnett had "launched into a tirade" against those **[\*491]** who did not join her organization. <sup>168</sup>She also had compromised the association's efforts to establish a defense fund for rioters by raising money on her own. <sup>169</sup>Similar criticisms occurred after the Arkansas riots, when Wells-Barnett competed for credit and funds with the NAACP, which was defending the rioters. <sup>170</sup>As one biographer noted, she had "no gift for compromise and often departed in a huff from organizations that she helped create, her famous temper flaring when negotiations did not go her way." <sup>171</sup>

Much of what made the style of Wells-Barnett so off-putting to contemporaries involved gender and race. Some Black men were uncomfortable with a female leader. <sup>172</sup>Although other prominent Blacks, including W.E.B. Du Bois, were described as arrogant, their conduct did not arouse the same hostility. <sup>173</sup>Women were under greater pressure to be conciliatory team players, and that was not Wells-Barnett's leadership style. So too, many white women leaders of social reform organizations did not expect "to be criticized or challenged by a Black woman." <sup>174</sup>

It is hard to know how much of a role her personal shortcomings, as opposed to her race and gender, played in limiting her achievements. What is clear is that her anger over personal slights impeded cross-racial alliances. <sup>175</sup>But some of her difficulties involved matters of principle and her refusal to acquiesce in entrenched **[\*492]** racism. In one celebrated incident, at a 1913 parade organized by the National American Woman Suffrage Association, the organization's leaders decided that all the Black participants would march at the end rather than with their state delegations. <sup>176</sup>Wells-Barnett, after having lost the vote over Illinois's compliance with that

---

<sup>164</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 286.

<sup>165</sup> See MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 333 ("The same anger that diminished her effectiveness in organizations fueled her continual crusades.").

<sup>166</sup> *Id.* at 232.

<sup>167</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 478.

<sup>168</sup> *Id.* at 603.

<sup>169</sup> *Id.* at 609.

<sup>170</sup> *Id.*

<sup>171</sup> BAY, *supra* note 7, at 9.

<sup>172</sup> See MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 295.

<sup>173</sup> BAY, *supra* note 7, at 9.

<sup>174</sup> *Id.* at 264.

<sup>175</sup> *Id.*

<sup>176</sup> *Id.* at 290.

decision, simply defied it. <sup>177</sup>As the state's delegation marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in the nation's capital, she stepped out from the crowd and joined the group's white members. <sup>178</sup>Critics noted that the consequences of this courageous act further undermined her ability to work for change within the organization. But from Wells-Barnett's perspective, such efforts may have seemed futile. Having been unable to force change in segregationist policies, she could at least call attention to them and make a strong symbolic challenge.

### III.

The combination of systemic racial and gender biases, coupled with Wells-Barnett's own difficulty in navigating them, marginalized her leadership contributions later in life. When she died of kidney disease in 1931, at the age of 68, her death did not spark the public recognition that her achievements deserved. <sup>179</sup>Nor was she adequately recognized for decades after. <sup>180</sup>It took forty years to find a publisher for her autobiography, and it was not until the 1970s that her **[\*493]** uncompromising militancy attracted new-found admiration among feminists and civil rights activists. <sup>181</sup>This belated recognition is all too typical for civil rights leaders of color who were regarded as "difficult" during their lifetimes. Jeanne Theoharis' account of these leaders in *A More Beautiful and Terrible History* recounts the vitriol and violence that many activists experienced, stating, "even those civil rights heroes we [glorify] today were reviled in their day and made to feel crazy." <sup>182</sup>Rosa Parks faced death threats and suffered from ulcers and a loss of livelihood for almost a decade for her role in the Montgomery bus boycott. <sup>183</sup>Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was not lionized in his lifetime. Seventy-two percent of Americans had an unfavorable opinion of him in 1966; two decades later, when his birthday became a national holiday, only twenty-four percent still did. <sup>184</sup>

For Wells-Barnett, the lack of public recognition in her own lifetime was a source of considerable frustration. She opened her autobiography with an account of a twenty-five-year-old woman who had approached her out of ignorance of her achievements. <sup>185</sup>As Wells-Barnett recalled, the young woman had been

[A]t a YWCA vesper service when the subject for discussion was Joan of Arc, and each person was asked to tell of someone they knew who had traits of character resembling this French heroine and martyr. She was the only colored girl **[\*494]** present, and . . . she named me [Wells-Barnett]. She was then asked to tell why she thought I deserved such mention. She said, "Mrs. Barnett, I couldn't tell why I thought so . . . I was dreadfully embarrassed. Won't you please tell me what it was you did, so the next time I am asked such a question I can give an intelligent answer?" <sup>186</sup>

---

<sup>177</sup> *Illinois Women Feature Parade*, CHI. TRIB., Mar. 4, 1913.

<sup>178</sup> *Id.*; *Illinois Women Participants in Suffrage Parade*, CHI. TRIB., Mar. 4, 1913, at 5.

<sup>179</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at xxix-xxx; GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 658.

<sup>180</sup> GIDDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 7; *see also* BAY, *supra* note 7, at 11; MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at xvi.

<sup>181</sup> *See* MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 338.

<sup>182</sup> JEANNE THEOHARIS, *A MORE BEAUTIFUL AND TERRIBLE HISTORY: THE USES AND MISUSES OF CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY* 207 (2018).

<sup>183</sup> *Id.* at 74, 194, 200.

<sup>184</sup> *Id.* at ix-x.

<sup>185</sup> WELLS, *supra* note 7, at 3.

<sup>186</sup> *Id.*

That ignorance is being slowly rectified. The newly opened National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, which commemorates the victims of lynching, has dedicated a space to her memory, and a movement has formed to build a monument in her honor on the South Side of Chicago.<sup>187</sup> An Ida B. Wells Society offers training and support designed to increase the number of journalists of color.<sup>188</sup> These tributes are well-deserved and long overdue. Many now recognize that that Wells-Barnett had, in the words of W. E. Du Bois, helped awaken "the conscience of the nation."<sup>189</sup> As one of her biographers noted, few Americans before or after have more consistently refused to compromise with the evil of racial prejudice.<sup>190</sup> Despite enormous combined obstacles of race, class, and gender, Wells-Barnett managed to attain international prominence as an author and activist. Her path-breaking research, passionate advocacy, steadfast courage, and candid commentary in the face of violent and vitriolic opposition **[\*495]** helped expose the nation's most horrific forms of racism. More than any other individual, she kept lynching in the public eye.<sup>191</sup> She was also a pioneer in using the combination of strategies necessary to push the boundaries of social change: protests, boycotts, and media coverage.<sup>192</sup>

So too, Wells-Barnett was a leader in women's struggle to combine work and family at a time when society failed even to recognize this as a significant issue. In defiance of deeply rooted social conventions, she refused to relinquish her name, her activism, or her ambitions after marriage. She ceded major domestic responsibilities to her husband and insisted that childcare be available for herself and other working mothers. By transitioning in and out of professional life when her children were young, Wells-Barnett set an example for generations to follow.

Yet her legacy is not one of unmixed accomplishment. As she herself partly recognized, her ambitions were hobbled by limitations in temperament and leadership. Her uncontrolled anger, egoism, and self-righteousness often denied her the recognition that she craved and compromised her effectiveness in the causes to which she dedicated her life. Of course, most of the obstacles she confronted were not of her own making; systemic race and gender bias helped to fuel, as well as amplify, the significance of her outbursts. But if Wells-Barnett had been more self-disciplined in the way she managed relationships, she might have had more success **[\*496]** in her efforts to obtain and exercise leadership. And had she been more concerned with organizational needs and less insistent on personal recognition, she might have achieved more of it in her lifetime.

Recent protests in response to the brutal police killing of George Floyd have given many Americans a new understanding of the depths of systemic racism that Wells-Barnett faced.<sup>193</sup> And the less well-publicized police murders of unarmed women of color such as Breonna Taylor have underscored the intersectionality of race, class, and gender bias.<sup>194</sup> In today's context, the use of the term "difficult" to describe Well-Barnett should be more widely understood as reflective of the systemic racism and sexism that she sought to challenge.

---

<sup>187</sup> Patricia J. Williams, *Exciting Dissatisfaction: Ida B. Wells-Barnett Deserves a Bigger Statue*, NATION, May 28, 2018, at 10.

<sup>188</sup> DAVID P. GUSHEE & COLIN HOLTZ, MORAL LEADERSHIP FOR A DIVIDED AGE 127 (2018).

<sup>189</sup> MCMURRY, *supra* note 5, at 337-38 (internal citations omitted).

<sup>190</sup> *Id.* at 338.

<sup>191</sup> *Id.* at 124, 338.

<sup>192</sup> See ANGELA D. SIMS, ETHICAL COMPLEXITIES OF LYNCHINGS: IDA B. WELLS' INTERROGATION OF AMERICAN TERROR 13 (2010), for Wells' strategies. See Rhode, *supra* note 4, at 184 and DEBORAH L. RHODE, LEADERSHIP FOR LAWYERS (3d ed. forthcoming 2020) [hereinafter LEADERSHIP FOR LAWYERS], for the need for such combined strategies.

<sup>193</sup> See Alex Altman, *Why the Killing of George Floyd Sparked an American Uprising*, TIME, June 15, 2020.

<sup>194</sup> Brittney Cooper, *Why Are Black Women and Girls Still an Afterthought in Our Outrage Over Police Violence?*, TIME, June 15, 2020.

Yet it is still the case that those who seek influence in public life need to be strategic in challenging the racial and gender biases that get in the way. And those who wish to be effective need to subordinate their own concerns to the greater good. No significant change can be accomplished without alliances, and the self-restraint and shared power that make such coalitions possible.<sup>195</sup>To reach the ends that Wells-Barnett envisioned, the ideal leader needs her moral convictions and courage, but not her egoism and uncontrolled temper. That combination may be asking too much of any single individual, particularly a woman of color facing the entrenched intersectional biases that Wells-Barnett encountered, but it is an ideal worthy of our aspirations. Wells-Barnett's example points the way to a more just [\*497] society and the importance of leaders with her moral passion in that struggle.

Tennessee Journal of Law and Policy  
Copyright (c) 2020 University of Tennessee College of Law

---

End of Document

---

<sup>195</sup> See LEADERSHIP FOR LAWYERS, *supra* note 192, for a general discussion of leadership strategies for social change.